

## **1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas Day**

**I Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Luke 2:41-52; Col. 3:12-17.**

**I Samuel 2:18-20, 26** is a commentary on the prophet Samuel as a boy. It tells us, “Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife (Hannah), and say, “May the Lord repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the Lord”; and then they would return to their home. Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people”.

This story tells us of Samuel’s service of God in the Temple as a small boy. He is in permanent residence there, does not return to his home but does know his parents, and assists the priesthood in their performance of the liturgy and worship of Israel. It tells us that he wore a linen ephod (sort of like a long tee-shirt that reached to his knees), which was the garb exclusively for those assisting in or leading priestly worship in the Temple. It further tells us that his mother made him “a little robe” each year that was placed over the ephod, much as a jacket would be placed over a tee shirt. The fact that she made a robe annually and it was reported to be “little” is an indication that this service was performed by Hannah while Samuel was still a growing boy, because he outgrew the robe each year.

The text tells us that Eli, the high priest, blessed Elkanah and Hannah for their annual service of the Temple and of Samuel in their making a robe and presenting it each year to the boy. His blessing was “May the Lord repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the Lord”. What is intriguing is that the Hebrew literally reads, “for the gift that she asked of the Lord”. So that passage can just as equally be translated “for the petition she asked of the Lord” (see the English Standard Version of the Bible) as it can be translated “for the gift that she made to the Lord” (NRSV). That is, Eli is saying two things in this blessing. Hannah should be blessed by God because of her service to God and the Temple by preparing clothing for Samuel. But Hannah should even more be blessed by God for surrendering her right over Samuel in contributing him to the Temple (and eventually, to all of Israel). She had asked of God for pregnancy, but did so in order to give back to God the child forthcoming from that pregnancy. That was obedience of the highest order!

The final sentence in this lesson is “Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (2:26). That is a remarkable statement, given what is told the reader in the paragraph between the earlier statement about Hannah’s gift (2:18-20) and this statement, and in the paragraphs that precede that initial portion of our Old Testament lesson (2:11-17).

Samuel was serving the Lord by participating in the daily liturgy of the Temple (“Samuel was ministering before the Lord” – 2:18a; 3:1-21). The Temple in which he was ministering was the primary sanctuary in Israel to which the people came to offer their thrice-yearly offerings and in which God “tabernacled” (the Hebrew word literally meant, “to take up residence”). Yet by no means was this Temple without sin.

Eli, the high priest, is presented in I Samuel as a very weak and indecisive man, unwilling to call either the nation or his own adult children to accountability (1:12-14; 2:27-36). Further, his sons were evil personified, using their position as chief priests of the Temple to gather wealth for themselves, to rob the people and to rape many of the women of Israel (2:12-17; 22-25). In the words of the author of I Samuel, “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels” (2:12)! Yet, when Eli rebukes them for their behavior, he doesn’t remind them of their duty to God and the people as priests. Rather, he warns them of the danger and compromised position into which they are putting themselves (2:22-26).

Although it was dedicated to be a house of prayer for Israel in which God would tabernacle, the author of I Samuel is telling us that the Temple was being used by the priests to exploit, oppress and control the people and had become the very epitome of evil in Israel. But it is over against this sad picture of a thoroughly corrupt Temple that the author writes, “Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (2:26). This contrast is being intentionally made by the writer. God had placed in this most corrupt Temple his servant – a mere boy – who would bring about the transformation, not only of this Temple but of all Israel. And people sensed that great future for the boy Samuel. So it was that he grew, not only in stature, but also “in favor with God and with the people”. God knew what God was about!

**Psalm 148.** This psalm is, in my opinion, one of the finest of the psalms of praise – and is most fittingly selected for this festival time of the year, the first Sunday after Christmas. It begins:

“Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts” (148:1-2)!

The Psalmist, following the same identical pattern set in verse two, then goes through a list of all that should praise God – sun, moon, stars, highest heavens, waters above the heavens, the earth, sea monsters, the deeps of the ocean, fire, hail, snow, frost, stormy wind (i.e., the elements), mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things (that is, insects and reptiles), birds, kings, the people, princes, rulers, youth, men and women, old people.

In this naming of all of the elements one can imagine, the Psalmist has followed an intriguing order. First, heavenly beings praise the Lord (vs. 2), reminding us of the angel chorus (the highest of the high) appearing to the shepherds (the lowest of the low) and giving glory to God for the birth of Jesus. Second, the universe praises the Lord, in that, in its sheer scale, grandeur, expanse of time and mystery, it testifies to the mind-boggling creative energy of God (vss. 3-6). Third, the earth, with its magnificent geology, its seasons, its elements and its fecundity praises God by its very act of simply being (vss. 7-9).

Fourth, the living creatures – wild animals, domesticated animals, reptiles, insects, birds – all praise the Lord by simply being what they were created to be (vs. 10). And, finally, all humanity both unintentionally and intentionally praises the Lord (vss. 11-14). The kings “and all rulers of the earth”, along with their people unintentionally praise the Lord in that they are subject to the will of the Lord even though they do not acknowledge his authority (cf. Pss. 2, 82; Isa. 10:5-19;

31:1-3). But also God's chosen people, Israel, intentionally and proactively praise the Lord – both male and female, young and old, those who can reproduce (the Hebrew translated “male and “female” [*bakhurim* and *betulot*] means men and women capable of reproduction) and all who cannot reproduce (“young” and “old”) – whoever you are and whatever your age – praise the Lord!

In other words, what the Psalmist is declaring is that everything in the universe, whether intelligent or not, animate or inanimate, cognizant of God's work or oblivious to God's creative power – everything, by its very existence, gives praise to its creator! And they ultimately give praise to the Lord because “(God) has raised up a horn for his people”. For God has moved beyond the creation of the cosmos to the historical redemption of humanity, and has done so through “his people” and the “horn” from among them that “he has raised up”.

God has chosen one people to be his people, not in order to be exclusive but to be a means of redemption and liberation to the world. And the vehicle by which Israel acts for the redemption and liberation of the world is through its “horn” (cf. Ps. 89:17, 24, 38) – a ruler called forth by God who will be Israel's strength and transformation which he will pass to the people! This work of redemption and liberation, therefore, is the final reason that God is to be praised. The creation itself, in all of its complexity, captures our awe for God's capacity. But God's work of liberation is what captures our loyalty, love and respect, for it provides for us a “horn” that both sets us free and enables us to become freedom to the rest of the world.

“Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord” (148:13-14)!

**Luke 2:41-52** is the story of the boy Jesus in the Temple, closing with Luke's commentary about Jesus' continued maturation into adulthood. Jesus and his parents went each year to the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (vs. 41). But this incident in the Temple that Luke wants to note takes place when Jesus was twelve years old. Jewish custom specified that a boy should be brought by his parents to the Temple before he was thirteen where he would be made a “son of the commandment” and thus become an adult member of the Jewish community. It was, consequently, a most auspicious event in the life of any Jewish boy and his parents, and it would have been so for Jesus. It was the occasion when, in essence, he would begin “acting like a man”, including moving into his vocation.

After the celebration of the Passover, Joseph and Mary begin the return to Nazareth with a large band of pilgrims. Since the women and children would be in the front of the band and the men would be behind, each parent assumed Jesus was with the other parent (still as a child with Mary or assuming his new role as a man by being with Joseph). At the end of the day, when the entire party made camp, Mary and Joseph discovered Jesus was missing. They returned to Jerusalem to find Jesus in the Temple, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions”, and so engaging them in theological argument that these priests, lawyers of the Law and Pharisees “were amazed at his understanding and his answers”. Both relieved at finding Jesus and angry at his absence from the caravan, Mary and Joseph take him to task, only to have

Jesus respond, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house” (2:49)? Luke reports, “They did not understand what he said to them” (that is, they didn’t understand the implications of what he said, implications that would be lived out in his later life, ministry and death). But after this exchange, Jesus then returns obediently with them to Nazareth. And the story concludes, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and the people” (2:52; my translation).

That is the story. What does not immediately meet the eye about this story of Jesus’ childhood, however, is the skillful way in which Luke constructed this story to be like the story of Samuel that is our Old Testament lesson for today!

Samuel was a boy. Jesus was a boy, officially becoming a man by his participating in the Passover festival in his twelfth year. Samuel was in service to God in the Temple, participating in its liturgy. Jesus also participated in the liturgy of the Passover at the Temple (a man was not an observer in Jewish worship as if he were attending a performance; he was a participant in its liturgy, doing the “work of the people” - the actual meaning of the word “liturgy” - while the priest did the “priestly work”). Jesus was engaged in theological debate with the scholars of the Temple, which was also understood by the Jews as the service of God. Samuel stayed in “his Father’s house”, the Temple while Elkanah and Hannah went home each year. Jesus stayed in the Temple while Mary and Joseph were returning home; it was his Father’s home (where God tabernacled) in which he needed to be. But the clearest indication that Luke intentionally meant to compare Jesus with Samuel was in the summary statements used by himself and the author of I Samuel to describe the maturation of these two boys into men.

The author of I Samuel wrote, “Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (I Sam. 2:26). Luke wrote of Jesus, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and the people” (Lk. 2:52). The parallel construct and the use of the same identical words to describe the maturation of the two young men are obviously intended!

Why would Luke want to compare Jesus to Samuel? I would suggest Luke wanted to make that comparison because of the unique role that Samuel played in Hebrew thought and belief.

Samuel was considered the greatest prophet of the Old Testament (I Sam. 3:19-21); Jesus was the greatest prophet of the New Testament era (Mt. 11:9; Lk. 7:16; 24:19; Jn. 4:44; 6:14). Samuel was a priest of the Temple, set aside by God and the people to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people (I Samuel 16:1-5). Jesus was the great High Priest of God, who himself was the sacrifice for the sins of the world (the entirety of the book of Hebrews). Samuel was not only the last judge of Israel but was considered by the Jews its greatest judge (I Sam. 7:3-17); as a judge, he was closest to being Israel’s king without being named as such (to be named as a king, in Samuel’s eyes, would be to usurp the authority of God as king – I Sam. 8:4-9, esp. vs. 7). Jesus was seen by the people as Israel’s rightful king – that was what his trial before Pilate and crucifixion was all about (John 18:28-38), and what it meant for Jesus to be claimed by his followers as the “Messiah”. Paul the Apostle particularly testified that Jesus became king of the world through his crucifixion and resurrection (Col. 1:15-20; Eph. 1:20-23).

In other words, Samuel had been prophet, priest and “king” – the only person in the Old Testament so designated! Jesus, like Samuel and yet far beyond Samuel, has been and is even now “prophet, priest and king” both to the Church and to the Kingdom of God!

What is particularly significant about Luke’s intentional comparison of Jesus with Samuel was that both served God through service to and in a highly corrupt Temple system. God might have “tabernacled” in both temples. But Samuel’s temple was run by wavering; indecisive leadership and morally corrupt leadership, seeking their own economic and sexual gain. Jesus’ temple, likewise, was run by a cabal of priests, Sadducees, scribes and Pharisees that were committed to building personal power under the guise of obedience to the Law that resulted in the political oppression, economic exploitation and religious control of the people. Both Samuel and Jesus, once grown into young manhood, confronted this systemic evil and sought to reform their nation’s political, economic and religious systems for the good of their people. Both failed! But in their failure, both also brought about the building of a new “kingdom of God” for the people – Samuel through his anointing and then mentorship of David as king, and Jesus through his own redemptive sacrifice and the creation of the church. Thus, to Luke, Samuel was the premier example of the service of God that the man from Nazareth would perform as the Jubilee Jesus!

### **Colossians 3:12-17.**

“Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (I Sam. 2:26). “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and the people” (Lk. 2:52). And what about us? How are we as Christians to grow in Christ?

Colossians 3:12 states, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.” The Greek words translated “clothe yourselves” captures the sense of one putting on clothes (in fact, in some translations, it is translated as “Put on compassion, . . .”; e.g. RSV, ESV, NEB). What Paul is driving at in this passage is that Christians “put on” the character of Christ, just as they would “put on” clothing. In their receiving of Christ as their Lord and Savior, Christians have become a “new self” through the redemptive work of Christ appropriated in their lives (see Col. 3:9-11 that immediately precedes this passage). A transformation has begun in them because of God’s grace activated in their lives through their embrace of Christ. Now, this new Christ-like identity takes shape in them, much as they might put on layers of clothing that give them a new identity (thus, a naked man “becomes” a soldier, a priest, a political official, a wealthy man or a beggar as symbolized by the clothing he puts on). As each Christian comes to know Christ better, he increasingly acts out the image of the invisible God revealed in him (1:15; 2:3).

What, then, does this newly clothed Christian look like? What does it mean for him to grow “in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and the people”? Paul states that a Christian who is becoming identified with Jesus Christ is a person who exhibits the characteristics of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. He or she bears with others and is quick to forgive. But the underlying characteristic of a Christian who is becoming more Christ-like is the characteristic of love. It is her genuine love-commitment to her brother and sister Christians, to the pagans or people of other religions whom she encounters every day, and even to the society

into which that Christian is placed that is the true manifestation of that person's "Christ-likeness". And that Christ-like love manifests itself in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, thankfulness, forbearance and forgiveness.

Paul then uses a rather unusual term. It is translated as "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body" (3:15). The word translated "rule" is, in reality, a sports metaphor that can better be translated "be referee". What Paul is stating is that "the peace of Christ" should be the referee of your heart, that is, Christ's peace must be the "sports official" who has final authority in the actions you take in the game of life in which you are playing!

But what does Paul mean by the "peace of Christ"? If that peace is to underlie all that you are and do in life as a Christian (perhaps even more than love), what, precisely, does he mean by the "peace of Christ"? It's obviously very important to be able to answer that question.

Paul does not define this term in this passage. Perhaps he thinks he doesn't need to, because it is so clear to everyone who is a Christian what the word "peace" (*eirene* in Greek, *shalom* in Hebrew) means. It does not mean "nobody is fighting right now". It is not the absence of hostility. Rather, both "*shalom*" and "*eirene*" meant the world as God intended it to be – humanity and their society that is at one with God, at one with each other, committed to the acting out of justice in public life and the equitable sharing of wealth so that poverty would be eliminated. So when Paul states that the peace of Christ is to be the referee of a Christian's life, he is declaring that a Christian's life and actions must be centered in working for the transformation of the world as it is into the world as God intended it to be. The Christian may never see that fully happen, but he or she is to work for such a world as the ultimate living out of his or her faith in Christ.

Paul then concludes what it means for Christians to increase "in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and the people" by insisting that the transformational work Christ is doing in and through us needs to be acted out in the Church itself, manifesting itself in our life together, in our study of scripture together and in our worship together. He then ties it all up by declaring that, whether you look at the interior growth of Christians, their involvement in the church or their engagement in the public life of the world, "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17). And that is what it means to "increase in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and the people".

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