

Sermon by Travis Winkler, Associate Pastor of Broadway UCC
December 27, 2009
First Sunday after Christmas

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26
Luke 2:41-52
Colossians 3:12-17

As Advent comes to a close we look forward to a new year and new opportunities for ministry in the city. With newness comes the hope that good possibilities are on the horizon. Last week we enjoyed a Christmas pageant presented by the children of Broadway church for the first time in years, which is a positive sign of vitality and of promise for our future. Children especially remind us that the status quo is never set in stone. The future is open to yet unimagined possibilities at the dawn of each new generation. For this reason I was pleasantly surprised to discover that only one week following our children's Christmas pageant two prominent children are highlighted in the lectionary: the young Samuel and the boy Jesus, both "boy wonders" you might say, in the scope of biblical personalities. If we met them today we might call them precocious little boys, the kind of kids we say are wise far beyond their years, yet still, its interesting to note their need for *growth*. Both boys grew in years and in favor with the Lord and with people. Samuel was to become one of Israel's greatest prophets and Jesus the awaited Messiah. Before

scripture records them as such, before their public personas of Prophet and Messiah became known across the land, we catch a glimpse through the passages read today into their lives as ordinary youth. These passages show each getting exposure to the temple and interacting with their parents and faith communities. Sort of like a VH1 special "Behind the Music," we have a sneak peak of Samuel and Jesus before they were famous. Which, by the way, if you Google "before they were famous" you can find some pretty interesting things about people. Did you know before he was famous Tom Cruise entered a seminary to train for the priesthood? Before he was famous David Letterman worked as a stock boy at a grocery store in Indianapolis? Here's my favorite. Before he was famous Johnny Depp worked as an over-the-phone pen salesman! I never would have guessed that.

The passages today show Jesus and Samuel in a stage of preparation. In fact, the similarities between the young Samuel and Jesus are striking: both are engaged in the center of Israel's religious life as children (the boy Samuel breathes new life into a temple system that has gone awry with numerous corruptions, while the boy Jesus amazes the religious teachers of his day with his questions and understanding), Mary and Hannah conceive by the power of God; Mary's Magnificat closely resembles Hannah's prayer – a declaration that

the coming of the Lord raises up the lowly, the poor, and oppressed while sending the rich away empty; both passages explicitly say that the boys grew in stature (matured) in the Lord and found favor with people; both were at home in the temple (Samuel actually resided there, but it appears Jesus felt at home there from an early age. To his anxiety-ridden parents who are weary after days of searching Jesus simply explains his presence in the temple as “being about his Father’s interests.” We recall that later in life “his Father’s interests” would compel Jesus to drive out money-changers, and those looking to make a quick buck off the faithful, from his Father’s house of prayer).

Further similarities evident in the narratives of these “boy wonders” include the historical and cultural situations in which they grew up.

Israel at the time of Samuel’s birth was experiencing constant threat and humiliating defeat at the hands of the Philistines. The humiliation that comes from defeat was only aggravated by the interpretation of these events rendered by the dominant theology of that time. Military defeat was a sign of God’s punishment for Israel’s faithlessness. The status of Israel’s relationship with God was judged by the militaristic tally of gains and losses. “If you repent”, so goes this theology, “God will give you victory in battle. If not, Israel risks

being routed in battle by other nations. The promise is that economic and political security is a byproduct of faithfulness to the special covenant God made with Israel via Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the Exodus community of Moses, and Joshua. To make matters worse in Samuel's time, the religious authorities, those invested with the responsibility to care for people in situations of crisis and anxiety, were themselves completely corrupt. Travail from outside, crisis within, politically and personally, Israel was a mess when the boy Samuel began ministering in the temple.

Fast-forward to Jesus' time and we observe similar national and religious dynamics. Rather than the Philistines, the Roman Empire is now the cause of Israel's national turmoil. Most religious authorities are either complicit in corruption or detached from society for purity's sake like the Essenes. Social revolution is in the air. The scene in first century Palestine is turbulent and people are looking for answers. (*answers or peace/king/savior?*)

On the verge of the second decade of the twenty-first century I think we can relate to living in environments of instability and fear, conflict without and crisis within. Two of the top stories of 2009 are the "War on Terror" and domestic economic demise. Yesterday authorities charged a 23 year old

Nigerian with trying to blow up an airplane bound for Detroit on Christmas Day. Not even Christmas Day is free from the chance that an airplane might be used as a weapon. 2010 will continue to be full of news about America's military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Though some experts report signs of economic recovery, 2009 has seen the highest unemployment rate since 1982. For others, the pain of facing a holiday for the first time after the death of a loved one produces feelings of immense grief and loss. At the psychiatric hospital where I am privileged to be a chaplain patients express to me the surge of depression and isolation that comes with being institutionalized, far from family and friends, over Christmas.

In this world, in light of these realities, we have just celebrated the coming of Immanuel, God with us. We receive at Christmas the good news of accompaniment: we are not alone. The divine somehow comes alongside us to suffer with us.

Our children have led us to the manger here at Broadway last Sunday. The Lessons and Carols of Christmas Eve prompted us to reflect upon and sing the mystery and splendor of Immanuel. Samuel and Jesus enter their respective

scenes as the primary agents of change in environments of instability, fear, and corruption. Once two babies, now growing through adolescence. Born of unlikely mothers, one barren another unmarried. One born in a barn on the fringe of the empire; the other handed over to serve the Lord before he could crawl. These are the ones who were ordained to bear the power of renewal and a vision for redemption. We don't know much about their lives before the days when their public leadership would come to full fruition, but we know each had to grow.

The passages focus on three aspects of growth: in stature (years), favor with the Lord (spiritual maturity), and favor with people (compassion). I am, myself, leery of those who banter about ingredients for spiritual growth (like an easy-to-follow three-step recipe: a little of this, a pinch of that, a few shakes of this, and whalla, enlightenment!) I sympathize with those who are suspicious of such spiritual incantations. However, I suggest for your consideration these three descriptions of Samuel and Jesus' growth – growth in experience, growth in spiritual maturity, and growth in compassion – as helpful aids for our own congregational reflection of the kind of ministry we are cultivating here in the new year. The wealth of experience in this congregation amazes me. With this experience comes maturity and tremendous

resources for growth. In January we will have opportunities to explore and discover ways we can exercise our compassion in the city.

And what about now? It's only a few days after Christmas and what are we to do with this news of God incarnate? To help us figure this out, Paul advises us to rise and put our clothes on. This is an indispensable part of our daily routine, at least if we plan to walk out our front door. As ones rolling out of bed and getting ready for the day we should "clothe" ourselves, Paul says, with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Forgiving one another because in Christ each one of us is forgiven. Most importantly, as Cornel West admonishes, "we are to love our way through the darkness." As one lights a candle to find their way after the lights go out during a storm, we discern our way through the dark shadows of this world with the light of love. And this we can start today.

With growth in years and experience comes pain, disappointment, and broken relationship; war with other nations and neighbors; a growing awareness of the shadows. And yet with growth in spiritual maturity (or the favor of the Lord) comes wisdom to respond to coercion with compassion, cruelty with kindness, haughtiness with humility, meanness with meekness...to forgive because Christ has forgiven.

This was no easier in Israel in Samuel's day, nor Palestine in Jesus' time, than it is today for us on the verge of 2010. This is no easy three step recipe for becoming an agent of change, but rather an invitation to a lifetime of practicing love for our neighbors, putting on the virtues of compassion as regularly as we put on our clothing. The light of love not only illuminates the darkness but also helps us find our way through it.