

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/30/2012, in preparation for the First Sunday of Christmas
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26, Psalm 148, Colossians 3:12-17, Luke 2:41-52
Samuel and Jesus

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Bible readings speak of two good children: Samuel of old, and Jesus. What more can be asked of a child than what was said of both Samuel and Jesus, in almost the exact same words:

And Jesus [like Samuel before him] increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:52, RSV)

More than silver and gold or any other treasure this old world can name, this is what parents really want: they want their little ones to grow up both in stature and in favor with God and with humanity. For if that be true of them—that they are strong both in body and soul—then they are headed to heaven. Every other wish we might have for our children pales and fades away in comparison to this eternal blessing: that our kids should make it to heaven to live with Jesus there.

And so, how very earnestly parents can sing on behalf of their children the third verse of *Away in a Manger*:

[Tiffany sings]

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care
and fit us for heaven, to live with you there.

Ahh! That's what I'm after in this sermon: that for all God's children—you, me, our sons and daughters, indeed, everyone!—our Lord Jesus will “fit us for heaven, to live with him there.” We need to be formed and refashioned and crafted after the image of Christ. Or, to use the imagery of this morning's Epistle Reading, we need to be fitted for a new set of clothes. We need the robes of righteousness.

Let me begin to develop this idea of being crafted for heaven by speaking of Samuel. We read of the boy Samuel in today's First Lesson.

HANNAH AND HER ROBES

Our text starts off by saying that Samuel was but a boy ministering before the LORD. Samuel lived a consecrated life from childhood onward. His ministry in the house of the LORD was part of a solemn commitment made by his mother, Hannah. You might recall that Hannah had promised that if the LORD would give her a son, then she would give him to the LORD all the days of his life:

¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant, but wilt give to thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life..." (1 Samuel 1:10-11, RSV)

That's how it came to be that the boy Samuel grew up in the house of the Lord in Shiloh. He was part of the household of the priest Eli.

So, the boy grew up in the house of the LORD. But, naturally, his mother did not forget him. Our text says that each year she made a little robe for him and took it to her son.

It is easy for me to picture Hannah making that little robe because I have the example of my wife, Carol, whose hands are always busy. This afternoon I will be working and leading the chapel service at Carnegie East House. But if the rest of the day goes well, Carol and I will be "waiting all day for Sunday night." That is, come Sunday night we will be watching NFL football on TV. I'll probably be in my rocking chair and Carol will probably be on the couch, following the game, but also knitting. Just the other night she finished a beautiful little sweater for one of our grandnieces down in Maryland. Now she has started something new.

Experience has taught me that making a little robe for a child is a matter of balance. The child is growing all the time, and if you take too long making the robe, then the child outgrows it before you even have a chance to deliver it. So, I picture Hannah making her best estimate of how big her Samuel is now. She only sees him once a year, so she has to guess at how big he is, and how much larger she should make the robe so that it will last him much of the coming year.

One way or the she wants her child to be properly decked out. And judging by the Bible, Samuel was indeed properly clothed. He was clothed not only in the robes his loving mother made for him, but even more beautifully, he was robed in faith and piety, courage and obedience to the Lord all his days.

Samuel himself seems to have been a faithful and true servant of the Lord from beginning to end. Never do we hear a discouraging word about Samuel—at least that I can recall. He got off to a good start in life, growing “both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men,” and he continued faithful all his days.

IN FAVOR WITH GOD AND MANKIND

Think about that phrase describing both Samuel and Jesus: They “increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.” There is a connection between these two favors, God *and* man. On average, to live the kind of life that God can look upon with favor means that our neighbors can look upon us with favor too. I say “on average” because, alas, it is not always the case. If we live a life that God smiles upon, it will probably mean that pirates and robbers and cruel folks *will not* smile upon us, because they will be on the other side. They will not be able to trust us to join them in whatever wickedness they plan. Interestingly, though, not all of life is wickedness, not even for the pirate or robber or wicked person. For large stretches of life, even the wicked person wants to be able to deal with people who are honest and fair, so that they will look with favor upon the kind of people they themselves are not.

As for most of humanity, if God looks upon us with favor, so will they. To make it in this world, a good way to do it is first of all, to try to make it in the eyes of God. Then we will be reckoned by our neighbors as people of honesty and virtue. We will be people whose word is rock solid, like money in the bank. We will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world and a sweet fragrance that makes this world a better place.

A GREATER ONE THAN SAMUEL

Such a one was Samuel: salt of the earth, light in darkness. Even more, such a one was Jesus. The old prophet Samuel anointed the shepherd boy David to be king. Aye, and a Greater One than either Samuel or David appears on the scene in today’s Gospel story.

In this story, we find that Mary and Joseph have raised a son who fulfills the desire of all pious parents. They have raised a boy who loves the Lord with all his heart and mind and soul. There is some sadness in this for Mary and Joseph. When they at last find their twelve-year-old son in the Temple, Mary tells him that she and Joseph had searched for him “anxiously.” Scholars point out that

the word Mary uses here – anxiously – expresses anxiety with pain.¹ There is distress in Mary’s voice as she greets her son:

⁴⁸And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you *anxiously*.” (Luke 2:48, RSV)

Mary and Joseph had been sick at heart as they searched for Jesus. And when they at last found him, they discover that in a way, they had lost him for good, for Jesus was taking his stand with his heavenly Father, even above his earthly mother and father:

⁴⁹And he said to them, “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I *must* be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49, RSV)

The inevitable separating of child from parents can be a painful process for both parties. It is part of growing up. The child steps back and surveys the parents. It is as if the child says, “I like this in my parents, and I like that. But this, yuck! I don’t want that to be part of my life.” And so it is that the child chooses his or her own path in life.

At least in the case of Jesus we see that when he takes his stand *apart* from his parents, he takes his stand *with* God. And Mary and Joseph are no doubt grateful for that.

OUR PARENTS SANG AWAY IN THE MANGER FOR US

Jesus never fell away from his whole-hearted love for his heavenly Father. All his life he lived in favor with God, if not always with men.

The meaning of Christmas for daily life is that you and I should follow his example. We should do as the Christmas carol says: we should seek to be “fit for heaven, to live with him there.” As the centuries-old Second Lesson for Christmas Eve puts it, the birth of this holy child should make us “zealous for good deeds”:

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, ¹²training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, ¹³awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the

¹ Peter Martyr in *The Lectionary Commentary*, on Luke 2:41-52, page 306.

glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:11-14, RSV)²

After all, as we are glad to sing *Away in the Manger* for our children, so many of our fathers and mothers sang that hymn for us, long ago. It was their earnest desire that we should be “fit for heaven, to live with our Lord Jesus there.” Christmas is a good time for renewal of the spiritual life.

ROBED IN GOOD DEEDS

I close by lifting up some concrete moral exhortation from the Bible about how to do that: about how to renew our spiritual lives and to make ourselves fit for heaven. It seems to be a matter of our daily clothing. St. Paul puts it this way in our Second Lesson—from his letter to the Colossians:

¹²*Put on* then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, ¹³forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these *put on* love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

As we stretch our arms in the morning through the sleeves of our shirt or blouse, so we should stretch forth our arms, day by day, into the robes of righteousness. We should head out into the days that lie ahead of us all decked out with compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love and peace. For these are the traits of Jesus. He manifested them as a twelve-year old boy, he lived with them his whole life, and he is clothed with them still even now as our living Savior and Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

² See Leonard R. Klein in *The Lectionary Commentary* on Colossians 3:12-17, pages 392ff.