

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Today is the last Sunday of 2024, our current calendar year. It is also the fifth Sunday of the current liturgical year and the first Sunday of the liturgical season known as Christmas. The liturgical season of Christmas begins on Christmas Eve, go figure, and ends with the Baptism of our Lord Sunday on January 12<sup>th</sup> this year. That means there are only two Sundays this year in the liturgical season of Christmas.

There is a clear connection between Samuel in our first reading and Jesus in our gospel reading today. A connection most obvious when we look at last verse of each reading. The last verse of the first reading says: "**Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.**" And the last verse of our gospel reading says: "**And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.**" Now it seems to me that growing in stature and favor is essentially the same as growing in wisdom and years. And both Jesus and Samuel grew in favor with both the Lord, divine, and the people, human.

This reference in Luke to a 12-year old Jesus is the only reference in any of the synoptic gospels for the period, roughly 30 years, between Jesus' birth and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. We are left to make semi-educated guesses about these intervening years for Jesus. It does seem that Jesus grew up in a faithful Jewish household because according to our gospel reading today, Jesus' parents, Joseph and Mary, appear to adhere to Jewish tradition and training. Unlike Jesus who was sent by God, Samuel was chosen for service to God by his mother. Samuel had a different kind of miraculous birth so his mother dedicated him to God and took him to the Temple to learn from and be raised by Eli, a judge and a priest. Samuel was a contemporary of King Saul and King David. Samuel was both a judge and a prophet and was instrumental in establishing Israel's monarchy because God chose **him** to anoint and counsel Israel's kings. It seems like Samuel had pretty important roles in the history of Israel but just not **as** important as the Messiah.

Karl Jacobson in his commentary on our first reading posed the question, I hope tongue-in-cheek, "*What is the exchange rate for one's firstborn?*" That, of course refers to God's promise to Hannah for dedicating her firstborn, Samuel, to God. There is actually an answer to this odd question in one of our inexplicably skipped verses, verse 21 that says they received three sons and two daughters. This same missing verse also gives a wonderful look at Samuel's life when it says, "**And the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord.**" I think this same thought also applies to Jesus.

Our gospel reading also contains two other unique characteristics. First, these words spoken by Jesus to Joseph and Mary are the first words Jesus spoke to be recorded. Second, the mentioning of the Passover at the start of this reading is the only time the Passover, or **any** Jewish festival for that matter, is mentioned in a synoptic gospel prior to the one preceding Jesus' crucifixion. This passage points, therefore, to those three days of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Both our first reading and our gospel reading point to lives spent learning and serving in the presence of the Lord. But in our second reading, Paul really provides some clear instruction on what living in the Lord really should mean. I am going to read this text to you again but from a different translation. Colossians 3:12-17 from The Message translation: "**So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ — the Message — have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives— words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God every step of the way.**" These verses are a clear description, in my opinion, of what it means to live in love and relationship which is to also say the way to follow Jesus.

Hear then the good news:

You might have noticed in the reading from Colossians that God chooses us.

In other words, God comes to us, we do not come to God.

On Christmas Eve I briefly touched on an idea about following and worshipping. Richard Rohr says: "Much of Christianity has not emphasized actually 'following' Jesus...we haven't based our religion on following Jesus and doing what Jesus did. We've largely emphasized 'worshipping' Jesus." So that's what you came here this morning to do, worship Jesus? You do know that Jesus never told you to do that, right? He never told you to worship him, he told you to follow him. One of the most clever ways to avoid actually doing what he did is to make Jesus an object of worship."

Roger Wolsey in his book "*Kissing Fish; and Discovering Fire: Spiritual Practices that Transform Lives*" discusses differences between orthodoxy, beliefs and doctrines, and orthopraxy, behavior and relationship.

Kurt Stuckmeyer in his book "A Conspiracy of Love" says "*Lots of people believe in Jesus. They just love Jesus to pieces. They worship and adore Jesus. They praise Jesus' name. They invite Jesus into their hearts and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. But not many people are willing to follow Jesus.*"

I know following Jesus is not easy, it is, after all, counter cultural. But we can do it or we can at least **try** to do it.

Grace and peace to you my friends, this week try following Jesus.

**Amen**