

Dec 31, 2006  
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26  
Colossians 3:12-17  
Luke 2:41-52

The most poignant moment in the pageant on Christmas Eve, here at St. Paul's was when the baby "jesus" began to squirm and fret and the "parents" did not know what to do. Haven't we all been there? When the newborn baby cries the new mother responds, with all the obvious things. Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. Anxious to do the right thing, we fret over the child, pick him or her up, walk the floor, even resort to riding around the neighborhood with the child in the car seat hoping sleep will come. As the child grows and begins to form words, then sentences, then independent thoughts we guide, teach, admonish, correct, and hope that all the things we imagined in pregnancy will come to pass.

Mary anticipated that Jesus would be unique by her articulation in the Magnificat, a prophetic prologue to Luke's account of the life of Jesus. Mary conceived in mysterious circumstances, the virgin birth marking a divine origin for Jesus. Joseph consented to call the child Jesus and the small family grew in time to include brothers and sisters. Perhaps we pay too little attention to the atypical family that surrounded Jesus when we promote "family values" in a political and religious context. Mary and Joseph were Jews, who recognized and kept the holy observances. The journey to Jerusalem each year for the Passover celebration fulfilled the requirements of all male Israelites (see Exodus 34:23). In Jewish tradition a male child became a man and embraced the traditions of his ancestors at the age of 13.

Mary is reproachful as she questions Jesus about his behavior. Jesus in response is direct, where else would he be? He is either unconcerned or not sensitive to their distress. Teens. We should pay attention to the pronouncement of the necessity of what he was doing..."I must be" about my fathers business. The divine imperative drives the ministry, life, faith, and fate of Jesus. Jesus is not driven by political coercion or religious legalism, he is responding from his heart. The point of the story is that Jesus is making a declaration that reveals his identity in relationship to the Father, God, that his life will be guided and marked by this unique relationship. Jesus returned home with his parents, was obedient, a good boy and according to tradition began his ministry at about the age of 30 years. We have no record of the 18 intervening years except in the extracanonical gospels.

Neither Mary nor Joseph was prepared for the events of the ministry of Jesus. Mary is said to treasure these experiences that were so infused with God's presence perhaps to bring insight into the events as they happened, or years later as she reflected on them. We can relate to this observation because parents often hear a child proclaim a vocation early in life and think it cute. How often does that come true? My own daughter proclaimed her vocation in social work about the age of 12 and that is what she has become a clinical social worker.

There are some things, experiences that reveal who we are, what we ultimately want and seek, and things that we just have to do because of who we are...Jesus must be

about his Father's business at age 12. Every teen has to discover who he or she is... one's identity can be tied to family, religious experience, sense of vocation, personal dreams and ideals. Jesus found his identity in his relationship to God. God's claims may stand in tension or open conflict with human desires for social acceptance, loyalty to family, economic prosperity and other worthy ideals. The hard decisions are not those between right and wrong but those that call for us to choose between options when both represent worthy claims. In this event, Jesus was already subordinating other priorities to his sense of God's purpose for his life. Jesus confronted the central question of all persons: Who are you?

This question gets to the heart of the matter – what defines you – what priorities do you set – what differentiates you from everyone else? Each one of us is unique and at the same time we share our attributes in being a part of the human species as distinct from other animals. Parents and other role models shape children in good and bad ways. Children see the difference between our words and actions. They recognize our hypocrisy and seek to be more faithful because they are innocent of the dangers that adults too often recognize and fear. Social pressure begins early, in kindergarten, elementary school, for conformity. We hurt if adults or other children treat our children harshly. We comfort them, surround them with affirmation, and try to teach them to not be vengeful but forgiving.

Taking our children to church, teaching them social customs often is intended to socialize them for success. We teach our children to be compassionate, caring, sensitive, accepting of those different from us. When we discover that they have taken our moral teachings to heart, we are sometimes horrified at the shape the lesson takes. Have you ever considered what risk we take in teaching our children about unconditional love of God for all humanity in the life and character of Jesus? Think about how social justice emerges in Old and New Testament texts. If the children take these stories to heart, they will become compassionate and generous persons. How generous and compassionate do you want your child to be?

Jesus was a unique child and frankly I don't envy Mary as his mother. The story in Luke gives us one example of Jesus being his own person at the age of 12, defining himself in terms of a relationship with God that was serious and frightening for his parents. Having a child missing even for a few minutes is scary enough. When we find them we want them to know that we who see the danger in this world are worried, frightened, in pain but children seldom see the danger we see. Jesus, like any one of our children would be amazed that we were afraid, if they just stayed at church. Isn't this a safe place?

One Sunday after church and coffee hour, I was about to leave and went into the sanctuary to see if the doors were locked and found Chris back in the children's area playing a game on a hand held device. I said, Phyllis left – do you need a ride home? He said, no. I asked, are you staying here this week? He said, no. I said, do you need me to call someone? No. Finally, seeing that I was getting anxious, Chris, said, "I am going home with the McIntosh family – they are counting the money."

Chris and I saw the world differently that morning. Jesus and Mary saw the circumstances of his desire to learn more about the Torah, Jewish law, the tradition of the prophets, and the story of faith. When our children ask questions about where is God, who is Christ, etc are we able to answer their questions? We all need to be about our father's business. We need to study scripture, engage the stories of our faith, understand the symbols of our worship, and engage in dialogue that helps us know who we are in relationship with God.

Jesus even at 12 is teaching us that priorities matter in life. If we listen to the children we will be amazed at what we can learn about God and life in general. They see things from a different perspective that has hopefully not been tarnished by disappointment, violence, or rejection. Adults are often jaded by experience, fearful, hesitant, less trusting, and less hopeful. Children can teach us if we can stop long enough to listen to them.

Ruby Bridges was the first black child to enter an all white school in the integration movement in late 1960s. Adults taunted her, threw eggs and tomatoes at her, as she walked up the sidewalk, and up the steps into the school. She kept her eyes down, and kept moving toward her goal – straight into that school. After school at her grandmother's house, Robert Coles a child psychologists from Harvard interviewed Ruby and asked, what were you thinking today when the people were calling you names and throwing things at you? Ruby answered: "I was thinking of Jesus on the cross." Coles asked, why? Ruby explained, "my grandmother taught me that Jesus forgave everybody from the cross" and we ought to forgive others too because we love Jesus.

Children often see more clearly than we do. Listen to the children, ask them what they see, you like Mary may be amazed and have much to ponder in your heart.