

“Making Changes”

Luke 2:41-52

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Every year about this time the thoughts of many turn to making changes. Here we are just two days away from the New Year a time when we might be one of those who once again follow that annual tradition of taking a journey in our minds to decide what should be our “New Year’s Resolution”. We might look back celebrating past achievements, remembering special events or special people, but no matter how good it was, or wasn’t, most people resolve to make changes... many resolutions are centered on health and wellness – eat better, exercise, practice gratitude, chill out and rest up, spend more time with family and friends - because we want to be healthier and happier, to be what we are meant to be ... and to make changes that reflect who we are. Have you made any New Year’s Resolutions yet?

Our gospel reading today tells of an older child making changes to reflect who he is. In the whole canon, that is the Old and New Testament, only in the Gospel of Luke do we read a story of the childhood of Jesus. Luke is a story teller, traditionally held to be an historian with an instinct for the importance of events in chronological order, making connections between events to show purpose in the story. In his telling of this historical event Luke wants us to understand that Mary and Joseph are very pious – in a good way – they live out their faith in God.

I wonder if we could find parents more devoted to God than Mary and Joseph – and that would make sense because God had chosen them to parent his son Jesus when he arrived as a baby in Bethlehem. We celebrated that this past week. And if we read the story between Jesus’ birth and his first visit to the temple we see how devoted Mary and Joseph were to ‘the law of the LORD’; Jesus was circumcised and named as the angel instructed; Jesus was designated as holy to the LORD, and it was at this first visit to the temple that Mary and Joseph met Simeon, a righteous and devout man looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. And when he took Jesus in his arms he praised God, saying,

²⁹ *“Master, now you are dismissing your servant^[i] in peace,
according to your word;*

³⁰ *for my eyes have seen your salvation,*

³¹ *which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,*

³² *a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

³³ *And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon^[i]
blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many
in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—
and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”(2: 29-35)*

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Mary and Joseph accepted their responsibilities in raising this special child. Every year Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover – this speaks volumes about their faithfulness to God: it wasn't required that Mary should go; it wasn't even required that Joseph should go every year because they lived about 60 miles (100 kilometers) from Jerusalem, not the required 20 mile distance for yearly visits to Jerusalem; it was a significant commitment in time and money, like a two week vacation might be for us; it is a covenantal (a relational) expression of their faith, belief and obedience - and it is highly likely Jesus would go with them.

Of all the times Jesus might have gone, it is important that Luke tells us the story of the pilgrimage when Jesus is twelve, because when Jesus is twelve he is not yet obligated to go, but he does – on his thirteenth birthday he would be obligated to go – it is not an obligation for Mary or Joseph or Jesus, they want to go – they are devoted to God – but there is a more significant reason for the story in this year because this is the year Jesus understands and voices his true heritage – this is the year of making changes that reflect who he is.

On the journey up to Jerusalem Jesus may have travelled with the other children – travelling in a caravan the men would be with the men, the women with the women, and the children all in a group, playing all the way. But after the days of the Passover were fulfilled and it was time to return, Jesus stayed in Jerusalem, apparently oblivious to the fact that his group had left. Mary and Joseph would naturally assume Jesus was with the other children... why wouldn't he be ... he was still a child.

I don't know about you, but when I think of my children, even grown up, they are still vulnerable in my eyes. I remember one of my sons being furious with me because I wouldn't write a note to give him permission to go to McDonald's for lunch with his friends when the news carried pictures of shootings at McDonald restaurants in the States – he was in grade 8, but to me he was one I needed to protect.

And though Mary and Joseph were teaching Jesus in such a way as to be faithfully inquisitive and to be his own person, perhaps Mary did not want to see Jesus growing beyond childhood, growing beyond “her boy” – maybe she wasn't ready to let go of her firstborn.... Maybe all she could see was her Jesus as a small boy travelling on the road of life... one she was responsible for protecting....

At the end of the first day, Mary and Joseph discover Jesus is not with his buddies from home and they head straight back to Jerusalem. I can only imagine the panic that would tear them apart as they raced back and searched ... I remember times like that ...praying and praying and hoping (was this the beginning of what Simeon had predicted – *a sword will pierce your own soul too ---?*)

They found him!

They found him sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions – Jesus is not teaching teachers, but listening and asking questions – he is hungry to learn more, to know more – questions and answers are a standard in Jewish teaching, and the teachers are amazed to hear such good questions and answers from a twelve year old boy!

What would your response be?

His parents had a completely different reaction – Mary asks, “how could you treat us like this – we, your father and I have been worried sick – we have been looking everywhere for you” – Joseph does not say a word

Jesus is surprised, not reproachful. “Why were you looking for me?” ...why wouldn't you assume I would be in my Father's house? “Didn't you know I *must* be in my Father's house?” They had heard from angels and shepherds and elders in the Temple, ... they had been instructing him in the faith through the years, shouldn't they understand? And in that simple question he has made it clear that though Mary referred to Joseph as his father, and Joseph had performed the role of earthly father duties, he no longer held that title. Jesus was making changes to reflect who he is – the Son of God – he is making changes to know his Father more and more.

But Mary and Joseph didn't understand what Jesus was saying to them.

We don't hear a word from Joseph, but I imagine it might have felt like his soul was pierced by a sword too when he heard those words.

They found him ... and he goes back down to Nazareth with them and he is obedient to them. This story ends with Jesus returning with Mary and Joseph and being obedient to them while he continued to grow in distinct ways: he grew in wisdom - more than knowledge, a higher understanding; he grew in stature - physical and spiritual growth; he grew in divine favor - his relationship to God his Father; and he grew in human favor - relationship with other people.

Jesus, at the age of twelve understood his identity and his calling and made changes to grow into who he was and is. That day in Jerusalem his parents thought he was disrespectful to them, but he was not – they did not understand what Messiah meant – though they too worked hard at being devoted to God as Jesus grew, every year they would have to make changes to be what God called them to be.

Every year at about this time we are encouraged to think about who we are, who we were created to be, encouraged to make changes to reflect that...

Every New Year we may or may not have decided to make resolutions. A fair amount is written on this subject. I read one article that was very doubtful people would keep the resolutions they made, and I must confess I have not kept all of the resolutions I have made.... I read another article that gave some criteria to help people keep them. It spelled out some criteria I had heard before in the marketplace relating to performance evaluation and goals – not one of my favourite things to write up. But for some reason it caught my attention in a positive way this time. Maybe you have heard of it – SMART (Journal of Management Review in 1981) – the letters stand for Specific. Your resolution should be absolutely clear; Measurable. So you know you are making progress; Achievable. You can have big goals but know that it is a process – it is not a snap of the fingers; Relevant. This is the one that caught my eye first - Is this a goal that really matters to you, and are you making it for the right reasons?; and Time-bound-it takes time to build habits that that lead to growth in stature. It did for Jesus and it will for us.

In all of the articles I perused, I couldn't help but notice of all the listed changes people hope to make, very few mentioned getting to know God better – and yet that is the one thing Jesus focused on – being in his Father's house.

You know, the Gospel of Luke is only the first half of the original book, telling the story of God's fulfilling promises to Israel, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the second half is the book of Acts, telling of the birth and spread of the church - the church finds meaning as the continuation of Jesus' story.

Every year we make changes... let's make changes that help us to grow in wisdom, in stature, and in our relationship to God and to people:

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord^[a] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^[b] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.^[c] ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
(Colossians 3:12-17 NRSV)

Though we each have to decide for ourselves, this is not an individual undertaking, but a group project for the body of Christ, God helping us.

All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Focus Quote: *Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Sources:

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