

Sermon for 26 December 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
First Sunday after Christmas

Scriptures: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148: (UM861); Colossians 3:12-17;
Luke 2:41-52

“Ready”

How quickly we go from birth to growth!

Night before last, we sat stunned at the difference a newborn brings into the world. We insisted being born was good, and having birth around us all our lives makes for great richness. Either we’re adjusting to new life around us, or changes within ourselves, all the time, or we’re just not fully alive. “Change is the only constant,” as they say.

Today we return to the Bible’s steady insistence on that truth through various scriptures. Now the theme is not birth, but growth. Specifically, we have Luke describing Jesus’ upbringing: Traditional, respectful of all the markers of solid progress, respectful of time-honored group connections. He was obviously among the outstanding young people in his village and among his relatives, and his parents supported his gifts and progress; but there was inevitable tension, as we see in the quotes Luke gives: “Child, why have you treated us like this?”; “Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety;” “But they did not understand what he said to them.” Growth isn’t simple, and being ready to stretch oneself, or to relinquish parental reins, has rough edges.

What I want to point out this first Sunday after Christmas is the similarities between us as a congregation and our Lord’s own development.

Christmas Eve last Friday was exciting, well-attended, full of connecting and love. It was an affirmation of our strength as a family, and as a small but sturdy institution. For all the uncertainty of these days and of recent years, we saw an illustration of what church leaders who have come to us during my time with you have said over and over: That we stand out among the smaller congregations of the Conference; we do a lot of things well; we are not just established... we are steady.

That message, after the somber self-examination of Advent, came through. People came because of ties we provided, obedient to our faith. God works that way, and we have a clear call to honor our consistent direction and stability.

We have an unusual opportunity this Sunday to build on all this, as we meet after the second service to consider the day care’s request to fence in our parking lot for their children’s use. Fitness Fun and Games has secured an estimate and a plan that they will pay for ... they want to seek a grant, and

they have figures and drawings to up their application ... and we are going to look it over as a church Everyone's welcome.

Such a step has problems. They want a longer lease than I feel we should provide. Either we feel comfortable with one another for the standard two-year commitment we've had since 2003, or we shouldn't do it. The matter of gates is under discussion, and I feel strongly we should insist on a sliding, cantilevered type that avoids swinging out over sidewalks or inward over play space. We will discuss, "weigh and consider," as the saying goes, and your prayers, our prayers, are essential as we do; but the point I'm making is worthy of the Bible texts we're going to for inspiration today. We have reached a point of hopefulness that requires new attention. Over the years, as one church after another closed and sent its members our way and we welcomed them, Bethesda has stayed independent and not only survived, but done good work. Becoming a Reconciling congregation has not looked like much, but as the United Methodist Church now works, we are among those who are clearly progressive, and stand to endure and even to attract with that identity, whatever happens to the over-all denomination.

What we lack is a certain jubilation and enjoyment about our position. The hard work that went into Christmas Eve could have been more comfortable, as we do better on the conference call and various other details. Nobody's to blame; that's not fruitful. Certainly my skills and reliability have their limits ... but it's time we enjoy the work like all those folks who came from afar to be with us obviously did, and God willing, will again.

So, with Samuel's dedication from childhood to the development of the Jewish people, and with Joseph and Mary and Jesus' continuation of that steadiness, let us pray God will help us lighten up and go forward into the next stage of Bethesda United Methodist Church in Baltimore. Let us pray, and share, and connect, and not try to work everything out in one meeting or even one season. Let us, as the scripture reports, stay steady in the strength and delight and peace and praise, even of ourselves, in the light of God's love, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.