

Dear Friends, in Jesus Christ,

Have you ever watched one of those movies where you're confused about the time? The movie starts out in the present day and all of a sudden you're viewing flashbacks to a previous time and then the movie returns to the present. The series of sermon readings that we're using has done that same thing to us today. We've just celebrated the birth of Jesus, and next Sunday our lesson will be about the Epiphany, the arrival of the wise men to worship Jesus, but . . . today, we're flashing backwards to the childhood days of Samuel, a generation before the days of King David. Hopefully, because you know that you'll be able to follow along. This UNUSUAL CHRISTMAS STORY will make sense.

**1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26**

*18 But Samuel was ministering before the Lord--a boy wearing a linen ephod. 19 Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. 20 Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, "May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the Lord." Then they would go home... 26 And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.*

We start with Mary and Joseph in the stable at Bethlehem and the shepherds who have just come to see the baby Jesus.

*Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* Luke 2:19

What was Mary thinking? What do you think she was "pondering in her heart?"

Maybe some sacred history could help, and so we are taken back to a story that precedes the birth of Jesus by over fifteen hundred years. Today we read about the near-miraculous birth of the prophet Samuel. His mother, Hannah, was not able to have children with her husband, Elkanah. In chapter 1 of this story, we learn that Hannah is only one of the wives of Elkanah. There is another co-wife name Penninah, and while she seems to have no difficulty conceiving children, Hannah remains childless. Every year Elkanah goes to offer sacrifices with his family in Shiloh. Penninah seems to take every opportunity to remind Hannah of her ability to have children and Hannah's obvious infertility. And this was really a matter of importance because giving sons to one's husband was considered the greatest of blessings. Therefore the implication is that Hannah is not loved by God because she cannot give a son to her husband. While they were at Shiloh, Hannah prays with all her heart for a child of her own, promising God that if He would grant her prayer with a son, she would give him to the priesthood.

The priest at the temple is named Eli, and he observes Hannah's desperate and silent prayers to God. Judgmentally, he assumes that she is drunk (1:14). This seems to be quite a ridiculous conclusion to

draw under the circumstances; how often do you think that the priest has witnessed a drunken woman praying in his temple before? When he accuses Hannah and orders her to leave, she answers him,  
*16 "Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." 17 Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." (1 Samuel 1:16, 17)*

The Lord did answer Hannah's prayer. She gave birth to the boy, and named him Samuel. And because she honors her vow to the Lord,

*"As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. 27 I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. 28 So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD." (1 Samuel 1:27, 28)*

Samuel has grown from infancy and into childhood. As promised Hannah brings her son to the temple at Shiloh gives full parental rights and responsibilities to the aging priest, Eli. One can only imagine what Hannah thought as she gave her son to Eli. Still, she leaves him there and returns home. 1 Samuel 2:11 tells us

*"the boy was serving the Lord in the presence of the priest Eli."*

Here we can make the first comparison between these two mothers, Hannah and Mary. Luke's story of the nativity ends in this week's gospel reading (Lk. 2:51-52) with a keen observation about the effect of the event on Mary, the mother of this child. Luke indicates that her mother's heart was already troubled. We read again, that Mary considered many things, as she had when Jesus was born.

*But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. (Lk. 2:51)*

She knew that this child was dedicated to God – but what does the future hold? What will it mean for him? What will it mean for her, his mother? It's not difficult to see that Luke identifies a connection to the story of the boy Samuel.

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel are set at a time of great insecurity and disturbance in the lives of the people of Israel. Again and again they have been defeated, and occupied, especially by the Philistines. Again and again they have been left without hope. They have a deep need for a strong and stabilizing influence – a leader whose values will be those of God. Hannah seems to know that the son she has given to God will be this leader – this man of God. We may think that giving her son to the priesthood might create a great deal of sadness for Hannah, but instead we read that it as an act of hope. Hannah believes he will renew the relationship between the people and God. Samuel will cleanse the worship of God from the corruption and selfishness of the priests and the people of God.

In Luke's story Mary also understands that her son's life will be dedicated to God, to bring reconciliation and peace. The Gospel lesson for today (Lk. 2:41-52), already presents an indication of Jesus' future. When we hear the lesson of Jesus being left behind in Jerusalem, when his family went to the festival there, we may think it was a simple story, of Jesus lingering in the city, and speaking with

wisdom to the elders at the temple. But it also can be seen as a foreshadowing of the day when Mary will “lose” her son in a very different way, in Jerusalem. As Jesus was speaking with the leaders at the temple we see that they were impressed with his wisdom. Years later they will look for ways to trap Jesus in his words.

What really connects the boy Samuel and Jesus are the passages of 1 Samuel 2 and Luke 2:

*And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men. (1 Sam 2:26)*

*And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (Luke 2:52)*

When Samuel first came to Eli he did not begin with all the wisdom and understanding he needed for God’s work. He needed to learn and grow. Although Jesus shares the characteristics of his Father in heaven he also learned the scriptures and what it was to be righteous in a sinful world. Growing “*in favor with God and men*” was more to Samuel and Jesus than being popular. As servants doing the will of God, their task was to reconcile people to one another, and to God.

When he grew older Samuel would also play a direct role in the life of Jesus. It was Samuel who would later anoint David, to become ‘the great king of Israel.’ And from the line of David the child was born who was called ‘the Son of God,’ born to redeem all who believe in him. (Luke 1:26-38).

Samuel’s life is indeed interesting to ponder. He led the people of Israel from the time of the Judges to the monarchy they desired from God. Political power during the days of Samuel made a drastic change. But even as “a blessed servant, chosen by God,” Mary cannot ponder deeply enough to grasp how her son, Jesus, would change the world.

He is the One who would bring reconciliation between sinners and the holy God.

*For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Tim 2:5)*

He is the One Isaiah spoke of, and of whom the angels sang,

*Our Prince of Peace. (Isa 9:6)*

This child in the manger is,

*Christ Jesus [the One who] came into the world to save sinners. (1 Tim 1:15)*

So, that’s the lesson of Samuel. Is it out of place, out of time, here on the Sunday between Christmas and Epiphany? It certainly is AN UNUSUAL CHRISTMAS LESSON but still interesting for us to consider as we recall the words of today’s gospel about Jesus,

*And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (Luke 2:52)*

Amen