

Weekly Reading – Monday, December 21, 2009

Well most preachers are thinking about Christmas Eve services today and in the next couple of days. But we look on to the First Sunday after Christmas, December 27, 2009. The Christmas Eve crowds will be mostly gone. But some will be there, and someone is waiting to hear a word from the Lord. From the standpoint of the texts, this would be an excellent Sunday for the celebration of baptism.

I Samuel 2: 18 - 20, 26

The story of Hannah and her son, Samuel, continues to create a background and back-story for the story of the birth of Jesus. The modern way of thinking is that antecedents and parallels somehow jeopardize or compromise the uniqueness or singularity of Jesus. Some seize on similar stories to say, "It's not true." Ancients, and the Bible, think differently. Truth is not so one-dimensional. The layers and echoes deepen and enrich, much as literature is deepened by references to other stories. So, back of Hannah's story is (indirectly) the story of Abraham and Isaac, of the gift child offered back to the Lord. Hannah has fulfilled her promise, committing her firstborn son, Samuel, to the Lord's service in the temple with Eli. Though Hannah did have additional children, imagine giving up her long-awaited firstborn son. A tender note in vs. 19, "His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice." The implication seems to be that she saw her son only that one time each year. The final verse about the boy Samuel growing in stature is the kind of summary that foreshadows the impending action of God through him. God is up to something. If you read on, Samuel is contrasted with Eli's corrupt sons. God is not indifferent to such corruption, but is working a change.

Colossians 3: 12 - 17

These six beautiful verses are sometimes a reading for a wedding. But the better fit is baptism. Paul is speaking, in his way, of baptism as dying and rising with Christ. Rising he calls us to be "clothed" in the garments of new life: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. A pretty good "gift list" that! The continuing verses offer a fitting admonition for life in the "holidays." "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive." This text gives the preacher an opportunity to speak of the kind of life we are called to in response to the gift of grace in Christ. Or to put that a slightly different way, "Baptism is just the beginning." Verse 16 is worth pondering: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly: teach and admonish one another in all wisdom . . ." In most churches I know, we don't "dwell" in Scripture very much, if at all. That is, we don't let the word of Christ "dwell" richly in us. Nor is Christmas seen as a truly spiritual season in these ways. The rush of Christmas activity and sentimentality burn off quickly like the alcohol-fueled fire on a flaming dish in a restaurant. This text invites a deeper engagement with the Word of Christ, which may be the really most important thing at Christmas.

Luke 2: 41 - 52

This charming story does, of course, have Hannah, Elkanah and Samuel in its background. Here another annual visit to the Temple, which reminds us that Mary and Joseph were observant people and that Jesus was raised in an observant home. It's nature and nurture! Here the "staying behind" in the Temple of the boy Jesus also references Samuel who stayed behind in the Temple. In doing so, it suggests his future vocation and confirms the previous signs to Mary of the calling of her son. We of course relate to the parental anxiety and exasperation, "Child, why have you treated us like this?" One imagines a lippy, modern Jesus saying, "It's not about you!" Jesus is anything but contrite or considerate of his parent's feelings. "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Note the language of call, "I must be . . ." Note as well the tension between two houses and two fathers (earthly and heavenly), which will be reprised when Jesus is asked about his mother and brothers and says that "Whoever does the will of God is my mother, my brother . . ." We too live with this tension between our family of origin and our call/ vocation from God. Mary continues, as at the birth, to "treasure" these strange words and experiences "in her heart." She is, that is to say, alert to God, alert to the reality that God is up to something, but she doesn't know fully or exactly what. Which is our situation too, is it not?