***Growing Up and Letting Go***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 31, 2023*

*based on Luke 2:41-52*

I’ve mentioned before that I grew up in Sacramento, just a half dozen miles from Sutter’s Fort, the destination for many pioneers of California who made the long trek from St. Joseph, Missouri to the central valley of California.

Two of my great-great grandfathers came west in covered wagons to that fort, so the story of the gold rush pioneers is in my blood. As a small child I read about other pioneers who were not as lucky as my ancestors. The most famous among those were, of course, members of the Donner / Reed Party and the tragedy of how they took an ill-advised “shortcut.”

In fact, the first bit of history I remember learning (I was 9) was about a little 8 year old girl named Patty Reed who came west with her family in that ill-fated company. When their wagons failed them on the Bonneville Salt Flats they abandoned them and Mr. Reed ordered his family to abandon everything they owned in the wagons.

An independent spirit, little Patty, his daughter, crawled into the back of their wagon and rescued two things she felt deeply connected to: a lock of her grandmother’s hair, and a tiny wooden doll with cotton clothing. These two things she stuffed into a pocket in the only dress she had.

Once the family stopped at what is now Donner Park, a little west of Donner Lake, her mother and father left Patty with people they trusted, and went on to Sacramento without her, thinking that was the quickest way to get help and bring food back to the weaker members of the party. The height of the snow there that winter was over 20 feet.

The story of the parting of Patty and her mother is a remarkable one. Like Jesus at 12, Patty was precocious, mature beyond her years. You might call her an old soul. She had a maturity that made her stoical instead of desperate as most people, regardless of age, would be. By her own account, she accepted her parents’ decision, knowing she would probably never see her mother again; that one of them would likely die.

It’s so amazing what our children are capable of when push comes to shove. It gives me shivers thinking of what Patty’s mother must have felt, leaving her behind, thinking it was the best chance they had of saving all of them; pondering her daughter’s stoic gesture as she walked west, away from her.

Patty’s parents made it to the fort, but it took much longer than they hoped for her father to get back to her. So many in Patty’s group had died in the meantime, but Patty survived.

Once her father had fetched her and they had made it over the crest of the sierras and were in reach of the valley, they rested and it was then, according to her own written account, sitting beside a campfire, that Patty took the doll out of her pocket and told it the story of everything that she had seen and experienced in her parent’s absence.

The image of that brave little girl talking to her doll captured my imagination when I was nine years old and it has touched my heart ever since.

That story has been on my mind as I have thought about the long trek Jesus and his parents took to and from Jerusalem when he was 12 years old; how they, too, were separated along the way.

Before I get to that, let me share with you a little bit of how I ended up leaving Portland and going to Utah for a ten year ministry. Back in 2010 a friend emailed to tell me of the church in Salt Lake City she was serving as an interim. It was looking for a permanent pastor. She included the church’s Mission Statement. Here it is:

*We are God's children, seeking to know God and God's will for our renewal and healing. Celebrating and reflecting Christ's love, Wasatch Presbyterian Church invites all people,* ***with special concern for the young****, to grow in faith within a nurturing community, through worship, learning and service to others.*

Well, that part about “special concern for the young” spurred me to apply. Looking back, I reflect that every church I have served could have had that in their mission statement, including this one. Southminster has always been about children and that special concern is only growing.

We care for them now and we want very much to pass on to them a world they’d want to live and prosper in.

As parents, extended family, teachers, guardians, and friends of children we are, and rightfully should be, concerned for their well- being. We are meant to protect and teach them, nurture and nourish their lives. It is our responsibility to ensure their health and safety. Growing up is hard work and full of risk.

You know, 6 or seven years ago when I heard that over 600 children had been separated (by orders of our then president) from their parents at our southern border (likely never to see them again – like Patty Reed) I was more than anguished, I was appalled. Like most of you, I cannot bear the extreme suffering of innocent ones, especially children.

I figured that was the worst thing that could have happened, until maybe the recent news from Israel and Gaza. What sickness rages in the heart of any adult human who would support such policies or execute them?

Well, before we lose perspective, let me note that Nicholas Kristof wrote a piece published yesterday called, “2023 Was a Terrible Year and Also Maybe the Best One Yet for Humanity.” What was good about it? Child mortality rates are still going down and that is not happening by accident but through the good work of many many wise and caring human beings.

Okay, back to this morning’s text. The focus, as I have said, is on the adolescent twelve-year-old Jesus. Think, 6th grader. Bring to mind your sixth grade self for a moment. What were you up to then? I mean, in your heart. If you were like me you were beginning to imagine what you might do with your life.

Jesus had clearly begun to explore his own identity, his possible future, what his heart was about at bottom. In his staying behind in the temple and surrounding himself with the teachers there, Jesus was coming to understand his heritage and his relationship with God.

Growing up means establishing our identity and figuring out our proper place in this world.

Of course, along the way we make mistakes, we get lost, we backtrack, and sometimes we just need to start over.

Ultimately, growing up means moving out and finding a new home. Sometimes this involve a geographical move, but always it involves psychological and spiritual moves, as well.

It is no surprise that Mary would be in a panic when she discovers that Jesus was not with the group of travelers heading home.

With great anxiety she and Joseph search for him. Three days later the one who was lost has been found. Mary’s first words are, “Child, why have you treated us like this?”

In the context of the gospel’s story of Jesus, what I really hear is, “Where have you been young man? Your father and I did not survive angel visits, birth in a stable, and living like refugees in Egypt only to have you get lost in the big city.”

But, as the story goes, Jesus isn’t the one who is lost. He knows who he is and where he belongs. Mary and Joseph are the ones who seem lost.

This is a story about growing up but it is not just Jesus’ growing up. It is also Mary and Joseph’s. It is about you and me growing up.

And look, growing up, of course, is not about how old we are. It is really about moving into deeper and more authentic relationships with our world, one other, ourselves, and our creator.

Like all children, Jesus will play a huge part in a crucial step in the maturing of his parents. And this is not just because he is Jesus. No, all children play a huge part in the maturing of their parents, no matter who they are and what they are like.

I know this from experience, and now it’s fascinating to watch my grandchildren shape my daughter’s maturing. I’m watching as my daughter is looking forward in wonderment at what kind of adults her girls will one day be.

I am also observing how my daughter is looking back at the parenting she received from me and her mother – weighing it, wondering over it, asking me questions from time to time.

It’s exactly as it should be and it gives one a sense of how important it is that most of us live as long as we do. Our full maturing takes a long time – a couple of generations.

It’s remarkable how our children challenge us to look at our world, our lives, our parents and ourselves in new, and sometimes painful ways.

That is exactly what Jesus’ question to Mary does. She had put herself and Joseph at the center of Jesus’ world. His questions to them were about to undo that.

“Why were you searching for me?” he asks. “Did you not know that I must be in God’s house?”

Jesus is telling Mary she should have known where he was. It is as if he is saying, “Knowing what you know about me already, where else could I be but here?”

It’s just the kind of thing a precocious 6th grader might say. Jesus is telling her what is at the center of his world and, in a sense, asks Mary to do the same.

By asking his parents to look at him differently means that Mary and Joseph will have to begin letting go of their “little boy” Jesus (Lk. 2:43). Jesus was born of Mary but, like all children, he doesn’t belong to his parents. They can give him love and safety and their concern, but that’s about all.

He is engaged in what we are all engaged in (in the end), “our Creator’s business.” That is to say, we are all living out of the larger purposes put within us when we were born.

Ultimately, his parents must strive to be more like him and not make him like them.

Jesus has moved from Mary and Joseph’s home to what comes next. This is not a rejection of his earthly parents but a natural progression.

It is what Jesus will eventually ask of his disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John. “Follow me.”

That will be the invitation for them to leave their homes, their nets, their parents and move to a different place, live a different life, see with different eyes. It is what we are all asked to do at different stages of our lives.

So, can we agree, growing up involves leaving our comfort zone, letting go of what is safe and familiar, and moving to a more spacious place, to the “God” place in our hearts, whether we know what’s happening in us or not?

The truth is, some of us come from very troubled homes. Homes of fear, anger, and prejudice. Homes of grief and sorrow. Homes in which we have been told, or have maybe become convinced, that we don’t matter, that we are not good enough, that we are un-loveable -- homes in which we have been or continue to be hurt or wounded.

Every one of us could name the different homes in which we have lived; homes that keep our lives small, our vision narrow, our world empty. The problem is compounded by the fact that even in such places we can become comfortable.

But look, they are not our true homes. They are not the home God offers us. We may have to pass through them but there is a meter running on them all. We aren’t meant to stay in any of them forever, however good or bad.

So, what are the little homes in which you live or have lived before? How have they bounded your life, stifled your growth, and kept you from maturing? What have you left behind (or might have to leave behind) in order to grow up and move to a place that really fits who you are?

Those can be hard questions, painful questions. Ultimately, however, they are questions founded on love.

Mary asked, “Child, why have you treated us like this?

That’s one huge question that at some point every parent asks of his or her child.

The most important answer, however, will not be given by the child. It will be given by the parent who can turn that question back on himself.

Amen