***Jesus In 5thGrade***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 29, 2024*

*based on Luke 2: 41-52*

High School graduation rates are going up somewhat nationwide following Covid. The state with the highest rate is … Montana.  Surprise?  The lowest?

California.  However, California sends the highest percentage of grads on to college. What factors are key to graduation? The ability to read is one.

When it comes to reading, we know that fourth grade appears to be the watershed year.  Fourth grade is the year when kids should have transitioned from “Learning to Read” to “Reading to Learn.”

That is, by fourth grade reading is no longer a discrete subject, but is a skill they take everywhere, driven by curiosity, to understand aspects of their world. Curiosity and reading go together.

Another factor:  grasping the fundamentals of reasoning and logic.

First grade appears to be the wake-up year for children in this area.

Fifth grade seems to be the key year over all. It is often the year kids put all the academic pieces together.  They are able to look at school with a little distance,  Teachers are no longer substitute parents.

Kids will come out of fifth grade either saying, “I got this,” or “I’d rather be somewhere else. School’s just not for me.”

Fifth grade, then, is critical. That rung true for me personally.  In fact, I had a terrible 5thgrade experience.  My mother was hospitalized for depression for months when I was in fifth grade.

My parents’ marriage was in bad shape. I went to several different schools in different cities that year with mixed results.  That summer my mother enrolled me in a very rigorous private school where I was able to catch up with my peers and it made all the difference, but I needed an intervention.  I needed extra help.  A lot of kids do.

And there was one teacher that summer who told me I had a special gift for writing and language. And that probably made a huge difference, right then.

I don’t remember his name, just his encouragement.

In preparation for this sermon I was re-reading a book called, *Heading Out: The Start of Some Splendid Careers.*  In it you see story after story of eleven and twelve-year-olds who find themselves, or catch a whiff of something quite important, right when they are the ripest for it.

One person profiled in the book was Pablo Casals, the great cellist. He was born in a small village in the Catalan region of Spain.  He fell in love with the sound of the cello when he first heard one at age eleven. He thought it the most remarkable sound he had ever heard – almost like the sound of a human voice.

He pleaded with his father to get him one.  His father made that happen, but was horrified when his son announced that he wanted to play it professionally.  It wasn’t that his father was non-musical.  Quite the opposite.  His father was a church organist, but so poorly paid that he wanted his son to become anything besides a musician.

Had it been left to his father, Casals would have been a fisherman or a laborer of some sort.   Instead, his mother intervened, She insisted that the family make every sacrifice so that Pablo could go to music school.  His father objected vociferously, but his mother’s was the strongest will. She just insisted that they had to make this happen. His gift was larger than all of them.

Here is how Casals wrote of it: “She had known, I believe, from the beginning.  It was as if she had some special sensitivity, a peculiar prescience.” She was just as tuned into the paths his two younger brothers would follow that were non-musical. Why?  Because she believed that all three of her children had a destiny.

It is interesting to see how parents read their children. It’s interesting to watch and see if they see their children as individuals with a discrete destiny, or as mere extensions of themselves.

That difference invariably makes all the difference when it comes to meaningful parental support.

Look at the life of Jesus in this morning’s text from the gospel of Luke. This is a very late story, something likely apocryphal, but also a story the gospel writer, Luke, finds fascinating and chooses to include in his interpretation of Jesus.

It’s something that demonstrates that Jesus is both very childlike (and thus, very human) but also wise beyond his years.

Luke says that it was the custom of Jesus’s family to go to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. They go there to sacrifice, be entertained, eat food they can’t get back home,. And then they leave to go back to business as usual, back home to dreary old Nazareth. 

A day later Mary and Joseph begin looking for little Jesus in the entourage of their friends and family, but he is not among the throng headed back home. They were sure he’d be traveling with a cousin or neighbor family, having a little extended family time, but he’s not there. So they “returned to Jerusalem to search for him.”

They finally locate Jesus there at the temple, putting the temple elders through their paces, debating fine points of theology with them. The learned elders are “amazed” that Jesus, a little boy, full of nuanced understanding.

Luke infers, without examples, that the boy Jesus has answers for some of life’s deepest theological questions.

“How on earth could this little boy speak with such eloquence about God?”

Moral development is interesting and germane here. From infancy to adulthood the developing moral person progresses from a moral sense focused on self (“Something is right because it feels right to me”) to a focus on others (“Something is right because it’s what we do in our family”) to abstract moral reasoning (“Something is right because it just is right”). And it’s around fifth grade when this kicks in for most kids.

Well, I wonder if maybe the old men in the temple are just the age to see what maybe the parents, Mary and Joseph, are too close to Jesus to see.  Sometimes it’s the grand-parents, I think, who notice these unique things first in a child. In any case, that relationship at a slight remove can be something very special.

Here is something on that from a woman named Deborah Shouse of Kansas who tells of being very young when her family visits her grandmother.

*WE ARE STICKY with the long car ride, hundreds of miles, hours when we have grown sick of each other.  “Let’s go to the hotel first,” Mother urges. But my father drives to this house where his mother waits by the window, her thin hand trembling at the curtain. She’s been waiting forever. “At last,” she says. The sorrow of her bent bones scares me, the hunger of her hug surprises me. No one has ever held on to me so wonderfully. No one else never wants to let me go. I sit close to her on the stiff sofa.“  Don’t you want to go outside and play?” Mother whispers, as if the scent of lemon trees and fresh sun, the splash of ocean breeze, can compare with the way my grandmother looks at me.*

Well, like the old men in the temple, Mary and Joseph also receive a jolt. They are astounded to find their little boy standing up before the rulers of the religion.

When they rebuke Jesus for making them so distracted with worry, little Jesus brings them up short, telling them that they ought to know that he would be found “in my Father’s house.”

Jesus either has a sense of God as male (think of the opening of The Lord’s Prayer) not surprising for the time, or he uses male words for God because he wouldn’t get to first base without them in the 1st century. Who knows? Jesus then obediently travels back to Nazareth with his parents.

Luke says that Mary “pondered these things in her heart.”   As I said, it is interesting to see how parents choose to act or react to the gifts and quirks of their children. According to Luke, Mary, to her credit, does not count this as a bad thing, but as a watershed in her understanding of her son and his “destiny.”

Let me tell you another story detailed in the book,  *Heading Out*.  It tells the story of a nearly equally gifted child and a less tuned-in mother; the mother of the Nobel Prize winning physicist, Richard Feynman.  He once wrote the following of his own 5th Grade transition –

*{As a child} I was often in my house fiddling with my lab.  I didn’t get to do as much as I wanted to because my mother kept putting me out all the time to play.*

*{But} one day I was playing [inside] with a Ford automobile coil, punching holes in paper with the sparks, and the paper caught on fire.  Soon I couldn’t hold it anymore because it was burning near my fingers, so I dropped it in a metal wastebasket which had a lot of newspapers in it.  Newspapers burn fast, you know, and the flame looked pretty big inside the room.  I shut the door so my mother, who was playing bridge downstairs with some friends, wouldn’t find out there was a fire in my room.*

*I took a magazine that was lying nearby and put it on top of the wastebasket to smother the fire.  After the fire was out I took the magazine off, but now the room began to fill up with smoke.  The wastebasket was still too hot to handle, so I got a pair of pliers, carried it across the room, and held it out the window so the smoke could blow out.  But because it was a breezy day, the wind lit the fire again, and now the magazine was out of reach.  So I pulled the flaming wastebasket back in through the window to get the magazine, and I noticed there were curtains in the window – it was very dangerous. Well, I got the magazine, put the fire out again, and this time, kept the magazine with me while I shook the glowing coals out of the wastebasket onto the street, two or three stories below.  Then I went out of my room, closed the door behind me, and said to my mother, “I’m going out to play,” and the smoke went out slowly through the window.*

Wow, the things mothers never find out.  It would kill them.  Well, as I said, this book tells the story of person after person who take a giant psychic leap at the age of eleven or twelve.

What opened for you when you were that age?  What spark of life and uniqueness revealed itself at that time for you.  I bet there was something.

What one often sees, looking closely at the lives of children of this age  is how much it means to have someone recognize the unique spark you have.

Now, it doesn’t have to be your mother. It might be your father, or a teacher, or a scout leader, or a children’s minister or youth leader.  What is key here is that the person manifesting the gift may not see it or even value it, so having it named and celebrated is crucial.

And I believe that at age 11 or 12 we are all just so hungry for such a thing. Lisa Boken of Massachusetts tells the following story from her life.

*ONE DAY WHEN I WAS a young girl sitting in church, a scripture jumped out at me: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 13:2). Entertained angels? Really, do you suppose people have entertained angels, I mean had them over for dinner and not known they were angels? My parents had lots of people come for dinner. Some of them were strangers to me.*

*I became more attentive to the persons who came to our house. I asked them where they were born, who their fathers were; I looked carefully for bumps along their backs where wings might attach.*

*When I could find no clues, I decided that as my parents knew all those who came to our house for dinner, they must not be true strangers. I started observing real strangers — people on the streets, in the grocery store, driving by in cars.*

*I was obsessed with the idea that some might be angels. In my enthusiasm I talked with strangers wherever I could. When my mother found out, she [was horrified and] told me all about men who offered candy to little girls. This was so frustrating; there might be real angels out there and there was no way to get to them. I soon lost interest and became cynical.*

*A few years later a woman visited our family. She was the kind of person children like. She spoke directly to me and listened attentively. She was one of the few adults who asked real questions, not just, “How’s school?”*

*She framed her questions from my previous answers. This proved what I had only suspected up until then: I was worth listening to. This stranger presented a small Christmas angel as a gift to our family. I wondered if this woman who was so very kind and loving was herself an angel. I studied her throughout the meal.*

*Afterward, when I was alone with her, I decided to share the scripture and ask if she thought it might be true. She paused, then took my face in her hands and said, “Lisa, there is a special secret that the scripture didn’t tell you. Listen carefully, it’s this. Drawing me in, she whispered to me: “Lisa, every stranger is an angel.”*

Well, I don’t know if that’s the case. Lisa Boken’s mother had every reason to tell her daughter to be careful of strangers, but it IS true that someone needs to make a difference for young people to become the people they are meant to become.

That’s maybe what Luke was getting at by including the story the dowdy olf temple elders listening with rapt attention to a twelve year old boy from the country-side. Someone needs to show an interest.

Who believed in you?

Amen