

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

December 20, 2015
First Sunday After Christmas

The readings this week:

- 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 ◦ Psalm 148
- Colossians 3:12-17 ◦ Luke 2:41-52

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

And The Child Grew and Became Strong

When my "baby" brother Robert was five years old, he had blonde curls and big blue eyes and was just about the most adorable little boy imaginable. (I have his permission to share this personal, but positive, description of him!)

He was assigned a part in the Christmas Eve pageant by its director, Mrs. Betty Hefflebauer. He had his heart set on being a wise man because of the cool costumes. But she did not cast him as a wise man. Nor did she cast him as Joseph, the inn keeper, or a shepherd. To her mind, none of these parts seemed quite right for him.

Instead she gave him what my mother tried to convince him was the most important part of all—the narrator. He only had one line, and it was straight out of Scripture (Luke 2:40). After all the actors in the pageant had processed down the double aisles to the front and had taken their places in the Nativity Scene at the front, little Robert was to come out, walk to the center, pause to heighten the moment, gesture dramatically toward the baby, and say, loudly and clearly, "And the child grew and became strong!" He had the last word of the whole play. That was what my mother kept telling him.

My mother took him to Sears and bought him a Christmas suit: little black pants, a red velvet blazer, a white shirt, and a clip-on bow tie for his acting debut. We all helped him practice around the house, prompting him with the first part of his line, "And the child grew..." to which he would chime in "and became strong!" Other times, he would start things off by saying, out of the blue, "And the child grew," to which the whole family would respond in chorus, "and became strong!" Add to that the weekly practices during Sunday school and, by the time Christmas Eve arrived, our little thespian was set to do the family proud.

We're still not sure what happened that night. Maybe it was because he had never practiced making his entrance and saying his line in a darkened sanctuary. During Sunday school there was always light streaming through the Garden of Gethsemane window at the back. Maybe it was because he had never practiced making his entrance and saying his line with the place packed with people.

Whatever the reason, when the Holy Family and their entourage were in place and his moment came, Robert walked out, his red velvet jacket glowing in the candlelight, and stood in front of the congregation. He was a baby deer with blonde curls and big blue eyes caught in the headlights.

He opened his mouth, and nothing came out. His eyes began to glimmer, and his little lip trembled. He looked toward the baby and gestured, but couldn't get the words out. Mrs. Hefflebauer, from her position as prompter crouched behind the lectern, whispered to him, "Pssst, Robert...And the child grew and became strong."

Still nothing. Again she whispered, this time a little louder, "And the child grew and became strong."

Suddenly, a look of relief washed over his cherubic countenance. He leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner and whispered to the congregation in an audible and even dramatic stage whisper, "And the child grew and became strong!"

Practicing Our Lines for Epiphany

Epiphany begins next week, January 6. It takes its name from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, which signifies a "manifestation," "striking appearance," or "theophany." Epiphany, as a Christian feast day, celebrates the revelation of God the Son as a human being in Jesus Christ. Both Western and Eastern Christian traditions celebrate the visit of the Magi and Jesus' baptism by John.

Traditionally, Western Christians have focused on the visitation of the Magi to the baby Jesus, and thus the revelation of Jesus' identity to the Gentile world. Eastern Christians have focused on the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, seen as his manifestation to the world as the Son of God. Both emphases occur in the texts chosen by the Revised Common Lectionary in the weeks ahead. The season of Epiphany is a four-week journey that takes us to the Transfiguration of our Lord. In the Church Calendar, this Sunday is listed simply as "First Sunday after Christmas Day." That seems like too bland a banner to me. I'd rather call it "Preparation for Epiphany Sunday," because we need some time to learn what our role is supposed to be and to practice our lines.

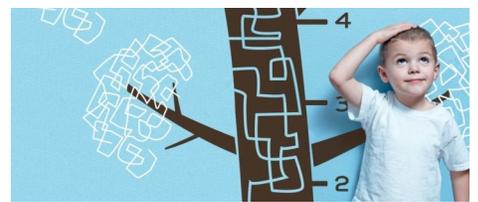
During Epiphany our role is to celebrate the manifestation of the identity of Jesus as Son of God to the whole world. Our role is to allow the presence of Jesus to have an ever stronger influence on our lives. Our role is to allow Jesus to be who he was sent to be.

That to me is one lesson his parents learn in the vignette recounted in Luke 2:41-52. They find out that the boy Jesus, in growing and becoming strong, is not under their control and will not always be found at their side. When they finally track him down in the Temple, his mother's question is focused on the anxiety and perhaps inconvenience he has caused his family: "Child, why have you treated us like this?" But Epiphany is not about our peace of mind and convenience. It's about assuming our role of allowing Jesus to grow and become strong in our lives and in this world.

My brother's lines were the last words of the Christmas play and the first words of the season of Epiphany: "And the child grew and became strong."

Keep your eye on that child this Epiphany and see how he grows and where he goes. Keep your eye on that child this Epiphany, and see where he takes you and how he shapes you.

Reflecting on the Word



___ 1st Reading: [1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26](#)

The priesthood of Eli and his sons at Shiloh is corrupt. By contrast, Hannah gives back to God the very thing she has prayed for so fervently - her son, Samuel. Through Samuel, God is preparing a good future in the midst of a corrupt present. Hannah entrusted everything to God. What barriers keep you from doing the same? What present situations, both personal and in the wider society, are corrupt and less than they should be? What signs can you see, of God preparing a better future? [United Methodist Church of Yucaipa](#)

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 148](#)

This psalm divides into two six-verse stanzas (vv. 1-6 and 7-12), with a recap that underscores the motivation to praise (vv. 13-14). What two major chorus groups are appealed to here? Within those two major choral divisions, who joins in praising God? Do you see this as mere figurative (symbolic or exaggerated) language used by the psalmist to call all things in heaven and on earth, or is there some way that all the various elements actually praise God? Why praise God at all? What is the closest you have come, this side of heaven, to experiencing a worldwide worship service such as this psalm announces? Do you look forward to heaven when this psalm finds its fulfillment, or does praising God all day long sound boring to you? How does this psalm provide a new or fresh picture of praise for you? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)



Psalm 148: Praise and Splendor, [Melani Pyke](#)

Praying Toward Sunday

Dear God, draw us to search for you where you will be found — in acts of mercy, compassion, and kindness, that we might treasure in our hearts, and witness to in our actions, your profound love. May we grow and become strong in you, like you, through you. Amen

Adapted from ...[In the meantime](#)

If we let Jesus's silent years stand at face value instead of filling them with some ostensibly deep meaning, they speak volumes in our media-saturated world of celebrity culture, self-promotion, and endless noise. His hidden years point to a counter-cultural spirituality of invisibility and obscurity...

For Christians, the delicious paradox is that the missing 90% of Jesus's life, no matter how completely lost to history, was not lost or hidden to God, not by a long shot. Nor is my life or your life. Liberia, Congo, and Darfur are not hidden to God, even though the world ignores them. After raising six kids and then experiencing a divorce, my mother lived by herself for thirty-three years, but none of those years were lost to God.

*An excerpt from "Plunge Yourself Into Obscurity:"
The Hidden Years of the Boy Jesus, [Journey with Jesus](#)*

___ 3rd Reading: [Colossians 3:12-17](#)

When you were a child, what was one behavior your parents insisted on just because you were a member of their family? Why does Paul begin by reminding us of who we are in God's sight? Why is the description "God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved" not dependent on our feelings or efforts? Paul recognizes that grievances occur even in the church. How are his instructions for handling grievances different from the way our culture handles them? Paul also recognizes that Christians conflict with each other. How could conflicts be better managed with peace ruling (literally, "functioning like an umpire") in our hearts? What does it mean to let the word of Christ "dwell" in us richly? What "new clothes" would you like to put on? How would doing everything "in the name of the Lord Jesus" transform what you have to say and do today? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

___ 4th Reading: [Luke 2:41-52](#)

Why do we need to know that Jesus's parents went to Jerusalem for Passover "every year"? How do you think Jesus felt about the annual trip at age 12? What does Joseph and Mary being unaware of Jesus staying behind say about the nature of the community they were apart of? What thoughts and questions were likely going through Mary and Joseph's head during their 3 day search for Jesus? How did Jesus likely spend the nights he was separated from his parents? What questions do you imagine Jesus asked of the teachers in the temple? What questions would cause you to be amazed? What would you have said to Jesus if you were in Mary and Joseph's shoes? What does Jesus' obedience to his parents say about the need for us to obey and honor our parents regardless of our age? What do you treasure in your heart about Jesus? [Heralds of Hope](#)