

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Palisades, NY

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*And they were amazed...*  
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I hope everyone had a Merry Christmas and that this coming New Year is filled with blessings for all and all on this and any other planets where God had deemed life should emerge and exist!

I spent part of this week in Florida visiting with my family. My sister and brother-in-law live just south of my parents in Tampa and my brother and sister-in-law and their daughter, Ella, live in Amelia, Ohio. Ella is the only grandchild, and – I know I am biased – she is a doll. She has just turned one and took her first steps early this week. She also has the dubious distinction of being compared to my childhood antics every time she does something like emptying a cupboard of its contents, finding a way to climb onto the kitchen counter or out of the crib, or other such adventures.

“She’s a rip, just like you were, Raymond” is said so often that I feel as though we’ve entered into a state of hyperbole – but such is the realm for grand and great grandparents, parents, guardians, aunts and uncles, and the others – when the likes of this little girl are about.

You might say that we are all amazed by her on a regular basis. And, if you did, that would give me my first link with today's title for this bit of a reflection.

Something else amazed me. And, when I finally got home late Thursday, I was surprised to realize that I was experiencing what my parents described every time their visits with Ella were over – I really missed her. I may have to start making frequent visits to Amelia! Funny how the heart tugs. Another left-over from childhood? Anyone feeling a little tug now? 😊

This caring of family and friends for the young in the family is a human tradition, instinct, calling, perhaps. Not everyone finds young children easy to deal with, but for the most part – if we don't have to change diapers or walk them in the middle of the night – most of us find them amazing, and for some – even these tasks seem minor inconveniences to the wonder of having children in the house.

Children... This morning's two readings continue the relatively quick stories of from childbirth to early adolescence for Hannah's son Samuel and Joseph and Mary's son Jesus. There are several parallels between the two stories: Hannah's prayer – which many consider to be the foundation for Mary's magnificat and even some of the verses in each:

I Samuel 2:26 – “And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour of both the Lord and with all men [and women].”

Luke 2:52 – “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and with man [and woman].”

It is always a good thing to keep in mind that the Bible was not written to pass the scientific historical scrutiny of our day. It was not meant to be history, in the sense we know it. It was meant to be a narrative of the journey of the faithful and God’s relationship with them on the path. It was also seen not as chapters of a book or scrolls – but as ongoing revelation, so that past events were seen as linkages with the present and the parallels that make us go “Aha! Evangelical Plagiarism!” were really ways to reinforce the completeness and totality and connectivity of God’s plan – throughout time!

What I do find interesting, though, is the relationship of children in the Bible to its central themes. On the surface it’s easy to make sense of this: the Bible is all about people striving through one trial and oppression after the other, a saviour was always being sought, and lineage was important in who ruled – as well as into whose line Jesus was born. Hope was always most abundant in the presence of a young, rising star – from Moses, to Joseph, to Samuel, David, Jesus...

Just as it was from one king and emperor to the next. The difference, of course, were in the kingdoms, even though they merged for a while, as the line got closer to Jesus – the former monarchies associated with Judaism dissipated, and what remained was what

was there in the beginning – this relationship with God, a God who according to some of the Biblical writers and prophets (Samuel included) wanted no king between God’s people and God. But the people saw others with their kings and kingdoms and they, too, wanted to be a mighty nation. So we have KINGS (four books of them!)

All kingdoms a limited lifespan, but this God continued on and once again magnificently emerged in the presence and hope of a child, perhaps miraculously born – perhaps not; perhaps in a stable, perhaps not – but born, yes; and with a presence of God that brings many millions hope on a daily basis and through 2 millennia of time.

It’s what I have said here before – the best hope I have or the reason for hope – has always been most present for me in two places: kids and that quiet place inside where God seems to be, always - sometimes annoyingly difficult to understand, present. And among the many places where this harmonizes and energizes with the greatest efficacy – is here, for me – maybe for you too.

I told a friend of mine yesterday that I seemed to be leaning into a reflection on children and hope and such. He said, “Gee that sounds really good, but you know there probably won’t be many children there on Sunday to hear it.”

Then I thought of last week ad the late service. I had inadvertently left in the heading for the children’s story in the bulletin. When I showed it

to Michael, he said, “Oh, that’s OK, you can just come up with something clever that says something like, ‘I Know you all were children once, maybe still are...’”

That stuck with me this week, getting back to Ella, when she would go into her laugh routine. When you really got her going, she would squint up her eyes, curl her lips, and light up with a smile and her two little upper and lower teeth showing just enough to make you crack up!” Something like this....

And, it occurred to me that that is probably going to be her laugh for the rest of her life (with a few more teeth, I’m sure). That wonderful part of her childhood will be with her always, as will so many other things – maybe the best of things.

The connection to the child in the adult (please note: I am not referring to the inner child here!) – but the child in the adult is the spontaneous laughter, the unconditional loving, the willingness to trust others, the vulnerability that asks for help, the curiosity and inquisitiveness, the sense of humor, compassion, energy, and the unbridled hope that just seems to emerge –the easy loving friendships, as natural as language acquisition, and the closeness to God in some unknowable way that fills their lives –

That’s us, we older kids, isn’t it. Sure, things get a bit more complicated – as do we – but I am beginning to think that we are never meant to lose that childhood grace – or have it taken away. In

fact, I think that there may be some truth that the trouble in this world is that this child like sense has been lost in some of those who have risen to levels of authority across all designations of leadership and power.

Do you remember when Jesus said,

"Let the little **children** come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14)

We are those little ones, just a little older. We are the children who have grown in wisdom and stature and love of God and others – grown in those ways, a continuation of the child into the adult world that too often relegates children to a suzerain or under the authority of exams and assessments and advanced placements, and...

All well and good, as long as we don't wipe out the child in process. And here, in this church we somehow seem to know that and protect it. It's the child coming out, I think.

Oh, yes...the child is here in the laughter and the love, the hope and the happiness, the commitment and the acceptance of the challenge, and the patience and persistence in still being willing to be amazed at what God has given to us and has planned for us in the new things of this day and the days to come. The unconditional ways in which we

come together in times of difficulty, gathering from that deep Jesus-sort of place inside – maybe the most right sense of child there is.

Maybe Michael was right, maybe this is a children’s story – a children’s story for us.

Happy New Year