

In Front of Our Eyes, December 26, 2021, St. Timothy, Burnaby
1 Samuel 2.18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Luke 2.41-52

Prayer

There is a routine I do almost every time I get up from a chair or get ready to leave: I pat my pockets and check to make sure all the essentials are there: keys, wallet, phone. I am lucky enough to have pockets in all my clothes so that's not a problem, and as long as everything is there, all is good. I've got what I need. The moment something is *missing* however, it instantly causes a panic. Before I've even had the time to think about *why* one of those things might not be there, my heartrate has already skyrocketed and I'm patting my pockets again, quicker, just in case I missed something the first time round. "Keys! Wallet! Phone!" Sometimes there is a good reason one of those three is missing: my phone is plugged into the charger. My wallet is put away since I won't need it. But for that split second that one of those three is *not* there, my heart really starts pounding.

You might have a similar routine and similar items. And you can probably sympathize with what's next: sometimes I get into a panic looking for something that's missing that's right in front of me. I've had instances, more than one, where I get really worried about my keys not being in my pocket—when they're still in the lock in the door in front of me. Or I panic about my phone not being in the right pocket...because it is in my hand, showing me the map of where to go next. I understand similar situations happen for people with glasses. I've heard stories of people who are so worried about losing their glasses that they keep extra pairs in every room of their house.

Yes, sometimes the things that are right in front of us are completely outside of our view. Ask my wife how many times I've opened the fridge then called her because I can't find something that is right in front of me. I think those two things are connected, actually. It's not only that we don't see something that is right in front of our eyes, it's that we *expect* to see something, to feel my phone is in my pocket for example, and then jump to distress or panic when it's not *as we expected*. I thought the leftover pizza would be on the bottom shelf. It's not there. It must be gone (never mind checking the top shelf). My keys should be in my pocket and they're not. That's a problem! (before looking to see them in my hand). My glasses should be right here on this table. That's where I always leave them. Where could they be? (when they are on top of my head or hanging around my neck). We can miss even the most obvious things when they're not as we expect them.

But there is hope for us yet. People *can* change. Grow. Develop. We have two stories of people doing just that. Both Samuel and Jesus grow and develop. Very similar phrases are used for both of them—just compare the last line of each reading. They grow in favour and stature and wisdom. They become more reputable figures. And, presumably, more responsible. So there *is* hope for us.

And I know the temptation is to look at every Bible story to see what it is supposed to teach us; which character do we identify with and learn from? The temptation, especially when we see these two, side-by-side, is to think that *growth* is the common theme and the lesson. Samuel grew. Jesus grew. Therefore, I too must grow. I can and I will!

But these are not typical stories about typical people. Yes, people do grow and mature. But not like Jesus. And not even like Samuel. Sorry to burst your bubble, but that's just not in the cards for us. At least, I don't think so. Samuel grew from a boy who was only just weaned living at the temple to a major

prophet in Israel. He was a leader with no comparison. He was widely respected and feared. He anointed both Saul and David as Kings of Israel and prophesized about the downfall of the priest Eli and his family. There are very few people in human history who have had the kind of impact he did. So...maybe Samuel as a role model is setting the bar a little high.

And Jesus? Well, yes, he did grow and learn and develop. But, if you thought Samuel was a high bar, Jesus is in an entirely different league. He was God. He *is* God. So, everything is different for him. Yes, in many ways, Jesus is a role model for us...but in some ways that's just not what we're supposed to take away from the text. Jesus loved with a very deep love. Sure, we can emulate that. Jesus gave of himself for the good of others. Yes, we too can hope to achieve that. Jesus died on a cross for the sins of humanity. Well...we just can't do that. And Jesus died and came back to life. Also, not really in the cards for us—at least not in the same way.

But that's not to say that these two stories don't tell us something important. It's just not that we should learn about growth from them. They tell us something else. They tell us that God is working—God is working and we don't always know what's going on.

There are times when it is almost like God is telegraphing us with plans. We know exactly what is going on and we can see the writing on the wall and watch as things unfold. We can sense God's presence and see God's work firsthand. That can be very exciting to witness and be a part of.

That is Samuel. All the cards lined up for Samuel. Things were very clear from a very early point that Samuel was to be God's messenger. That Samuel would function as God's mouthpiece and interpret God to humankind. Even from a very young age, God used Samuel so that as he grew, the people continued to rely on him to speak to them from God. It was apparent to anyone who was paying attention. As Samuel grew and developed, that trust and confidence the people put in him deepened. Right in front of their eyes.

But that is not always how God works.

The familiar expression is "the Lord works in mysterious ways." And sometimes they can be very mysterious indeed. Sometimes God works in ways that are completely baffling. So much so that we wonder if it is God at all. It's not always easy to tell. Sometimes we don't know until much later, when we look back and see God's hand in hindsight. And sometimes we never know.

What we see with Jesus in the temple is that sometimes even the people *best* positioned to know what God is doing still completely miss the point. Really, who would we think would know what God was up to? The priests and teachers at the temple? They spend all that time in prayer and studying the scripture. They represent God to the people and the people to God. They should know what's up, right? Yet we hear that they are "amazed" at Jesus' responses. He is an under-educated commoner who seems to really get what their religion is all about. They are shocked. Despite their time in prayer and study, they didn't know to look for Jesus, for the Messiah, during that time in the temple. They were surprised. This was not what they were expecting.

And Jesus' parents are even more baffling. They *do* know who Jesus is. They both had visions from angels (if we combine the different accounts from the gospel writers). They *knew* that Jesus was God's son, the fulfilment of God's promises. This was no ordinary child. This was God's only begotten son. They were looking right at him and *still* they couldn't see him for what he was. Perhaps he wasn't what they

expected. Perhaps they were looking for something else. Perhaps they were so used to him just *being* there that they stopped seeing him altogether.

God is at work in our world. Now. But we don't always see it. Sometimes the evidence of God's work is not where we think it should be. All-too-often what we hope and pray for simply doesn't materialize. We can get discouraged and wonder if God is really still involved in the world.

When we're looking for something specific, we tend to miss what is right in front of our eyes. Especially when it's not where we thought it would be, or not *just* as we thought it would be.

Sometimes, the work God is doing in the world is hidden from us—or we can't see it as God's work. We can be surprised or confused or even offended at it. We don't recognize God's hand at play. We don't grasp it for what it is.

May we, like Mary, *treasure* these things in our hearts. Hang on to them, even when we don't understand and don't yet see the big picture. May we be open to experiencing God in ways we never expected, allowing God to surprise us, challenge us, confuse us, and even anger us. But may we accept it all, even when we don't understand. May we hold these ideas, treasure and ponder them in our hearts as we see the work of God in the world continuing to grow and develop. It's there, right in front of us. Can we see it?