

May 19, 2019

Confirmation Sunday

Amber Alert!

Luke 2:41-52

Opening words: Over 2,000 years ago a young Greek artist named Timanthes (4th century) studied under a respected tutor. After several years the teacher's efforts seemed to have paid off when Timanthes painted an exquisite work of art. Unfortunately, he became so enraptured with the painting that he spent days gazing at it. One morning when he arrived to admire his work, he was shocked to find it blotted out with paint. Angry, Timanthes ran to his teacher, who admitted he had destroyed the painting. "I did it for your own good. That painting was retarding your progress. Start again and see if you can do better." Timanthes took his teacher's advice and produced *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, which is regarded as one of the finest paintings of antiquity. It isn't just true of fine art, it is true in our spiritual journey too. Our Wesleyan tradition tells us we are always striving for perfection.

This is confirmation Sunday at Western Reserve and we are instructed from the second chapter of Luke. This story is unique to Luke. It is not found in Matthew, Mark, or John. I am glad Luke included this story, because it is the only Biblical story that bridges Jesus' childhood with his adulthood. Our Gospel reading for today is Luke 2:41-52. Let me call this message *Amber Alert!*

Luke 2:41-52 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house." ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German pastor and theologian. He died on April 7, 1945 in a Nazi concentration camp. He once wrote, *"Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you the rest of your life."* If you understand that quote, say, **"Amen!"**

This story has a happy ending. It happened just the other day. On May 14, 2019, in Kentwood, Michigan, an amber alert was issued for four-year-old Faith Martinez. You know the amber alert system. It began in the United States in 1996, to ask the public to help the police locate abducted children. Faith had last been seen with her thirty-year-old mother, Petra Yahya. It was Petra's mother who called the police. She reported her daughter had threatened to harm herself and her four children. The other three children were located safely, but Faith was missing. Within fifteen minutes of the alert being issued, a citizen called the police and reported the location of the family vehicle. When the police arrived, they found Petra and Faith in a nearby residence, both safe. The amber alert was canceled. If you are glad Faith is safe, say, **"Amen!"** Did you know, according to the Department of Justice, 957 children have been saved by the amber alert system?

This story has a happy ending too. It happened about two thousand years ago near Jerusalem in Israel. You can find the story only in one place, the second chapter of Luke. According to the text, Jesus was twelve years old (2:42). That was a significant year in the life of a young Hebrew man. For it was during that year that he would begin his studies to take his place among the men of the faith. Perhaps, that is why Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem? Perhaps they went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover, as was required by the law. Or perhaps, they went to Jerusalem for the Passover to visit with family and friends. We really don't know why they were in Jerusalem, but we do know they were returning home. The distance between Jerusalem and Nazareth was and is 63 miles as the crow flies. In reality, it is 68 miles, because no road is perfectly straight. You do the math. If you walk about 4 mph, then it would have taken 17 hours to get home. The journey was not done in isolation. The pilgrims returned home in large packs. They walked with family and friends, who filled the hours of traveling with various discussions. Jesus was twelve years old and twelve-year old boys are beginning to explore their independence. It would not have been natural for Jesus to travel with his parents. Mary and Joseph assumed their son was traveling with his friends. They assumed wrong. Jesus was missing. They sent out a first century amber alert. They asked everyone with ears the question, "Have you seen Jesus?" Everyone answered, "No!" With no other option, Mary and Joseph returned to the Golden City. (They had to go back! How do you tell God you have lost his son?) After three long days of searching, they found Jesus in the temple. They try to reprimand him, but their words seem to fall on deaf ears. They thought Jesus was lost, but he knew where he had been the entire time. He was in his father's house. If you are glad that Jesus was safe, say, **"Amen!"** Listen to what I am about to say.

The story of Jesus at twelve years old is really our story. We are lost and we don't even know it. Spiritually, we think we are doing fine, but we are not. This is the question I

must ask you this morning: Are you making any progress in the faith? You are not going to make any progress in the faith until you do what Jesus did in the story. What did Jesus do? We find out in verse 46. It says:

After three days they (Joseph and Mary) found him (Jesus) in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

Did you hear what Jesus did to grow spiritually? First, Jesus listened. The Master didn't talk, he listened. Second, Jesus asked questions. He didn't ask sarcastic questions to criticize. He asked questions to expand his understanding. If we spent more time listening and more time asking probing questions, then we would grow spiritually too. That is the simple outline for this message. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Jesus Listened

First, Jesus listened. Jesus is sitting in the temple with the teachers and he is listening to what they were saying. In other words, when Jesus was listening, Jesus was learning. You know it is true. We are not very good at listening. However, we are excellent at talking. Have you ever gone to church and tried to listen, but the person next to you won't stop talking? There seems to be a national shortage of good listeners. If you don't believe me then just google this question, "how can I become a better listener?" Everyone seems to have list a to help us. Even *dumblittleman.com*. This is their list of seven:

1. Remove all distractions
2. Be present
3. Wait for the other person to stop talking
4. Don't assume anything
5. Look at nonverbal communication
6. Clarify
7. Ask questions

Do the people in your life consider you a good listener? When you come to church, do you spend more time listening or talking? It is my job to communicate the divine Biblical truth in a clear way. It is your job to listen to the divine truth. American author Bryant H. McGill once said, "*One of the most sincere forms of respect is to actually listen to what another has to say.*" How much do you respect the people in your life? How much do you respect me? How much do you respect God? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" I don't want to shock you, but you don't know everything. People don't come to church to hear what you think. People come to church to hear what God has to say. You may want to stop talking and listen.

Jesus Questioned

Second, Jesus asked questions. When I was young, I lived in a home that was built in the 20's. If you lived in a home built in the 20's, you know they weren't built like homes today. Homes built during that decade did not have air conditioning or decks. However, they did have front porches. We never sat on the front porch, except when the weather

grew hot. I have fond memories of those hot evenings because the entire neighborhood sat on their front porches at the same time. That is how we got to know our neighbors. When I was young, I would journey to our neighbor's front porch. Her name was Mrs. Ortmyer. I thought she was as old as the hills. (She was probably about 62 😊). She served me the same snack regularly, ginger ale and soda crackers. Every night, I would ask a mountain of questions. Why is it so hot in the summer? Why is it so cold in the winter? Why is the grass green and the snow white? How can birds fly and fish swim? Every evening our discussion ended the same way. She would cup her hands over her ears and say, "Russell, go home! When you get older you will have all the answers you want." I have to say it: Mrs. Ortmyer was wrong! I am older, but I still have a mountain of questions. Why are some born with so much and some so little? Why are all my friends fighting the battle of the bulge, yet someone dies in our world every seven seconds from a lack of food? How can you raise two children in the same house, and they end up so different? Have you ever asked those kinds of questions? When I get to heaven, I have a mountain of questions for God. How many questions do you have for God?

There is nothing wrong with asking questions. Jesus asked questions. Look at verse 46 again. It says, *"After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions."* There is nothing wrong with a sincere question. Asking God a sarcastic question just shows your arrogance. Asking God a sincere question means you are simply trying to understand. Look at it this way. If you don't ask questions, it means you don't care enough to try to understand. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Ask God all the questions you like. Don't worry, He can handle it! Jesus grew spiritually because he listened and asked questions.

This is confirmation Sunday, and on this day, we will confirm eight wonderful people. They have been working hard. They began this process back in September. I have no clue how many hours they have spent together listening about Jesus in the classroom and on various trips. I have no clue how many questions they have asked. I have no clue how many hours they spent with their mentors. I have no clue how many times they helped in worship. However, I do know this: I am proud of each one of them. For this reason, I almost feel bad saying the next line. Today is not the completion of anything. It is only the beginning! We have only planted a seed that will grow for decades to come. In just a few minutes, they will become one of us, people who are always striving for an impossible goal, to be like Jesus! Are you becoming a little more like Jesus every day? Or, are you satisfied with your present state?

Let me end this message with an illustration that haunts me late at night. I have told it countless times, because I hope it haunts you too. I originally heard it years ago at Lakeside. It was told by Tom Tewell, who was the pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. It happened during his ordination interview. He was interviewed by a small group of Presbyterian ministers who had to approve him for ordination. He said they covered the various areas of systematic theology and church

history. They talked about his personal life and his holy habits. They talked about his future dreams. Everything was going well, and there came a point when he felt like he was going to be approved. One of the interviewers said, "Tom, we only have one more question." It was asked by the oldest man on the interview team. (He was probably 62!) He said, "Mr. Tewell, are you making any progress in the faith?" Tom said he opened his mouth, but no words came out. He didn't know how to answer. It is an excellent question. How do you answer the question?

Are you making any progress in the faith? If you don't know how to answer that question, then do two things. They are the same two things Jesus did when he was twelve years old. First, start listening and learn the divine truth. It is my job to communicate it clearly. It is your job to listen. Second, ask questions to expand your understanding. Do you care enough to ask a sincere question? Do you remember the quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer? He once wrote, "*Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you the rest of your life.*"