It Is Necessary

1 Samuel 2:18-26

A sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, on the First Sunday of Christmas, December 27, 2015.

Saint Augustine said, “Habit, if not resisted, soon becomes necessity.”

Samuel Johnson, an eighteenth century English writer, fleshes this out further, saying:

The chains of habit are generally too small to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.

Stephen Covey, author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People posits a chain of events, saying:

Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.

Today we are encouraged to consider the models of faithfulness that were foundational to Samuel “growing both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (1 Sam 2:26). Today we are encouraged to consider the good habits that were foundational to Jesus “increasing in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52).

Ten centuries before Christ, Samuel was given to the Lord by Hannah, to be raised by the High priest, Eli, at the temple in Shiloh. It was a miraculous birth, followed by a miraculous gift to the nation Israel.

Hannah was the favored wife of Elkanah; however, they had no children, since Hannah was barren. Annually, Elkanah’s household traveled a full day’s journey from Ramah to Shiloh, to offer sacrifice. Peninnah, the other wife of Elkanah, taunted Hannah with her fertility, since Peninnah and Elkanah had multiple sons and daughters. Distraught, Hannah poured out her soul to the Lord in the temple, in such a way that the priest, Eli, chastised her, thinking she was drunk. Hannah prayed fervently for a son, promising to offer him as a nazirite (see Num 6:1-231), consecrated in service to God. Hannah conceived, presenting Samuel to Eli, once he was weaned.
Each year, Hannah would lovingly make Samuel a robe that would be worn with his priestly garment (ephod). Each year, as Elkanah and Hannah are about to return to Ramah, tearfully I suspect, Eli blesses Elkanah and Hannah, asking the Lord to give them more children. As the years pass, Hannah would bring more of Samuel’s brothers and sisters (three sons and two daughters) along with a larger robe for Samuel. I like to think that both Elkanah and Hannah encouraged Samuel in his priestly duties, at a time when the priesthood was in decline. The garment that Hannah offered represented Samuel’s growth in spiritual maturity.

Eli’s sons were scoundrels. They served as priests in the temple, but they had no spiritual maturity. It was their habit to steal the best cuts of sacrificial meat for themselves. It was their habit to engage in sexual immorality. Eli chastised them for their unacceptable behavior; however, he was unwilling to remove them from office. Their bad habits resulted in their demise.

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Samuel was Eli’s second chance at fatherhood. Eli understood the precious gift he had been offered from God and from Hannah and he raised Samuel to be a prophet, priest, judge and king-maker. Samuel would lead God’s people and eventually anoint David as king, thus ushering in the Davidic Line from which Jesus would be born.

We are told that “the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people” (1 Sam 2:26) – a precursor to Jesus who likewise “increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52).

Our Gospel text from Luke is the only canonical story of Jesus growing up, describing Jesus at age 12, teaching the teachers in the Jerusalem temple, while Mary and Joseph frantically searched for him. We know Mary and Joseph to be pious Jews. On the eighth day after his birth, Jesus is circumcised, in accordance with the law (Luke 2:21). Five times during the purification of Mary and presentation of Jesus in the temple, Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph act in accordance with the law (Luke 2:22, 23, 24, 27, 39). Annually, Jesus’
parents made the four-day journey to Jerusalem for Passover, as usual, or better translated, as was their habit (Greek ethos), traveling with family and friends.

When used in the New Testament, “habit” refers to religious behaviors, mostly about attending synagogue. As a newborn, Mary and Joseph do for Jesus what is habitual (Greek eiotha) in accordance with the law, presenting him in the temple (Luke 2:27). Jesus had a habit of going to synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). We are told that it was Jesus’ habit to go to the Mount of Olives to pray (Luke 22:39). Jesus learned good habits from his parents, just as Samuel learned faithfulness from Eli, Hannah and Elkanah. If Jesus regularly attended worship and prayed, as was his habit, should we his followers not incorporate these same habits into our lives and teach them to our children.

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When we dedicate or baptize children, parents and sponsors make promises on behalf of the child:

To live with them among God’s faithful people, bring them to the word of God and the holy supper, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer. (“Evangelical Lutheran Worship,” Holy Baptism liturgy, p. 228)

We sow these actions to reap habits, so that:

…children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace. (Ibid, p. 228)

One might even say, “It is necessary,” to instill good habits, if we are to grow into our baptismal garment, into full spiritual maturity.
The twelve year old Jesus, missing for three days, is found in the temple teaching the teachers. The adolescent Jesus says, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). A better translation would be:

“Did you not know that it is necessary (Greek dei) that I be involved in my Father’s affairs?”

When Jesus speaks of necessity, he refers to his duty to God, which is often in tension with other competing claims. It was the adolescent Jesus’ duty to remain in the temple learning from and teaching the teachers, but it caused Mary and Joseph great distress - putting them all in danger as they returned home without the protection afforded by family and friends to accompany them. Do you remember when Jesus was teaching, casting-out demons and healing the sick in Capernaum, the people desired that he remain with them, but Jesus insisted, “It is necessary that I proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:43). It was necessary that Jesus suffer, be rejected, die and be raised (Luke 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 24:7, 26). It was necessary that Jesus fulfill the scriptures (Luke 22:37; 24:44), even though many desired a conquering Messiah to free them from Roman rule. Jesus’ duty often competed with other claims upon him. But, like Samuel, Jesus grew into spiritual maturity, clothed in faithfulness.

Examples of faithfulness (Eli, Elkanah and Hannah) were foundational to Samuel’s “growth both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (1 Sam 2:26). Good habits were foundational to Jesus “increasing in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52). Examples of faithfulness and good habits are foundational to our becoming clothed in a garment of spiritual maturity, so that we might be faithful to do what is necessary as our duty to God.

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Amen.