

WILL OUR KIDS BE FREE?

A SERMON ABOUT CHILDREN AND CHRISTIANITY

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards

February 3, 2013 ~ The Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple

Luke 2:22-40

One of the great things about Luke's gospel is that it gives a history of Jesus' childhood, at least what we have of it. His whole birth story is there. His circumcision and naming when he was eight days old are there. His presentation in the temple when he was forty days old is there; it's what we have for today's gospel. The story of his running away from his parents to be in the temple when he was twelve years old is there. As is the final story of his youth just as he reaches his maturity, the one about him going back to his hometown to essentially identify himself as the Messiah.

Even though each of these stories involves Judaism and its official sites and practices, and the deliberate casting of Jesus and his parents as faithful Jews, I want you to notice that all these stories are not really about the institution of Judaism. *They are about the energy and dynamic movement of God further and further into the world.* God enters the world as a human infant. And then, Jesus is given a specific human identity at his circumcision and naming. At his presentation in the temple, his parents offer him back to God because they know he already belongs to God. And so the child Jesus is deliberately put into a relationship

with God. When he runs away at age twelve, he makes this relationship with God his own. He almost snatches it away from his parents! And when he returns to his hometown synagogue in early adulthood, he reads a piece of the Hebrew Scripture about *the essential release from captivity of all kinds* that comes from the hand of God and when he says "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he completely identifies it with himself and his work.

Notice too, that each of these events carries with it increasing danger for Jesus. When he becomes human at his birth, he becomes subject to death. When he becomes a Jew at his circumcision and naming, he becomes part of a people who suffer from increasing oppression and persecution. When he runs away to the temple, he leaves the safety and security of his family behind. And when he preaches in the synagogue, he subverts the tradition to take upon himself a role as Messiah that no one in the institution wanted. And so the story of Jesus' childhood is a story not only about a life completely and increasingly offered to God. It is also a story about release from captivity to everything that holds us down from God and from our dignity as human beings. It is a

story about a life with a trajectory. And so *it is a story about danger and freedom.*

The more I read these stories, especially the one we have for today's gospel, the more I think about children and teens and young adults in our church. Everyone knows that church affiliation across all denominations is at an all-time low. Tons and tons of kids have never been in a church and even more adults have no interest in it. In most parts of this country, at least, religion has become a kind of artifact, reserved for those who are supposedly not sophisticated enough to realize that the world has moved on from superstition. Religion has also become a casualty of the wildly mistaken belief that there is a necessary conflict between science and faith. The church as a whole has become a kind of a museum most people don't go to anymore. And so more and more people don't know the story of Jesus.

A funny thing happened after Josh's ordination on Thursday night. Bishop Douglas had gone into the sacristy to take his vestments off. Pete Thunem, who had been an acolyte, came up to me and said, "Mother Anne, could I have one of those bottles of water that are in the sacristy? I'm so thirsty!" And I said, "Sure, let's go over there and get you one." When we got to the sacristy, I introduced Pete to Bishop Douglas, and the Bishop shook Pete's hand and said, "Good job acolyting, Pete!" and Pete said, "Hey, thanks! Same to you! Good job!" And Bishop Douglas broke right out of his officialdom and he laughed and laughed. Institutional religion became real religion because the sacristy was filled with life and joy — which is what religion is about.

I have a few ideas about why Christianity is in the fix it's in in the West. Some of you are old enough to remember when religion was just a given. It was thought to be as necessary to life as air and water. Kids were routinely baptized. Most people went to church every Sunday. And churches were the hearts of towns and cities, providing not only religious rites but essential social services. People read the Bible at home daily. They knew the story.

One of the wonderful things about this kind of religious culture was that it implicitly taught children that the ultimate value of their lives was that they had a trajectory toward God. And so kids knew, deep down, that God was the most important thing in their lives. This was a corrective to the natural tendency of family and culture to put themselves up as having ultimate value. You probably know, as do I, many people whose lives were saved as kids from the garden-variety craziness of their families by some sane layperson or clergyperson in a church who (usually without words) taught that kid that she or he would be OK because there was a God and an open future, and that challenging life situations and parents and schools and competition are not the final word on anyone. You might be one of those people yourself!

There was a downside to all this. When religion is taken for granted, it can easily be contaminated by other values that are also taken for granted — things like consumerism, and individualism, and the obdurate American insistence that there is such a thing as a "perfect family," for instance. There is also the falsity and hypocrisy and conformity that result from religious practice when everyone is doing it and

everyone is supposed to be doing it. This is the aspect of religion that most people identify *as* religion. And so Christianity began to be understood as an outmoded institution that focused on law and conformity and appearances instead of a community of joy and life and purpose and service.

American Christianity was not prepared for the challenge to its authority that came in the 60s and 70s. We tried to put new wine into old wineskins. The church did respond to pressing social issues such as racism and poverty and to some extent sexism, and then later to homophobia, but as we reached for more social credibility and relevancy, *we stopped doing part of our job*. We stopped teaching the story because we assumed everyone knew it. *They didn't*. We stopped nurturing our people in the faith because we assumed everyone was mature in the faith. *They weren't*. We stopped paying attention to kids' religious formation because we thought religious faith was in the drinking water. *It wasn't*. We thought someone else was paying attention to it. *No one was*.

And so religion for lots of Americans became an optional extra, like gymnastics at the Y or enhancing, maybe, but not really essential. Not at the heart of life.

In today's gospel, the old man Simeon (who represents the sacred story) says some amazing words to Mary. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

What Simeon meant was that Jesus and his work of release from all kinds of captivity into freedom was going to compel people to make a decision about what they really believed about God. It was going to be dangerous. But it was going to change the world. And for that to happen, Mary would have to suffer.

I think that there comes a time for all of us when we have to decide what our lives are really about. And I think that how we raise our children is always in some sense a reflection of who we are and what we really believe. If we believe that Yale, Harvard, and Amherst are the Kingdom of God; if we believe that grades and scores and good looks and money are the cardinal virtues; if we present faith to our kids as a warm fuzzy belief that being nice is nice, then we will reap what we have sown, which is indulged, safe, accomplished, and lost children who will eventually be held captive to penultimate values and who will thus feel robbed by life.

I want to challenge all of us who are involved in the lives of children to consider that we are called to suffer the loss of what we have assumed our kids *must have* and *must be* so that they can become the people God made them to be. We will feel this as a loss, just as Mary did. But it is the only way. We have to let them go. We have to set them free. We have to let them be Christians.

I want to end this sermon by speaking to everyone here this morning who is a child or a teen, everyone under the age of 21. This is what I want to tell you:

When you were born, you were born into a dangerous and beautiful world, the same world Jesus was born into.

When you were named and baptized, the Spirit of God was given to you and the salvation of this world was put into your hands, just as it was put into Jesus' hands.

When you became 12 or 13 years old and made the decision to be confirmed, you made the decision to break away from the faith of your parents and to make faith your own, just as Jesus did when he ran away from his parents to the temple.

When you grow up, with God's help, you will do what Jesus did. You will be released from captivity to yourself. You will serve the world. You will become Scripture fulfilled in our hearing.

This will be hard work. It will be dangerous work. But you belong to God, just as Jesus did. Do God's work. It will set you free.

Amen.