

Are You Growing into Your Call?

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Good morning, Central United Protestant Church! How quickly we find ourselves on the edge of 2023, don't we? I have been looking forward to January for about thirty days. I don't know about you, but the busyness of this season is kind of exhausting. This morning we're going to be reading from Luke, chapter 2. In a moment I'm going to ask you to stand and I'm going to read a longer passage, so if you have trouble standing, that's okay. You can remain seated. But it is a long passage! Luke chapter 2, starting in verse 22. Would you please stand with me as we read from God's Word?

And when the time came for the purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that He would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

"Lord, now You are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;

for my eyes have seen your salvation

that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

a light of revelation to the Gentiles,

and for glory to your people, Israel."

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And when they had performed everything according to the Law, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

This is the word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it. Please be seated.

Every year, at Central Washington University, our cadets took part in a Military Ball. It was a grand, formal event. It's an opportunity for cadets to practice planning and leading a large event, but it also gives them a chance to practice military etiquette. Prior to commissioning as an Army officer, etiquette can be daunting. There are books written on it that are this thick. And it is best if their first experience is under controlled parameters. Many an etiquette violation has destroyed or made an officer's career. Over the course of my career, I've had the opportunity to attend many formal affairs, but my

cadet experience is particularly memorable. I had just broken up with my girlfriend and, as a result, I had to ask my sister to go with me. We had a great time, though. To this day she is mortified by the moment in which she bit into a grape tomato, and its juices spurted across the table and onto the white dress uniform of a retired Navy SEAL. Now, I embellished a little bit; there was no Navy SEAL. But when my sister tells that story, there's enough mortification in the telling of the story that I had to embellish it a little! She did challenge me to ask my ex-girlfriend to dance by offering that, if I did, she would dance with anybody in the room that I selected. So I asked my former girlfriend, and as soon as that dance was over, I chose for my sister that retired Navy SEAL in the white dress uniform. He was our crusty old supply technician. And even though he was 70 years old, man, could he dance! My sister had a blast, and I never had a problem requesting or turning in gear again. We had a great time.

Anyway, more than 20 years later, back at Central Washington University, our guest speaker was a full-bird colonel who had commissioned through Central Washington University. Not only was he a veteran, but he was a veteran of Central Washington University. And a full-bird colonel in the Army and Marine Corps is just below a general, and the equivalent of a captain in the Navy. He had held considerable authority and responsibility over the course of his career. As he spoke, he recounted several entertainingly anecdotal stories, mostly of learning things the hard way. Of all the things he had learned over the course of his career, though, the thing he wanted those cadets to know the most was that, given the chance to do it again, he would make one heck of a platoon leader! He had grown from a cadet at Central Washington University into a platoon leader as a second lieutenant, and then grown into company command. And by the time he had completed further staff time to receive another camp command as a colonel, he had grown so much that going back to being a platoon leader would be so easy that it might actually be fun. The reality was that he had to grow into the colonel that was standing before them. And what he wanted those cadets to know was that the secret to growing into leadership was in the realization that the pain associated with the process was the process. And to be successful in the Army as a leader, you had to submit yourself to that process.

I look around our sanctuary and you know what I see? Lifetimes of experience: men and women who had to grow into high school, college, into vocations, and leaders in those vocations. I see those who had to grow into husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. I see men and women who are still growing today. I see junior and senior high school students, young adults trying to discern their vocation or their purpose, new parents and those desperate to be new parents. And there are many of us who are even growing into our golden years and all that this entails: redefining who we are, recentering or rediscovering our marriages, the regular loss of cherished friends who've gone home to be with the Lord, the loss of spouses and the adjustments that follow that loss, ailing health, and new needs that we cannot meet as we once did before. And, of course, we are (or all should be) growing and continuing to grow into our call as Christian believers.

In our passage this morning, Joseph and Mary have traveled with Jesus to Jerusalem for their purification and to present Jesus to the Lord. The Law declared that a Jewish mother of a Jewish son remained ceremonially unclean for 40 days after childbirth. (She would also be unclean after the birth of a girl, but the time of the uncleanness changes. I couldn't figure it out, but it's there!) On the 41st day after a son was born, a sacrifice is offered in order to reestablish that mother's ritual purity. And here this sacrifice offers us some details about Jesus' early life. We learn that Jesus' family was not well-off. Only a

poor family could offer a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons instead of the required lamb. Jesus' family could not afford that lamb. We learn of this family's devotion and dedication as a family to the Jewish religious life. I think they had to travel two or three days to get there to do this. They were devoted to God, and they were devoted to one another. Only Mary needed purification, and yet the inclusion of Joseph in the reference gives a sense of family solidarity. They had gone for **their** purification. Mary's need is seen as a need for the one flesh, for the whole family. Because it was Mary's need, it was their need. Jesus was being raised in a devout family of modest means that clearly cared for one another, And perhaps the most intriguing thing to me, this time through this passage, we learn that Jesus would have been only 40 days old. Seven days after his birth he would have been circumcised, and 33 days after circumcision mom would be purified. 40 days. After Mary's purification, she and Joseph could once again enter the sanctuary. The law declared that every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord and be set apart to Him. This derives from the final plague that fell on Egypt, just prior to the Exodus, the loss of every firstborn. If you go back and look at that, you'll discover that that plague was pronounced on Israel as well. But God had redeemed every firstborn of Israel through His provision. And because of that provision, every Israelite had to redeem their firstborn back into the family at the price of five shekels of silver. And so, this is why this young family has come to Jerusalem. And I suspect Mary did not want to miss that moment in which Jesus was presented. And because of that, Joseph waited, so that she could go into the temple and the sanctuary to be a part of that presentation. When you focus on this, this is a really cool family.

So, off they went together into the sanctuary. While there, they encountered a righteous and devout man named Simeon. Upon seeing the child, he declares, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen Your salvation that You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel." Robert Stein, in the new American Commentary, writes that it is best translated: "Now that salvation, God's Kingdom, the Messiah has come, dismiss your servant in peace." Simeon is declaring Jesus to be Israel's Messiah. He's 40 days old! The Messianic hope of the Jewish people had reached a fever pitch. A Messianic prophet like Moses was expected to lead a new exodus from bondage, reestablishing the covenant, bringing a better revelation of God and, in short, serve as a new nation founder for the nation of Israel. The consolation of Israel was the person or prophet who would do just that. And Simeon, who the Holy Spirit had promised would see that consolation, knew that his arrival must be close. He was looking for him, I think. In fact, if you went to the temple, you couldn't miss the expectation from all of the people. And have you met Anna? Everyone knew Anna or heard of Anna. You know, the crazy old lady who won't stop talking about the expected Messiah. If you even mention the redemption of Jerusalem in her presence, she would start talking and giving thanks to God. There's a good chance you're not going to make it to the Fellowship Hour before the treats run out! And to state the obvious, Mary and Joseph marveled. I mean, we had angels and shepherds that just showed up for a birth, and stars and kings and wisemen. Now we've got Simeon declaring this baby to be the Messiah. And when somebody talks about it in the sanctuary or the temple, Anna says, "Hey, he was just here. You just missed him. Just wait."

And they returned to Nazareth. And Jesus grows and becomes strong, filled with the wisdom and the favor of God. Did I mention that the most astonishing detail about this

story is that Jesus is only 40 days old? He can't yet lift his head. His eyes can't yet focus on his environment. He won't reach or roll over for another few months. Jesus can't yet even recognize Mary's voice. He is only mildly aware of anything. Here we find the Son of God, having submitted Himself to His call in a most humble estate. Having emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, by being born in the likeness of men, we find Him in a most human form. We find Him unaware of His environment. What this means is that what is transpiring in and through Simeon and Anna was for the other people who were present. It is for you and me. All of these things that caused Mary and Joseph to marvel were to make sure that we did not miss the moment of His destiny, that moment when He, in his mid-30s, would humble Himself further by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. These are flags raised so that we will not miss what is about to happen. But at this moment, Jesus would need to grow.

My wife plays a game with my daughter as they lay together before she goes to sleep. She will say, "Someday..." She'll wait. "...You will drive a car, but not till you're bigger." Or, "Someday...you will have a boyfriend, but not till you are older." And my daughter has picked it up and now she runs with it. She will tell me, "Daddy when I am bigger, I will drive a tractor." Or she will ask, "Daddy, when I am older, can I cook dinner?" But my favorite is when she's eating a cookie, and I ask, "Adelynn, can Daddy have a bite?" and she will respond, "No, Daddy, not until you are older."

As I was studying this passage, it was hard not to imagine my daughter talking to Jesus. "Someday, when You are bigger, when You are a little bit older, You can save the world." Luke 2:40, the very end of our passage, reads, "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him." And there's a sister verse later in Luke, in verse 52 of that same chapter, when Jesus had grown 12 years: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." And just as Jesus had to grow, we too, Christians, we have to grow and continue to grow. And we need to grow in similar ways. We need to grow in strength and stature. We must increase in wisdom and in favor with both God and man. To grow in strength and stature is to grow into a strength and maturity of faith. To grow in wisdom isn't necessarily to grow in knowledge, although knowledge is a part of wisdom. But I think that's only where it starts. To grow in wisdom is mostly to grow in character. It is to grow into the character of someone who not only knows how to live through trials as a man or woman of faith, but it is the person who actually lives through those trials as a man or woman of faith. It is to live out what you believe in the midst of those trials. To grow in the favor of God and man, well, that's found in Jesus' submission to His call. And we grow here as we submit to our call. I love David Stern's description of Jesus' early days. He writes, "There is not the slightest evidence that Jesus did anything other than live the life expected of the Jewish son of a Jewish carpenter in Galilee." Jesus' early years were lived out faithfully as a Jewish son and whatever that was supposed to look like.

When we live the life expected of a son or daughter adopted into the family of God, we grow in favor with both God and man. This is very rarely the lofty royal life that we envision. Most often it is the humble and lowly life, when we submit as husbands, fathers, and providers, and women as wives, mothers, and nurturers. But make no mistake, the only way to grow in the favor of God and man is to live a life worthy of a royal call, in humble submission. Christian, are you growing in faith? If we were to place a tape measure against the growth of your faith in 2023, what would we find? You know, when a child fails to make benchmarks of growth, it is not taken lightly. There are

myriads of potential problems, and a lack of growth or progress is a great cause for concern. But there's usually only one reason that we fail to grow in our faith. Our faith fails to grow when we fail to submit ourselves to whatever lesson or purpose that God has given us at that time. To be successful, you have to submit to the process.

Recently, I read an old story about a pastor who had been summoned to a military academy (I think that's the part that caught my attention) in which the students had mutinied. It had been hoped that he might be able to help remedy the situation. The students were refusing to go to class; they were refusing to go to study hall; they even refused their military drill. The principal handed the pastor a large number of telegrams that had been sent to the students from their parents, after their parents had been made aware of the situation. One father wrote, "I expect you to obey." Another said, "If you are expelled from school, you needn't come home." Still another, "I'll send you to an insane asylum if you are sent home." And another said, "I'll cut you off without a shilling if you disgrace this family." But one message stood out from the rest. It simply read, "Steady, my boy." It was simply signed, "your father."

Today we stand before 2024. And it's hard for me to give up my military analytical side, but I suspect that 2024 is going to be tough. And if it's not tough for you, it's going to be tough for somebody around you. Going into it, I want to be surrounded by people who want to grow in their faith. I want to encourage and be encouraged to persevere in that growth. I want people to say, "He is a devout and religious person, filled with the Holy Spirit." That's real discipleship, moving towards that end. And at the day of Jesus' return, I want to stand with each and every one of you and marvel at how God, who began a good work in you, brought that work to completion, as you marvel at how I have been completed. Steady, Church, steady. Jesus grew into His destiny, and if we submit to Him, we will grow into our destiny, too. Let's pray.

Lord, we come before You this morning humbled: humbled in what it is that You have done for us that allows us to be called sons and daughters of God. Oh Lord, most of the time we feel insufficient. Most of the time we feel unready for that call. We just ask that You would walk with us, that You would be the cause of our growth, and that You would help us to submit to what You have called us to do. In Your precious name we pray.
Amen.