

**“The Tides Always Comes Back!”**

There is this lithograph that shows an old, clumsy-looking boat. The boat is three times the size of a regular rowboat. Two oars rest dejectedly in the sand. The tide is out and the old boat is stranded high on the beach. In the background, distant water appears. The effect of the picture, at first glance, is sober. What could be more hopeless looking than a beached boat? It can't be pulled or dragged; it is too heavy. It's just stuck on the sand with the water far out. At the bottom of the picture, the caption reads: *The tide always comes back.*

When the tide returns, this boat that is stuck will come back to use. It will rise on the mighty shoulders of the sea. It will dance on the waves. The tide always returns. I thought of this picture and caption as a prelude for this New Year. It's been a difficult year for many in this church family ... several of you have had to cope with aging parents, or the loss of a parent or relative, or close friend to death; several of you have had operations; several of you have had accidents; many of you have experienced radical changes in your life like a new job, moving, getting married, having a baby ... going through a separation or divorce. It has not been an easy year for the many of you!

In fact, probably all of us sometime or another during 2006 felt like we were “beached” ... that our lives had run aground ... that any hope seemed distant. It is during those helpless times that we need reassurance ... that we need our spiritual tide to return ... that we need to re-discover our faith ... need the uplift that faith in Jesus Christ can bring. Indeed, a word of good news for the New Year comes from the prophet Isaiah that emphasizes this very thought: *In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength* (Isaiah 30:15).

This scripture calls to mind a well-stated prayer that combines returning with rest: *Slow me down, Lord. Ease the pounding of my heart by the quieting of my mind. Steady my hurried pace with the vision of the eternal reach of time. Give me, amidst the confusion of my day, the calmness of the everlasting hills. Break the tensions of my nerves and memory. Teach me the art of taking minute vacations ... of slowing down to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to pat a dog, to read a few lines from a good book. Let me look upward into the branches of the towering oak and know that it grew great and strong because it grew slowly and well. Slow me down, Lord, and inspire me to send my roots deep into the soil of life's enduring values.* Before we rush head long into a new year, let us think seriously about returning to the One born a week ago. Let us not leave Bethlehem so quickly that we forget why we were there! And as we pack away Christmas, let us not pack away the spiritual qualities of the season.

The Gospel story for today is about a 12-year-old child left behind on a family's annual journey, and the parents having to return for him. The 12-year-old is Jesus and his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. Jewish religious law prescribed that males should attend three festivals each year: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. On pilgrimages to Jerusalem, villagers traveled in large companies or caravans in which the woman and younger children preceded the men. After the journey began, they would not meet again until the previously agreed rendezvous had been reached. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that Joseph and Mary would assume that Jesus was with the other parent or somewhere in the crowd as stated by our lesson: *Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him* (Luke 2:44-45).

And where do they find Jesus? In the temple ... learning! The notion of Jesus “growing in wisdom” is significant for Luke. Jesus would not be truly human ... if he did not have to learn. Also, Luke wants to present Jesus as a model for Christians to follow. One thing that Jesus models here is growth ... particularly growth through education. The picture of Jesus seeking out teachers in the temple is striking. Remarkably, the teachers are impressed not only by the answers he gives, but also by the questions he asks. By presenting Jesus as one who sought to participate in religious education programs, Luke recognizes that such participation is something all

Christians need. This becomes one of the marks of the early Christian community. If Jesus needed religious instruction ... who among us doesn't?

This picture of Jesus in the Temple is parallel to our lesson about Samuel's service in the temple when he was a young boy. Hannah, the pious wife of Elkanah, was barren. She promised the Lord that if she had a son, she would give him to the Lord ... that is ... dedicate his life to service in the temple. Her prayer was granted through the birth of Samuel, who was destined to become a great prophet of God and the anointer of kings Saul and David. Our lesson has the boy Samuel ministering before the Lord in the temple. His parents still make their annual pilgrimage, and on each occasion, Hannah gives her son a robe. The point here is probably that she is renewing her commitment to the vow she had made. The boy needs a new robe each year as he grows bigger ... and each new robe constitutes a commitment from his mother that he will continue to serve in the temple yet another year. Instead of trying to take him home with her, she brings him a robe to facilitate his remaining there, where she knows he belongs. In recognition of this devotion, the priest Eli blesses Hannah and prays for God to grant her more children ... which God does. God is preparing Samuel for leadership, and the overall theme of this lesson is that God provides leaders ... rising up new ones, as they are needed.

The last verse emphasizes that Samuel grew "in favor with the Lord and with people." Both personal characteristics are apparently important, and both are repeated later with reference to Jesus in the temple. We might think, if one is pleasing God, what difference does it make what people think? But the biblical authors don't have this attitude. The leaders whom God raises up earn the respect of others and so establish a mandate for the authority invested in them. The leader who is held in high esteem by people in general can accomplish much for the Lord. Samuel is a special child, dedicated to God from the beginning, growing up in the sanctuary of God, serving in the worship of the Lord, learning the traditions of Israel's faith from his childhood on.

Growing up into Christian maturity is a matter of getting out of bed every morning and praying: *Lord, enable me by Your spirit to do Your will this day and to grow in knowledge and love of You, and then ... bending mind ... heart ... strength ... and will ... to walk the Christian way.* Samuel grew in favor with the Lord. Jesus grew in favor with the Lord. The question for us as we face a new year: "Are we growing in favor with the Lord?"

We need to follow the examples set by Samuel and Jesus. We need to make ourselves available to God, in order that we can grow in faith. We need to be open to God's revelations, in order that we may learn about what we believe or how to believe. Study, prayer, worship and fellowship are all important for our growth. Sometimes in order to take one step forward, we must go back two. When we feel ignorant about what we believe; when that ignorance casts shadows of doubts; when our doubts lead us away from God, we need to seriously stop and think about where we are going with our life. If we have left behind our trust in God, we need to go back and find it. If we have lost the basic foundation of our faith, we need to go back and find Jesus ... find that example ... find that model once again ... find those teachings, those values, that love, that peace ... and incorporate them all into our life.

A father and son were testing the springtime winds with a brand-new kite. It was a big kite, red with black fringe, colorful and fancy. And they had a huge spool of string --- crochet thread, as strong as the kite string but colorful, more economical, and several hundred feet more to the spool. The breezes were blowing stiff, and the kite begged to run wild. And so they let out all the string. The kite went so high that the little boy couldn't see it any more. "Is it still there?" he asked. "Yeah, it's still there." "But how do you know for sure? I can't see it anywhere!" "I know it's still there," his dad said, "because I can feel it tugging on the string!"

Evidence of God's presence in your life may seem obscure ... you may even feel "beached" when it comes to believing. You may, at times, find yourself crying out: "Where is God in my life?" Despite where you are in your faith journey, remember ... that gnawing, prodding, tugging feeling is God's way of letting you know He is still there! Like a loving parent, God's love and grace is stronger than His disappointment. God will not leave you to yourself. You will not remain "beached" ... stuck forever ... *the tide always comes back* ... always ... I am sure of it ... just as I am sure there are 358 days left until we celebrate once more the birth of Jesus Christ!