Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

For much of this past week, there’s a song I haven’t been able to get out of my head: *The Circle of Life*, from the Lion King, a song sung as a young lion cub, the future King, is thrust into the sunbeams in glorious presentation. From baptism, to marriage, to engaging the transitions that present themselves as earthly life winds down, the Circle of Life has been very, very evident to me this week. Today we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, and this congregation is so pleased to be part of this special moment in Reuben’s life. Yesterday, I conducted a wedding with a really nice young Christian couple. And as we speak, back in Regina it appears that my Mom is moving into the final stages of her earthly journey. The Circle of Life, indeed.

One thing my brother and I were able to do together a week ago, is look through dozens of family photo albums. We laughed at silly fashions from the 1960s and 1970s, we remembered favourite relatives that have passed into Spirit, and saw photos of our Mom starting with a bunch of recently discovered black and white prints from when she was an adolescent in the late 1930s. As I looked at those photos, paying close attention to the expressions on people’s faces, I wondered what my ancestors’ hopes and dreams were – for themselves, for their children, for the world they lived in.

Today’s scripture reading is the beautiful story of Jesus being presented at Temple by his parents. Mary and Joseph, guided by holy visitors to believe that their child would have a big, difficult future in front of him, came to the high priest and everyone who encountered the child had a double-take, wondering if they could possibly be seeing what they thought they were seeing. The one who is to be the Messiah, the chosen one, the holy one, the next real King, is in their midst. Anna gives thanks to God for this child who is to redeem the relationship between Israel and her God; Simeon proclaims him a light, not only to Israel, but to all the nations. High hopes, for a child of everyday parents. High hopes, and scary hopes.

Knowing that we had a baptism planned for today, I was curious to learn more about the Temple ritual for infants of Jesus’ day. What I discovered, thanks to Jesuit Scholar Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer (pp.418-433), surprised me. It appears that this is one of those places where it becomes clear that the author of the gospel of Luke and its companion volume, the Book of Acts, was not from Jerusalem or anywhere near there. When Luke wrote about the presentation of Jesus, he did so as an outsider who was kinda guessing about what the Jerusalem Temple did for newborns when Jesus was a baby, combining his accurate knowledge of the Law, with his accurate reading of what had been done centuries earlier in the days of Samuel, with a less accurate inference that these practices would have continued on as written for another few centuries. Piecing together evidence from other sources, it appears that in Jerusalem in those days there were only two expectations of a couple with a first-born son: first, they needed to offer a lamb for sacrifice; second, they needed to pay the local priest a fee of five shekels. That was it. Nowhere in ancient literature is there a suggestion that parents were expected or even welcomed to bring their firstborn son to the Temple.

So what I am wondering, is this: was Luke just taking a stab at this, and got it wrong, or did he have something else in mind. We’re told that Mary and Joseph presented a pair of turtledoves or young pigeons as their sacrifice, and that was specifically allowed by the Law ONLY if the couple could not afford to present a Lamb. Could it be, then, that this couple
was so poor that not only could they not afford a Lamb for sacrifice; perhaps they were so poor that they couldn’t even scrape together the five shekels for the local priest, about half a day’s wage for a typical labourer, and decided to bypass this financial burden and take their chances at the Temple? Or perhaps Luke is just telling the story in this way so that we will see Jesus as a son of Abraham, a prophet of the Lord, and the saviour of Israel, all rolled in to one. His parents made the proper thank-offering, they dedicated him at Temple the way the prophets of old were dedicated, he was recognized by the devout as the promised one who would restore them and their nation to a full, wholesome relationship with their God. One way or another, Luke wants us to understand Jesus, raised by common folk in Nazareth, within the fullness of his people’s faith history, including its glorious Temple.

It is clear that this child had a lot of expectations riding on him. As with many children of prodigious potential, he carried with him the two-edged blessing and bane of having people see greatness in him from an early age. Having worked in a school for gifted kids for a dozen years, that’s a dynamic I’ve seen hundreds of times if not thousands. A child presents a phenomenal, intense aptitude or ability years before anyone would expect him or her to do so and the parents, noticing how deep and unusual and early this ability is, wonder what will be best for the child. Should they cultivate the interest, at the risk of their daughter being perceived as unusual or stand-offish? Should they pretend they didn’t see anything special, at the risk of having their son lose interest because everything pitched at an age-appropriate level is too easy for him? Is it OK for them to push her in other areas of her life that aren’t as strong? Can they support the extreme emotionality that he brings to his pursuit of excellence? As a parent, it is so hard to know where your hopes and dreams and aspirations for your child end, and where your child’s interests and abilities and passions begin.

In the autobiography of hockey star Bobby Orr, the man who for me is still the greatest player to lace up a pair of skates, he states how grateful he is for how his parents handled him. They saw from an early age that he wanted to spend every waking hour out on the pond, playing shinny with boys twice and three times his age, they recognized that as a passion, and they supported their child in his passion. They hadn’t planned to have an exceptional hockey player as a son, they certainly weren’t a rich family to start with and didn’t aim to become a rich family on their son’s coattails; they just saw what their child loved, and did what they could to support it. He was good enough to be playing Junior A hockey by the age of 14 and was the top rookie in the NHL when he was 18, but that’s not what it was about. He loved hockey, they loved him, they made adjustments to their family life to make sure he could follow his passion.

I find it impossible to encounter the story of Jesus, and the intensely high expectations that Luke says were upon him... or the story of child prodigies like Bobby Orr, or the off-the-chart abilities of kids who are way ahead of the normal curve in their music, or math, or poetry, or mechanical aptitude, or artistic expressions... or the advanced skills we will see on display later this week, as young athletes come from all over Alberta to the Bow Valley for the Winter Games... without it eliciting some degree of self-reflection. At some point in my life, did I have high expectations placed upon me? How was that expressed and supported? Did I put pressure on myself to be better or greater or more adept than I actually was? Was there something I was interested in that wasn’t sufficiently supported, encouraged or challenged? If there was disappointment – by me, by a parent, by a coach or teacher – how was that handled? Some of the highest and lowest points of our lives may well be attached to the ways we and those important to us related to our passionately-held abilities – it can
define whether we felt loved by those who were most important to us, it can shape our self-talk and whether we feel like a "success" or not, it may well have determined how much resilience we show as adults in tough circumstances. In all of it, I think that Bobby Orr has it right: as a child, make sure you’re having fun what you’re doing, and let yourself get passionately committed to those things you love doing. As a parent, support the stuff your child loves to do while strongly communicating by word and deed that your love for them is not going to rise and fall with their level of achievement, or lack thereof. On both side of the equation we do well to separate being from doing: we appreciate what others do, but our love for them is attached to who they are, not what they do.

About fifteen years ago, I got together with a couple of minister friends in Calgary and did some work with various Spiritual Gift inventories – tests that you can take to help tease out some of the most authentic ways that you might serve God. We pulled apart the theoretical and theological underpinnings of various tests on the market, and tried to take what was best from each model. While the resulting Inventory tool we developed is long forgotten, relegated to some 3 ½ inch floppy disk in the bottom of a steamer chest somewhere, I clearly remember that we measured four different aspects of a person’s gifts: what you love to do, what you’re good at, what you frequently find yourself doing, what you get asked to do because others see something in you. I think that’s still a good way to approach our interests: for each of us, there are things we’re good at but don’t particularly enjoy, and there are things we absolutely love doing without exhibiting a lot of skill. There are things I wouldn’t name as a favourite, but which I am immediately drawn to in any new social setting; there are other skills that I might not see as particularly special in my life, that other people keep getting asked to use. All of these things, not just one, go into our life’s choices... and when you find the very best things, that fit one of these categories, make you feel fulfilled, and instinctively tell you that you are doing something that pleases or honours God, pay attention to them. Those are the core pieces that God has given you, to minister to others in the name of Christ, to serve others through the ministries of your Church. In the same way that Luke says that Jesus “grew and became strong; [he] was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him” (Luke 2:40) so we continue to grow in wisdom and grace as we move through our lives, as we assess what God is calling us to do now, where we are, with our personal set of gifts and strengths and growing edges.

Anna and Simeon, Mary and Joseph, and the angels declaring a remarkable future for Jesus were not mistaken. No doubt he experienced pressures and doubts, frustrations and milestones as he figured out who he was in his growing-up years. As we know, when he emerged from that his contribution to the life of the world was immense. Friends in Christ, I invite you to own and rejoice in the great things that God has placed in you, the gifts and joys of your life. I encourage you to support and cheer on the passions of people in your lives who need a positive word and a loving basis as they strive to move forward. And I assure you, that in all of it you are a beloved child of God. Amen.

References cited:
John, Elton and Rice, Tim. The Circle of Life from The Lion King.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwSKkKruUzUk
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