

Dec. 30, 2018

Luke 2: 41-52; Isaiah 9: 2-7

Prayer: Dear Lord, On this next to last day of the year, help us to see clearly where we've been and where we should go. Help us to keep our eyes focused on you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

This Time, Next Year

Some of you may know local attorney Jo Watson Hackl. Random House published her first book this year, and it's been getting great press.

It is a book for middle schoolers called *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*. And it's a charming book about a 12-year-old girl named Cricket who moves out to an abandoned ghost town in search of her mother.

We call books like this "coming of age" novels. And they are a huge piece of our literary canon.

The Catcher in the Rye. To Kill a Mockingbird. The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time. Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret.

12 or 13 is the age in which humans usually turn from adolescents to teen-agers. It's an age in which some adult themes begin to be introduced into our lives, into our literature. And so the heros and heroines of coming-of-age novels are almost always 12 or 13.

It must have been the same in Jesus's day. Because all we have before he's an adult are four infancy narratives and one coming of age story.

Luke tells of his birth, in which he's laid in a manger.

His circumcision at 8 days old.

His dedication in the temple at 40 days old.

Matthew tells the story of the magis' visit, when Jesus is perhaps 2 years old. But in none of those does Jesus take action. He's too young. These are infancy narratives.

And then we hear nothing of him for the next 10 years. Until he is 12. Until he is "coming of age."

That's when we read the only real boyhood story of Jesus. If you'd like to read along, I'm reading from **Luke 2: 41-52**.

41 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.

43 When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.

44 Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.

45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'

49 He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'

⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them.⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

One of our men asked me recently why there was only this one story of Jesus as an adolescent. I answered that no one was really watching at this point in his life. It was only after his adult ministry, crucifixion and resurrection that people started paying attention.

Luke tells us that he had to go back and research these early stories.

Actually, there *are* other gospels that have some childhood stories about Jesus. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, for instance, says that when Jesus was 5, he created a dozen sparrows out of clay and they came to life.

Another story tells of him killing a playmate for running into him.

And another tells of a playmate who fell out a window and died, and the boy Jesus restored him to life.

But the early church decided these stories were not trustworthy and so they didn't include them in our canon. There is no Gospel of Thomas in our Bibles.

We received only Luke's story of Jesus at 12. Only this story that shows him on the verge of manhood, of understanding who he is, who he will be. **“All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”**

For most of us, our children's coming of age is a time fraught with worry and anxiety. We sign on for the Red Ribbon Marches. We have "the talk." We implore our kids to just say no – to everything.

No matter what the question, just say no.

We've seen what drugs and alcohol can do, and we want to protect our children from their ravages.

But not all parents do. One of the things that has surprised me most at Triune has been the number of people who told me they started drinking or smoking marijuana at 12 or 13 – *at the hand of a parent*. That strikes me as the saddest thing I've ever heard – that the person who should be most invested in your success undermined you.

That's the story I will tell today for "This Time, Next Year."

On the last Sunday of every year, I preach a sermon with this same title: "This Time, Next Year." The idea is that things might be bad right now.

You may be addicted to drugs or you may be homeless.

You may be estranged from family or have financial problems.

You may have a court case pending or you may have old felony convictions holding you back.

But let's think about what changes we can make in 2019, so that by this time next year, things could be different. And I try to give an example of someone who has come a long way in the past year.

Today's story is about BJ Oleson. BJ read for us at our Christmas Eve service but had to leave the next day to care for a family member in Sumter, so she's not with us today.

BJ was raised in Sumter. As I said, her birth mother gave her beer at age 12. She grew to love it, and then she grew to need it. She dropped out of school in the ninth grade.

Her life rocked along, mostly controlled by alcohol. In her 30s, her best friend died. Her sister invited her to Greenville to get away, but the sister couldn't take her drinking for long and kicked her out.

BJ lived in the Salvation Army three separate times. She lived at Shepherd's Gate three separate times. She tried to quit drinking many, many times, but said she was always looking for an excuse, a trigger, to start back.

I met BJ when she was in her early 40s, not long after I came to Triune. She was in and out of motels and apartments and rental houses. I picked her up sometimes on Sunday mornings to bring her to church. She got groceries from our food pantry. She was a frequent visitor here but we could see there wasn't any forward progress. Alcohol had her in a tight grip.

Then she got into a relationship. She and her significant other moved to Kentucky and she'd call to tell us how they were. But then the partner took off for Texas, leaving her stranded for three years in Kentucky.

Two years ago, she moved back to Greenville to live with her sister once more. She prayed every day that God would take away her taste for alcohol. And one day 21 months ago, she said, she woke up and realized she no longer had the desire to drink.

Her 3-month record for living with her sister stretched to two years now that she's sober. She began attending Tandy and Cheri's Sunday school class. She began attending Round Table. She landed a job she loves at Martin Printing in Easley. There she works 12-hour shifts printing calendars, brochures and promotional materials.

And every Sunday morning this fall, she waited by the parking lot as I pulled in. She wanted to tell me: *I've got 18 months sober. 19 months. 20. 21.* More clean time than she's had since she was 12 years old.

BJ's still got lots of goals she's trying to reach in 2019. She has two more payments before her driver's license can be re-instated. She wants to find a place of her own. And she's a leader in Triune Circles which will give her four supportive new friends this year.

"If you really want to do something and set your mind on it," she says, "you can do it. And you gotta keep your faith."

This time next year, I am confident BJ will have gone even farther.

While the secular world thinks that Christmas is over, it only started this week in the church year. That's why Myra sang Christmas songs for us. That's why we are going to look at one of the all-time great Scriptures that we read in light of Christmas.

It is from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah and holds as much truth for us today as it did when he wrote it centuries before Jesus's birth.

Isaiah 9: 2-7:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness

from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

We acknowledge Jesus as this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But it doesn't always feel as if that yoke and that bar
and that rod have been broken, does it? We still live with the weight and the load and the
burden.

And yet through the church of Jesus Christ, people offer help for that weight, that
load, that burden. Our friends at Miracle Hill housed and fed 123 men in a cold-weather
shelter during the ice storm at the first of this month. That's 123 over their full-bed
capacity. Greenville owes David Hanna and the Rescue Mission a huge debt.

Our friends in Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Porn Addicts
Anonymous help recovering addicts on a daily basis.

This year, our rehab managers David Gay and Kreg Kimmons sent a record 164
people into drug and alcohol treatment. When they get out, those meetings are waiting for
them.

This year, our social workers worked with hundreds of people on housing, medical
care, goal-setting, community building, confidence building. Their Round Tables allowed
people to lift each other as they made changes in their lives.

This year our employees Beth Messick and Morgan Rains left us because Jasmine
Road opened to provide housing for five women exiting the sex trade. We were a co-

founder and are so proud of the work they are doing. If you came to our Playback Café this month, the Jasmine Road ladies were Santa's elves.

This year, we graduated three people from Triune Circles and we have five more, including BJ, going through a new cycle. Each of them will have four new friends for life.

One of our faithful Circles volunteers, Wayne Barton, died this year. And at his memorial service his leader Vincent Grant helped me give the eulogy as the rest of their Circle stood behind him in a show of support.

In every period of history, in every culture, people have been under "the yoke of their burden," have felt "the bar across their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressor," as the prophet Isaiah wrote. That's what our Savior came to confront on that first Christmas.

That's what he has instructed his church to confront in the 21st century.

And so we will try to do exactly that as we go into 2019. We will offer people every avenue we can think of to get clean and sober, to find safe housing, to leave prostitution, to receive healthcare, to seek employment.

But as BJ will tell you, we can't do it for you. It's up to each individual to ask for help.

If you are not happy with where you are at the end of 2018, I hope the new year will be the one for dramatic change.

So we can tell another story and another and another... this time next year.

Amen.