

12-28-2008, 1 Christmas B
Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson

Bend the Twig
Luke 2:21-24

I think Mary and Joseph were excellent choices to be the parents of Jesus. Now, if you listen carefully, you will hear thunder in the distance and a rumbling voice saying, "I'm glad you approve."

In all the stories we have of Jesus' childhood, we see Mary and Joseph being careful to raise him with a great reverence and respect for God and for the Jewish faith.

You have all heard the expression, "As the twig is bent so grows the tree." The Jewish religion understands that well and the Law of Moses is careful to shape a child from its earliest days to be faithful to God.

When Jesus was eight days old, Mary and Joseph had him circumcised. This marked him as a Jew, one of the people chosen and called by God to be holy and to teach the world the ways of God.

When Jesus was thirty days old, Mary and Joseph brought him to the Temple to be redeemed. According to the Jewish Law every first-born male belonged to God, that is, to the Temple. The first-born male animals were brought to the Temple to be sacrificed. Some first-born sons were given brought to the Temple to be servants of the priests. In the Old Testament Samuel's mother brought him to the Tabernacle to be raised by the priests. But that was very rare. The law provided for the parents to redeem or buy their oldest son back from the Temple. So, Mary and Joseph bought a pair of birds and brought them and Jesus to the Temple. They gave the priests the pigeons or turtledoves instead of Jesus.

The point is that from Jesus' earliest days Mary and Joseph were careful to follow all the laws as they raised Jesus. They took him to the Temple for all the holy days. They took him to the synagogue each Sabbath to learn the Torah. The gospels tell us that when Jesus was an adult, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was his custom. It was a habit that was instilled in him by his parents from the time he was a small child. They carefully trained their child in holy living. As Proverbs says, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it."

Mary and Joseph set the example for all parents who want their children to develop habits of holy living.

As Christians, we bend the twig in the direction we want our children to grow when we baptize our children. Their lives will go in very different directions than those who have not been baptized. They will grow up in the Church as part of the people who are the body of Christ, dedicated to the service of Christ and living as Christ taught us to live. When we take them to church Sunday by Sunday, we are shaping the direction their lives will grow. When we teach them holy habits at home, prayer and Bible study, we are giving them habits that will stay with them the rest of their lives.

We need to stress the importance of parents shaping their children's lives, because too many parents have adopted the attitude that they don't want to influence their

children's direction. They just want to let the child grow up whatever way he or she wants to grow up.

That's an overreaction to a time when parents were too controlling. There was a time when parents tried to mold their children's personalities. You can't do that. I have two children and four grandchildren. I can tell you that people come into the world with their personalities. You can see it from the first day. Some children love a loud, noisy environment. Others are frightened by noise. Some children want to be held all the time. Others just want to be held sometimes. Some children are curious about the things around them. Other children are curious about people. And others are not curious at all.

Children come into the world with their own personalities, and they must be allowed to be who they are.

However, there is a difference between personality and character. Whatever your personality is, you need good character. Character is a reverence for God. It's an appreciation for the goodness of life. It's respect for yourself and for others. It's knowing the rules of right living. Character is taught. It is trained into us. And the sooner the training begins, the deeper and stronger it will be. Be very grateful if you had parents who understood that and begin developing your character from your earliest days. You are greatly blessed. And if you are a parent, take the responsibility to develop your children's characters very seriously. Don't let them grow up wild. Build their characters, and let the church help you do that.

However, the day comes when we have to take responsibility for maintaining and building our own characters. Children's characters are shaped by others. Adults shape their own character.

I am an inveterate reader. I read everything. I saw an article the other day entitled, "Training Fruit Trees." I have never grown a fruit tree and have no intention of every growing fruit trees. But the title intrigued me—"Training Fruit Trees." I had images of a tree farmer with a chair and a whip teaching fruit trees to jump through flaming hoops. So, I read the article. The article said that if you wanted a tree to produce the most and best fruit, you should be diligent to train every new branch and twig to grow in the right direction. It isn't enough to simply shape the trunk. You need to continue to train the tree throughout its lifetime.

And that's true of people as well.

We are putting out new twigs all the time. As adults, it's our responsibility to train those new twigs to grow in the direction that will produce a good, strong character. The way to do that is to decide beforehand how we will act.

I have told you this story before. But it's a story I like and it makes my point. It is the story of a young man who very much admired an older man. They were both lawyers, and this young man admired the way in which the older man consistently conducted his legal practice in such a manner that Christ was glorified every day. One day the young man went to the older man and asked him how he was able to be so faithful to Christian principles in his daily business. The man said, "Every morning when I wake up, my first thought is, 'Lord Jesus, I dedicate this day to you. I will say what you want me to say. I will do what you want me to do. I will live in obedience to your will and your ways.'" The young lawyer thought about that for a moment. He said, "That's premeditated righteousness."

That's exactly what it is. "Premeditation" means to decide to do something ahead of time. There are two ways we can face life. We can wait until events happen and let them decide for us what we will do. Or we can decide for ourselves what we will do before things happen. People of strong character make their decisions beforehand.

The new year is just a few days away. This is one of those new beginnings. This is a fresh new twig. We can either let grow wild or we can shape the direction it will go.

When we dedicate a day, or a year, or a life to Christ, we have decided beforehand how we will act. We have chosen the direction that day or that year or that lifetime will go ahead of time, rather than letting it be shifted and twisted by every gust of wind that comes our way. We are choosing to build a strong, healthy character.

This morning we will end our service with the John Wesley Covenant Service. John Wesley understood the need to decide ahead of time what direction how we will live. This is a service that he created for the New Year.

In this service we are renewing vows made for us and remade by us over the years. You are here today because, at some point, your life was dedicated to Christ. But you would not be here if your life had not been rededicated to Christ many times. Over and over again, you have decided to be a faithful servant of Christ.

This covenant is another opportunity for you to renew your vow to Christ, to decide ahead of time that you will be a servant of Christ in 2009, to decide the direction your life will go.

Who knows what this new year holds for us? But we are deciding today that no matter what comes we will deal with it as Christians, followers of Christ in 2009.

Let's bend the twig of 2009 in the direction of Christ.

Dr. Wesley Welborn
Senior Pastor