

MY FATHER'S HOUSE**Bruce Davis****St. Andrew's United Methodist Church****Omaha, Nebraska****April 28/29, 2018****Confirmation Weekend**

**Reading from the Gospel According to Luke, chapter 2,
starting at verse 41:**

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 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.

Shades of "Home Alone"! Jesus' mom and dad have come to the big city and started the return trip without checking to be sure their adolescent son was accounted for. If poor Kevin's mom was in a panic, consider Jesus' mother Mary: How do you explain losing the son of God?

When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

The scene is famously portrayed in this Heinrich Hofmann painting, dated 1881.

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." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my

Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them.

If our confirmands are anything like I was at your age, you may often think your parents don't understand you. Be patient with them. Young Jesus had the same problem with his mom and dad.

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

In my Bible what was just read is captioned, "The Boy Jesus in the Temple." Significantly, this the only scriptural account of Jesus' childhood. There are two extended gospel accounts of his birth. Matthew tells that story through the experience of old Joseph, and the visit of the Wise Men. Luke's narrative runs through Mother Mary and the shepherds. The two are fused into the Christmas story as we know it.

It's Luke who advances the story. Jesus' birthplace, Bethlehem, was just over a hill from Jerusalem, the aforementioned temple being the crown jewel of the city.

The temple was a massive, imposing structure. The image on the screen is a model of what it was thought to look like. Thirty years after Jesus' death the temple would be destroyed by the Romans, never to be rebuilt.

Per the religious practice of their place and time, Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus to temple. It was written, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord." Many of you were brought here in your infancy for baptism, infant baptism being roughly analogous to this "consecration" in Luke 2. We're told Jesus' mother and father, "brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord."

That's when we meet an old guy named Simeon. Simeon had spent his whole life "looking for the consolation of Israel." At the time of Jesus' birth, the far-flung Roman Empire dominated Europe, Northern Africa and the Middle East, including Jesus' homeland. The Romans called it Palestine (see the little white star at the far left of the map), a tiny sliver of a nation, at the distant margins of the Roman holdings.

Simeon would have been old enough to remember when his homeland was an independent nation, alone among the nations in worshipping one God. The Biblical prophets had spoken of a messiah, who God would send to save Israel, and "It had been revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah."

Luke tells us that as baby Jesus was being presented by his parents, Simeon came to the temple, took the infant in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Lord, now you are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

I don't know that I've ever before preached a Confirmation weekend at St. Andrew's, leaving that honor to the folks who've mentored you through the membership training. However, as I am about to depart myself--as in retirement--I particularly wanted to make this occasion one of the final preaching appointments of my parish ministry.

I've known many of you since you were toddlers. Even before I first moved up here, I had invited Saints of Andrew to send me photographs, so I could get a running start on putting names and faces together. Here's Owen and Elizabeth Doll then, the twins thirteen years later. Yes, I wanted to preach this Confirmation weekend.

Lord willing, a month from today, Nancy and I will be in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This getting ready to retire is a lot of work, the chores including clearing out my office. Most challenging: sorting through the books. Hard telling how many dozens of boxes I've hauled down to the Half-Price Book store, likely contributing to this back surgery I went through a few months ago.

I've come across a lot of stuff I didn't know I had, including this poster, given to me when Nancy and I were leaving Springfield, Missouri, to come up here: Fans tearing down the goalposts at Faurot Field in Columbia, Missouri, October 11, 2003, the University of Missouri Tigers having upset Nebraska by a score of 41-24

Never mind the dust. I never had the nerve to put it on the office wall at St. Andrew's.

I know this is from before you were born, but there was a time when it was a rare thing to beat the Nebraska Cornhuskers. If you're puzzled, perhaps, at this hubbub about the new coach, understand, Nebraska football fans have been looking for consolation as long as you've been alive.

But, even as I was divesting myself of many hundreds of books, there was no question of parting with this one, a volume I've surely had longer than any of the others: "The Good News: The New Testament with Over 500 Illustrations and Maps." I know exactly when I received it, for it is inscribed:

Bruce Ralston Davis
From:
The Methodist Church
Paris, Missouri.
Richard Davis, Pastor
4-15-1962

It was Confirmation Weekend at Paris Methodist Church in northeast, Missouri ('would not be "United" for another seven years), the congregation confirming on a Palm Sunday. I would have been six months shy of twelve years old. I'd started first grade at age five, so was being confirmed with my fellow sixth graders, themselves age 12, per the age of Boy Jesus at the temple.

It's been heart-warming, thumbing through the pages of this Bible presented to me a half-century + six years ago, seeing sepia-toned photos of places I would myself later be blessed to visit--this being the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. If I use a lot of graphics in these messages, understand, I grew up with an illustrated Bible.

Back to the inscription. The pastor at Paris Methodist, Richard Davis, was my father, himself the son of a Methodist minister. Richard Davis had come back from war in Europe, married Mary Frances Ralston, and was enrolled at the University of Missouri in Columbia when the Methodist church invited him to take a weekend gig serving a small town congregation in northeast Missouri. And it came to pass that Mary Frances was delivered of her first-born son, and they named him Bruce.

Fun fact: My father who was given to poetry, had floated the name Elliot Emerson. I could have been Elliot Emerson Davis. I have long suspected that when I came out of the womb, they decided I didn't look smart enough carry such a weighty name, so they went with Bruce. Got any Bruces in your class? Didn't think so. But it was all the rage in the 1950s. In Little League, I played in what may have been the only all-Bruce outfield in the history of baseball: Bruce McGee in left, Bruce Geske in right, this Bruce in centerfield.

I think it's a hoot your new pastor will be another Bruce, as in Emmert. If I might digress: It's not an easy thing, moving into a new congregation. I was in fourth grade when our family moved to Paris. I was not warmly welcomed. One neighborhood kid in particular, two years older and a head taller than myself, took it upon himself to beat me up with regularity.

To his credit, my tormentor assured me it was nothing personal. He'd been best friends with the twin sons of the previous pastor and blamed my family for their leaving. I endeavored to explain Methodist polity. My father hadn't asked to come here, he'd been sent by the bishop. But my tormentor didn't seem interested in Methodist polity. He just missed his friends and took it out on me.

Anyway, I know you'll greet new Bruce with great kindness. I very much hope when he looks in on Youth Worship, he'll find you there. You might write him a welcome note. Such will surely be an encouragement.

Soon after my confirmation, the Methodist Church moved our family to Warrenton, Missouri. I believe most of you are in 8th grade, right? This is my 8th grade self, yet to go electric.

Back then, as is still the case in many places, Methodist pastors lived in church-owned parsonages, often located next door to the church. Such was the case in Warrenton. In the passage read earlier, 12-year old Jesus talked of being in his father's house. I came to think of Warrenton Methodist as my father's house and pretty much had the run of the place during the week. With three younger siblings, the parsonage was a noisy place to begin with, my .45 rpm records being a point of particular contention: *Turn that music down!*

I made the church mimeograph room into a small music studio. Anybody here remember mimeograph machines? Before the invention of copiers, church bulletins were run off on these oily, smelly things.

The mimeograph room was tucked away in the church basement. I could put the records on the turntable, turn up the volume high as it would go, play along with my bass, figuring out chords to the songs.

I pretty much taught myself to play keyboards on a console organ in the Warrenton Methodist chapel. Don't know if I could still finger "Whiter Shade of Pale" or not, but once upon a time...

There's a line from a Broadway musical, young people singing of their experience in the ballet studio, "It wasn't paradise, but it was home." That's how I remember the church at Warrenton, and before that Paris, and before that Stanberry, and before that....

You'll maybe hear it said that church people are judgmental hypocrites. That's not been my experience, not in childhood, not at your age, and certainly not now. Jesus talked about his followers as "the salt of the earth," a term that applies to so many wonderful church people I have known, including many in this room.

To mention just one. Our high school Sunday school teacher was an earnest man named Bill Frick. Bill Frick was of slight build, flaming red hair. Years later, after I'd offered myself for ministry, I'd run into Mr. Frick at Conference meetings--and even as I aged, he was always "Mr. Frick" to me. No one would confuse Mr. Frick with a teaching dynamo, I suppose, but he was in front of the class week-in and week-out, putting up with inattentive wiseacres such as my young self.

My dad died the day Nancy and I moved up here from Springfield, his ashes interred in Warrenton. When Mr. Frick died, some years later, his wife said he wanted to be buried as close to Richard Davis as possible.

I'm not saying Methodist people always get it right. We don't. The church doesn't always get it right. But in my experience, most of us are doing our best, trying to do the Christian thing in an ever more complicated world.

St. Andrew's isn't paradise, but I've been proud to call it home these past thirteen years, sharing the life of faith with people I count as salt of the earth.

Likewise, I invite you to think of St. Andrew's as home. It has long concerned me, frankly, that Confirmation has evolved into graduation from church. Baptized? Check that box. Confirmed? That, too. So we're done now.

Consider the math. St. Andrew's averages between forty to fifty confirmands a year. If half of them stayed engaged in the ministry, we'd have a hundred senior high young people in youth worship each week. Suffice to say, we do not have a hundred senior high young people in youth worship each week.

This is a complicating factor: When I was your age, Sunday morning belonged to the churches. Stores were closed, all day for the most part. The Bible says, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." This was not a suggestion; it was a commandment, and Sunday was set aside for church and family.

A half century later, the church finds itself in competition for our own kids, Sunday morning having become prime time for youth sports. (I could veer into Sunday morning "fun runs," but what's the point?) This is a real conundrum for the congregations, and Christian parents. I know how it works. Coach says if you're not at practice Sunday morning, you can't play. And if you're not at the Sunday morning games, you're not on the team.

Of course, nobody's going to kick you off the team here at St. Andrew's. But, wow, it puts a crimp in the ministries of congregations that prioritize ministry to children and youth.

This is not to despair of the Confirmation experience. The Mission of St. Andrew's is to Share The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself spoke of such sharing in terms of "sowing seed." Depending on the soil, some seed has a better chance of taking root than others, but the mission of the church, as I see it, is to cast seed right and left, at every opportunity, Confirmation being one of the primo sowing seasons.

And the thing is, you never know where or when such may sprout. I've known folks who had the seeds of faith sown in childhood, laying dormant for years, decades, even, only to have faith blossom in unexpected times and circumstance.

Some have heard me say I thought one of the best parts of going off to college was that I wouldn't have to go to church anymore (don't mock the socks, that was the look in 1967). But having arrived at the university, much to my surprise, I found myself getting up Sunday morning, seating myself in the balcony of the Methodist Church on the edge of campus.

And it's not that the preacher was any great shakes. As I remember, he spent most of his time trying to raise money for a new elevator. I can only think the seeds of faith had taken deeper root than I realized and being in the Lord's house felt like home.

When I first got this idea of retiring to Gettysburg, I envisioned myself as a tour guide--in part to take a break from this Reverend Davis thing. Instead, I've found myself working on a writing/research project about the faith of the Christian soldiers who fought the Civil War, genuinely inspired by their stories. And, of course, Nancy and I are scoping out the churches in Gettysburg, with the idea of plugging in to a community of faith there. Bottom line: I find myself consistently surprised at how rooted I am in this Jesus thing; him having laid an early claim on Bruce Ralston Davis, with no sign of letting go.

While things have changed a lot since my confirmation, the fundamental human issues have not. I know many your age have rightful concerns about gun violence in the schools. I found this photo on the internet, elementary kids being drilled on what to do in the event of an active shooter situation. For what it's worth, in my childhood, we were having drills in school about what to do in case of nuclear war with the Russians, told to hide under our desks, as if that was going to save us from getting vaporized.

Bottom line: This old world was, is, and surely forever will be a scary place.

I've been reading about these kids in Florida, making their voices heard, being told to shut up. But say this for the old guys at the temple. They didn't tell 12-year old Jesus to shut up. Nor will anyone around here.

Back to Warrenton, Missouri, for one last story. The church choir consisted of eight women and one man (the latter being the part-time janitor), and was directed by Raymond Martin, who taught full-time at the local high school. On a memorable Sunday morning, Mr. Martin stood before the congregation and gave a plea for men to join the choir.

Having heard Mr. Martin's plea, I showed up for choir practice, a couple of my friends in tow. Mr. Martin quickly announced a change in policy: The choir, from henceforth forward, would have an age restriction, high schoolers need not apply. Well....

I want to close by making an appeal to you. Over the course of my ministry, I've noticed that the strongest youth programs are driven by a few highly committed young people, who in turn attract others to the fellowship. There's a lot of change coming to St. Andrew's. I've told your elders that what happens next will have less to do with Bruce Emmert than with them. Likewise, what happens next in youth ministry will have a lot to do with you.

Will one of you, two of you, three of you, step up as leaders? Will a dozen, better yet two dozen, of the forty-three confirmands commit yourselves to being with us week-in and week out? Will our Confirmation parents commit themselves to encourage you by example? On such will rest the future of youth ministry at St. Andrew's.

I depart in peace. Amen.