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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/31/2016, The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 4:21-30

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I begin this morning's sermon with a verse from our First Lesson, from Jeremiah Chapter 1. Jeremiah said this:

Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth. (Jeremiah 1:6, RSV)

“For I am only a youth.” Well, those days are long gone for some of us. Even the days of being a young preacher, like Jesus in this morning's Gospel Lesson, are long gone. As my friend Pastor Kurt Strause mentioned to me earlier this week, we are the generation of the dog-eared LBWs – our green worship book. Ours are cracked and taped. If had we splurged and had our names imprinted in gold on our LBWs, well that gold has pretty much worn off – a kind of symbol for the strength that has pretty much worn off some of us.

So, the days of youth are gone for me. But we love the young ones in our congregation, and this morning I want to preach a sermon for them and for their parents. This, then, is a sermon meant for the little ones in our congregation – for the Sunday School children and for our Catechism children. I want to encourage them along in the faith.

It is rather remarkable the stock the Bible places in the young. We know the story of Jesus and the little children — the way the disciples wanted to shoo the children away from Jesus, but how Jesus said,

Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:14, KJV)

Jesus was displeased with this putting off of the children. But it was common back in those days. It was common to keep the kids in the background. No so for Jesus! He defended the children and gathered them to himself.

That's the New Testament. But the Old Testament likewise often admires the children and lifts them up. Think of Isaac for example. We admire the faith of Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son if need be. But perhaps the Bible would also have us admire the son, who so trustingly obeyed his father, all the way to permitting himself to be bound and placed on the altar for sacrifice. Isaac trusted his father and his God.

This matter of trust — it has a lot to do with the beauty of children. And now I turn to a sad story. It is a story about a fourteen-year-old girl named Magdalena. She was the daughter of Martin Luther and his wife, Katie. They loved the girl

very much, but she took ill, and there was nothing the doctors back then could do to save her. We have this account of her death:

When his daughter was very ill [Luther] said: “I love her dearly, but if it be thy will, dear God, to take her, I shall be glad to know that she is with thee.” Later, when she was lying in bed, he said to his daughter, “Magdalene, my little daughter, you would gladly remain here with me, your father. Are you also glad to go to your Father who is in heaven?” And the sick girl replied, “Yes, dear father, as God will.” The father then cried, “My dear daughter!”... When his daughter was in the agony of death, he fell upon his knees before the bed and, weeping bitterly, prayed God might save her if it be his will. Thus she gave up the ghost in the arms of her father. Her mother was in the same room but was farther from the bed on account of her grief.”

What courage! What faith this child was expressed! Luther points out to her that she would gladly remain here with him, but asks whether she would also be glad to go her Father who is in heaven. And the sick girl answers, “Yes, dear father, as God wills.”

When Magdalena dies, Luther comforts his wife Katie with these words:

Dear Katie, remember whither she has gone! She has gone to a better world... Children do not dispute. They believe what is said to them. To them everything is plain and simple. They die without anxiety or regret, without murmuring, without any fear of death...just as though they were falling asleep.” (Martin Luther, on the death of his daughter Magdalena, September 20, 1542, told in *For All the Saints*, Volume 3, page 307.)

I think that Luther is right here. You children of our congregation: Your faith is often stronger than that of us grown-ups. You can sometime show us the way. I mean, for example, you might have heard this morning’s Epistle Reading. It is from First Corinthians Chapter 13 — what is called “The Great Love Chapter.” St. Paul speaks of love. He says that love is patient and kind. It is not boastful or rude. It does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. St. Paul says that love never ends. Well, you children are probably the best ones among us at believing these things about love. For you, things are more plain and simple. You believe what the Bible says. And I hope you never lose what you have heard about love. Love is the highest way of life in this world for us. You can lead us older ones in love.

Let me give you another example. This time I am thinking of the shepherd boy David. I bet you’ve heard the story of David and the giant Goliath. Goliath was so

big, so strong, and so fierce-looking that the soldiers of Israel looking on at him quaked in their boots. Goliath challenged them to come out and fight with him, but none would do it. The Bible says that the grown-ups were afraid:

And all the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him, and were sore afraid. (1 Samuel 17:24, KJV)

But the shepherd boy David did not flee from Goliath, and he was not afraid. He said that he would fight the giant. So, the soldiers took the boy to the king, and the king tried to talk David out of fighting. But David would not back down. He meant to stand up for the honor of the God of Israel. So the boy spoke to the king and comforted the king:

And David said to Saul, Let no man's heart fail because of him; thy servant will go and fight with this Philistine. (1 Samuel 17:32, KJV)

And fight he did. He did not linger. He did not stop to consult with the grown-ups on the best way to fight a giant. He simply dashed forward and fought with the weapons that were natural for a shepherd boy. He used a sling and stones and he faced that giant all alone. He faced him and he beat him. His childlike faith led him to victory and helped save Israel.

Later, when David was a grown man, he committed a terrible sin. He arranged for the death of one of his loyal soldiers and took the man's wife to be his own. For the remainder of his days, David faced troubles and conflict. In a way, King David was at his best when he was but a boy.

In our First Lesson, Jeremiah can hardly believe that the LORD wants him to be a prophet. Young Jeremiah tries to point out that he is "just a youth." But being just a youth seems to be a great thing in the eyes of the Lord. So God gives this answer to young Jeremiah:

"Do not say, 'I am only a youth';
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.
⁸Be not afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." (Jeremiah 1:7-8, RSV)

Jeremiah went ahead to become one of Israel's greatest prophets — probably my favorite prophet. He was young when he began, but he never turned back, never turned away from the Lord, and he did great work for the people of God. He taught them, he prayed for them, he comforted them, and he never gave up on them.

Today's Psalm also says a nice thing about young people. It says that the Lord keeps his eye on the young:

⁵For you are my hope, O Lord God,
my confidence *since I was young*.

⁶I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have been my strength;
my praise shall be always of you. (Psalm 71:5-6, LBW)

Here is what I think about the Bible and its admiration for young people. I think that the Bible likes young people because in the eyes of God, all of us are young — even us old dogs like me. Compared to God, even grown-ups are small and weak and we don't know all that much. But our God loves all the children of the world — even us old children. It is just that young ones are the most perfect and innocent examples of being children before the Lord.

When I was boy, we sang a Sunday School song about Jesus loving *all* the children — no matter what the color of their skin. The verse went this way:

Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red, brown, yellow
Black and white
They are precious in His sight.
Jesus loves the little children
Of the world.

Well, you are in this world! You sure are! And so we grown-ups want you to know that Jesus loves you. Remember that he wants you to be people of love in this world. He wants you to be patient and kind. He wants you to look for the good in people. Be brave for him, be good for him, and along the way, you might well help us older ones, in ways that you do not even see. Jesus loves the little children of the world, including us older children. And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.