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I've got a new concept for sermons: theology a la Netflix. You know how Netflix works? You go online and list movies to add to your queue. The movies are mailed to you, and when you finish watching them, you mail them back and get the next movie in your queue. It's a fun way to order movies because you pick what you want, but you don't know when you're going to get it. This week, my mailbox produced a documentary called "Jesus Camp." It was so long ago when I put it in my queue that I now don't remember who recommended it to me or why, so when I watched it, I really had no idea what to expect.

It turns out to be a documentary about a Pentecostal children's summer camp that meets in a place with the unlikely name of Devil's Lake, North Dakota. Presumably the makers of this film were critical of Pentecostals and of evangelical, fundamentalist Christians in general, and in between footage from the camp or from big name evangelical mega churches, the film showed a radio talk show host who represents a more mainstream or liberal Christian point of view. I'm guessing that the filmmakers are expecting audiences to be horrified by what these crazy Pentecostals are getting up to with their kids, and indeed at the end of the film, the youth minister appears on the radio talk show, where the host berates the woman for "indoctrinating" these poor kids, and she shoots back, "Yes, it's indoctrination: I'm teaching them right from wrong." And you know, I agree with her. I certainly plan on indoctrinating Sam with my own values! I'm not sure what point the filmmakers were trying to make here. I suppose one could make the case that there is a difference between education and indoctrination, but the filmmakers never made such a case, and it ended up coming across to me that they called it indoctrination because they didn't agree with the children's minister's theology or politics. Seriously: would the filmmakers have been so appalled if they'd seen what Quaker kids get up to at their youth camps?

Now, I don't particularly agree with either the theology or the politics of the Christians who were depicted in the documentary, but I nevertheless was impressed by many aspects of it. The adults kept telling the kids, "You have awesome power. God needs you right now. You may be the most important generation of our age." That's some pretty potent stuff! And the kids rose to the occasion. These kids were all under the age of thirteen, yet there was one young boy who got up and preached a sermon in front of an audience of several hundred. Another girl even younger witnessed to a perfect stranger at a bowling alley. An entire family went to Washington, DC to demonstrate in front of the Capitol against abortion. Again, I may not agree with their view, but they weren't harassing abortion clinics or bombing abortion doctors. They went to the nation's capital, and I thought it was pretty impressive to see young kids actively involved in making a political statement. And throughout the film, kids were crying, shouting, speaking in tongues, being slain in the Spirit. Sure, it's a bit weird to us mainliners, but it was also very powerful to see fifth graders so full of their faith that they wept as they sang praise songs about Jesus. I'm not sure that's what the filmmakers were wanting me to come away with, but it's what impressed me.

The thing is, we grown-ups think we need to teach kids about God, but the truth is: they already know all about God. Sure, we teach them the particulars about our style of worship, our beliefs, and so forth, but children have a deep spiritual capacity that adults often underestimate. When I worked as a youth minister, I saw it often. Let kids lead worship, and while the result may be a bit artless, it is nevertheless profound. I've heard ten year olds talk about God in a way that left this seminary-trained minister in awe, and with more than a bit of envy!

Children are not very prominent in the Bible. Like most books, the Bible is mainly about adults. But the few youngsters who do show up in the Bible play very significant roles, and they have much to teach us elders. I want to look at some of those young people, starting from the oldest and going to the youngest.

First is Esther. The Bible doesn't tell us how old she was, but she surely was young when she attracted the attention of the Persian king, I'm going to guess 15-20 years old, though she could have been younger. She was certainly an adult by Bible standards, but she was quite young by ours. Esther became queen when the previous queen angered the king by refusing to come when he called her. The king would have been looking for a more submissive wife when he married Esther. An evil plot was hatched by the king's minister to kill all the Jews. The king agreed to the plan, not knowing that his new queen was a Jew herself. Esther's cousin begs her to go to the king and plea on behalf of her people, but she knows she would risk the king's anger. If she keeps quiet, she might be able to save her own skin, but at the cost of all the Jews in Persia. In the end she finds the spiritual strength not only to go to the king and ask him to spare the Jews, but she also hatches a plot of her own to reveal the evil Haman's role in the plan. Esther exhibits a quality we often see in young people, particularly older teenagers and young adults. People that age have now established their own independence and identity, and often that is a time when they turn their attention outwards. Having found their own voice, they often use that voice in behalf of others whose voices are ignored. They can be powerful advocates.

Next is Joseph, who the Bible tells us is seventeen years old when his story begins. He had powerful visions and dreams, but unfortunately he also had an appalling lack of tact, and that got him in trouble with his elder brothers. Teenagers often have grand visions about their own futures, about the world around them and the role they will play in it, and they can be quite zealous in their cause, even single-minded. Due to that zeal, they have a tendency to deeply offend their elders. They can come across as not only self-righteous but self-aggrandizing. We elders, though, would be wise to heed the clarity of vision of these zealous teens. Something that struck me when I worked with teenagers, even though I was only about ten years older than they, I had already become slightly jaded about the world, even cynical. I'd whittled my dreams down to what seemed like a more reasonable size. We think we're being more realistic, but think of what we sacrifice when we give up those dreams! Often I suspect that we get our feathers riled by these upstart youngsters because in our heart of hearts, we know they're right. Fortunately, Joseph is able to mature in his gift. He not only learns tact to the extent that he becomes an advisor to Pharaoh, but he engineers the reconciliation and redemption of his own family. The lesson for us elders: listen to these teenagers! They know what they're talking about.

Then there is David. Again, the Bible doesn't tell us how old he is, but given that Saul's armor dwarfs him, he was surely not yet fully grown. He is probably anywhere from twelve to seventeen when he steps forward to battle Goliath, a task that men older and more experienced than he had refused to undertake. More than that, David fights Goliath with his own tools. He is offered a grown man's armor and sword, but he sticks to what he knows best: his slingshot, like a divine Dennis the Menace. Young teens can be reckless in their bravery, and they do not have a fully developed sense of risk, which is why we adults get so paranoid when the kids ask for the car keys. But we adults have perhaps a *too* developed sense of risk, and sometimes we refuse to act because we are afraid: afraid to lose our jobs, to lose our possessions, to lose our reputations. David's willingness to do what needed to be done, to be undaunted by obstacles, saved his people. We adults could learn from our younger friends how to be braver.

Next is Mary. No doubt we all think of her as an adult, and while the Bible again does not tell us how old she was, tradition says that she was thirteen years old when she agreed to bear the Messiah. She couldn't have been much older than that if she was still unmarried. Like David, she is astonishingly brave to undertake her task. While she possibly risked death by getting pregnant outside of marriage, she certainly risked shame and ostracism. Peer pressure and social

condemnation weigh heavily on young people, especially early teens, and that vulnerability makes us grown-ups overlook them all too often. We tend to discount young people's abilities and their reserves of strength, but they can really rise to the occasion when they are entrusted with important tasks. From Mary, perhaps, we can learn the importance of trusting young teens with responsibility, giving them the opportunity to grow and mature into all that they are capable of being.

Then there's Jesus himself. We have one story about Jesus as a twelve year old – I think today we would call him a tweener - when he got so distracted at the Temple discussing theology with the priests and scribes that he didn't notice that his parents had left town! When they found him again three days later, he reacted with surprise. "Didn't you know you would find me in my Father's house?" Okay, granted that Jesus was the Messiah and all, so we can allow him a bit of cheek, nevertheless preteens have a great desire to learn. It's a sad fact that today's environment of endless testing all too often squelches that desire. But in addition, kids with their fresh insights and clarity of vision have a great deal to teach, if only adults would be humble enough to listen.

Youngest of all is Samuel. His mother offered him for service at the Lord's tabernacle when he was weaned, so when his story begins he was probably around three to five years old. He was so young, that when God spoke to him, he thought it was the voice of Eli, the high priest. Eli's sons were corrupt, and they abused their privilege as priests of the tabernacle. Like many of us, they had lost their ability to hear God's voice. But very young children can still hear. I've heard many anecdotal stories about children Samuel's age, never older than five, who talk directly to God – and more importantly, to whom God talks back. I was one of those children, myself, because I remember when God stopped speaking to me that way. I wasn't even in first grade yet. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, we don't have to teach children about God. They are already on a more intimate basis with God than any of us has been in a very long time. When they speak about God, it's coming almost directly from the source, even though they themselves may not fully understand the significance of what they're saying. Eli could very well have blown it off when Samuel kept waking him up in the night asking if he had called. He might have just dismissed it as a dream, or Samuel getting carried away with his imaginary friend. Fortunately, however, Eli responded in two important ways. First, he told Samuel what to do when the Voice spoke to him next. He didn't have to teach Samuel about the Voice, just how to respond. He told him to say, "Speak, Lord; your servant is listening." Secondly, Eli listened to the voice of God speaking through this little child.

Will we be as wise as Eli? For all our sakes, I hope so.