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**Kids These Days**  
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*Psalm 148*  
*Luke 2:41-52*

Have you ever had a foolproof plan?

A few years ago, Ed and I were playing a game with the youth group. The game had a simple setup: we broke the students in to teams, each team had to complete a series of challenges in order, and the first team to finish was the winner. This particular year, challenge number one was to take everyone on your team's shoes off, place them in a box, and gift wrap the box. The second challenge was to steal another team's shoe box, thus shuffling the deck enough so that no one knew where their shoes were. The third challenge was to decorate a teammate as a Christmas tree. And we really went all out for this particular challenge, getting high quality ornaments and decorations. It was around the time that we heard the third ornament shatter on the floor that we realized our problem: We had stolen everyone's shoes and created a sea of broken glass on the gym floor for them to cross.

That was bad, but it wasn't quite as bad as a friend who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty. This particular friend took his youth group on a trip to Chicago. They stopped along the way for a dinner at McDonalds, and then went back to the hotel for the rest of the evening. A full three hours later, there was a knock on the door from the student that they had left behind at the McDonalds, and who walked back to their hotel room. They didn't even know this student was missing.

There are all sorts of funny (and painful) bits of stories like this. There's the creation of a "foolproof" plan, one that will

surely go as well as you imagine from the onset. There's the excitement of watching a foolproof plan come together, right before your eyes. Then there's that sweet, sweet moment when you watch your foolproof plan falling apart right before your very eyes. And of course, what follows that moment is the creeping question: "If this was my foolproof plan, and it fell apart, what exactly does that make me?"

I think we all have a lot of foolproof plans in life. Unfortunately these plans can get wrecked by the chaos of life, the insane busy pace that we all get wrapped up in, or perhaps our flat out failure.

What kind of plan do you think that Mary and Joseph had for this family vacation? This was, Luke tells us, a yearly event. Every year they would gather together with family and friends and make their way to the Temple to celebrate. Did they have check in times for their kids? Did they have a roster of everyone that was present on the trip? Perhaps they carried a pair of handcuffs for each child to attach them to a caring adult?

Whatever the plan was, can you imagine the shock when it fell apart right before their eyes? Jesus was gone for three whole days! First of all, great foreshadowing Luke! But on a more practical level, ask any mother or father here, anything longer than 30 seconds without your child is an absolute nightmare. I can hardly fathom what three days felt like.

Eventually, they find the boy Jesus in the temple, and there are a host of interesting tidbits in the story, each of which could be their own sermon. Jesus is in the temple, and at twelve years old, is able to keep up with the cream of the crop of the Jewish leaders and teachers. That's pretty impressive. You can almost hear Mary's voice when she

starts in on Jesus. “Son...” You can also hear a pre-teen Jesus come back at her. “Duh! Mom, where did you think I’d be?”

But there is one line that has just captured me this week as I’ve studied this text: “But his mother *treasured* all these things in her heart.”

What on earth is there to treasure in this story from Mary’s perspective? She lost her son! She didn’t notice that he was missing for a full day! It took three whole days to find him! Perhaps you could make the argument that Mary was proud of her son in the Temple, and that perhaps that was worth treasuring. But I don’t think that’s the whole of the story. The text tells us that she treasures *all* these things in her heart. The impressive things, the chaotic things, and the failure things all get treasured.

Which leads me to a question: What does it look like to treasure your chaos, your busyness, and even your failures?

To start, what do we mean when we say we treasure something? The Greek word that’s used in this passage comes from the root *tereo*, which literally means “to lay down.” It’s a metaphorical sort of way to say that you would literally lay these memories in your heart, that they would take up residence there. There’s also a connotation of permanence. This isn’t like you lay your shopping list on your mind, and then forget it when you leave the store. Perhaps you are like me, who spent time this Christmas around family fondly recalling the stories of your quirks and oddities as a child. It’s clear that these are stories that all these years later still take residence in our parent’s hearts. These are stories that are treasured.

But there's also this connotation in this word "treasure" that you are going to set this memory down in your heart, and let your heart have its way with the memory over time. Isn't it true that sometimes the things we think are most insignificant over time have the biggest impact on us? Have you ever had the experience of being somewhere and "that song" from your youth comes on the radio, and all of a sudden a swell of emotion hits you out of nowhere? Your heart has been working on the memories associated with that song.

So what does it look like to treasure the insane, wacky, and even the failures in our lives? What does it look like to set these confusing and confounding moments in our hearts, and let them play out in there? And if that chaos leads us to a place of failure or shortcoming, how do we best understand that?

I was introduced this week to an incredible YouTube channel from a guy named Mark Rober. When you're done here, go home and look up his glitter bomb video. It will not disappoint! Mark is a former NASA engineer, and he conducted a little experiment online. 50,000 people participated in a puzzle that Mark had created. Half of those people could fail as much as they needed with no penalty, but the other half was docked five meaningless, imaginary, internet points for each time they failed the puzzle. Of the no penalty group, 68% of them were successful at the puzzle, while only 52% of the penalty group was able to succeed. And on a related note, the no penalty group took on average twelve attempts to solve the puzzle, while the penalty group only took an average of five attempts. Rober's conclusion was that if you felt punished for your failures, even by meaningless internet points, you were less likely to succeed

than if you could learn from, celebrate, and dare I say *treasure* your failures.

Imagine disciplining a toddler every time they fell while they were learning to walk, rather than celebrating every success. We would think that a cruel and unusual way to parent! And yet I think this is what happens more often than not for us, both individually and culturally.

Imagine you are out doing some errands, and you come across a beloved child actor. What would you do? Stop and ask for an autograph? Leave them alone, recognizing that they have their own private lives? Would you become like me and get really nervous and lose the power of speech? A few months back, Karma Lawrence did none of the above. When she discovered that the gentleman bagging her groceries at Trader Joes was actually Geoffrey Owens, who played Elvin on *The Cosby Show*, she took out her phone and took an admittedly embarrassing picture of him. She then sold that photo to *The Daily Mail*, which ran a rather condescending piece about him, sort of a “oh how the mighty have fallen” story. To our culture’s credit, a vast majority of people commented on the story with, “Why is this such a big deal?” But truth be told, we do this all over the place. Take a look at just about any of the major social media platforms available today, and you’ll see that one of the defining traits of such places is finding someone who has “failed” however we determine failure on their behalf, and we shame them for it.

Speaking of social media, Ed and I have been working with our youth commission to expand the scope of our ministry a little bit. One member of our team said recently in a meeting, “I can’t even imagine what it’s like to be a teenager these days.” So our team decided that we’re going to work on



helping the church imagine what it's like to be a teenager these days! We want to frame that conversation with good research and information, so we set about reading. Now, this is a generalization to be sure, and there are some bright spots, but Ed and I have been surprised at just how negative the tone around the current generation is. This generation seems to be defined by how they do things differently than generations past and how much worse that is for our society. Technology is advancing faster than we can keep up with or understand, and so this generation is leaving behind some old ideas in favor of some new ones. Now again, this is a generalization, and there are some bright spots. There is of course a degree to which every generation compares what the younger is doing with disdain. But imagine that you are defined by your worst qualities over and over again! In fact, some of the research indicates that there are two things that best define the current generation of young people: They were the first generation to have a smart phone basically from the womb, and they are given far less responsibility from their parents and other caring adults than the generations that came before them, thus allowing them to coast with much less responsibility. I'm here to tell you, this generation can and should be known for much more than that.

I think the fear of failure is what sits right behind our chaos, our busy days, our the endless go-go-go of our culture. We want to make sure that our kids have the best possible life, so we make sure we don't fail them by signing them up for every soccer club under the sun. We want to make sure that we look good in the eyes of our neighbors, so we work ourselves to the bone to keep up with the Joneses. We want to make sure that the next generation succeeds, so we pad them and baby them and withhold responsibility until they're "ready." If all of this is true, that the fear of failure is

somehow behind our constant busyness, then our faith has some things to say about that. Paul reminds us in 2 Timothy that God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love.

All of which leads us to the last line of this story: “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”

I live with two people who are actively growing right now. They are currently learning to ride bikes, which makes me a super happy cyclist dad. And yet, there’s this weird sensation that comes over me every time we go out for a ride. I’m kind of waiting for them to fall off their bikes. Not because I’m some lunatic who wants to see pain come upon his children, but because I know that there’s a certain knowledge that true growth, true development comes with some failure. Failure in fact teaches us things. There are lessons you can’t learn about riding a bike if you never, ever fall down.

As cliché as this might sound, life is kind of like riding a bike. Our failures are not cul-de-sacs of disappointment but opportunities to grow in faith. A variety of smart people have some great quotes about this. “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work,” said Thomas Edison. Henry Ford reminded us that, “Failure is only the opportunity to begin again, only this time more wisely.” Or perhaps you will resonate with the prophets in the great 90s rock band Blues Traveler, “There’s no such thing as a failure that keeps on trying.”

What separates this sermon from a self-help inspirational talk is the all too important, and all too forgotten, Christian

concept of grace. Grace is God reminding us that our forgiveness was purchased for us long before we showed up on the scene. Grace is the ability to take our naggingly consistent human nature and start to bend it toward the vision of Kingdom living Jesus gives us. Grace is how Jesus chisels away at the worst parts of ourselves to reveal the beautiful child of God that we've always been. Grace is the ability to look at our failures not with an attitude of despair but with a posture of hope for our future. Grace is how you look upon this chaotic, crazy, unbelievable, fast pace, lose your kids for a few days thing we call life and treasure all those things in your heart. Grace is how you grow not just in wisdom and stature, but in favor with God.

I love cycling, but I'm pretty awful at mountain biking. The road has its hazards, but at least there aren't rocks and trees and such out there. But there's a friend of mine who wanted to take me for a mountain bike ride. And because he enjoys it we went on one of the most difficult, technical trails around. Every single rock I stumbled over, every rooty section of trail I had to walk, every mistake I made, I could hear my friend Justin saying, "Dude! You're doing great! Why don't you take a shot at that last section again, I bet you can get it!" Or if I was really struggling, he'd just say, "Isn't it a beautiful day out here!" It's amazing what a little praise and grace will get you.

Imagine a world where we offered grace and praise to anyone who had need! Imagine a world where we treasured our own shortcomings, not to embrace them but to allow the grace of God to cause growth to come from them. Imagine a world where our posture was to look for the best in people, rather than to catalogue their failures. Imagine a world where our attitude toward the younger generation was one of encouragement rather than disappointment. Imagine if there

were stories written about us having a culture of gratitude, rather than a culture of shame.

I think the best part of this story is that we don't actually have to imagine. I think Mary is the model for us. Whatever craziness meets us on the other side of those doors, whatever life has to throw at us, whatever the kids these days are in to, may we be the people of God who treasure *all* these things in our hearts!

Thanks be to God!



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