

Sophia

Luke 2:39-52

December 27, 2009

The child grew and became strong; he was full of wisdom, and God's blessings were upon him ...

Two days after celebrating the birth of Jesus, we are privileged to celebrate the beginning of the life of another child of God: Sophia Katherine Ann Russell. We are privileged to meet her and to welcome her, along with her family, into our church sanctuary. And we are privileged today to act as God's agents, to let our hands serve as God's hands, placing the mark of baptism, the mark of God's welcome, the sign of God's grace, on her forehead.

As we do, we join our hopes and dreams and prayers for her life to the hopes and dreams and prayers of her parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. What are some of those hopes and dreams and prayers? What might we pray for her, on this day of her baptism, as we look forward to her future life?

There is so much we hope for, so much we wonder about, so much of her story still to be told! Today Sophia is about three and a half months old. She has lived just over one hundred days. Wow! There is so much still undefined in her, so much unrefined, undeveloped, undetermined. So much is still possible. Her life could take an almost infinite number of different directions. She could become ... well, not anything, but almost anything!

We can picture her life as a network of continuously branching paths. At each moment, with each choice made for her or by her, with each event that happens to her or around her, she moves down one path, leaving behind a myriad other possibilities. At any given moment in her life, there exist the path her life is and all the many paths that might have been. As the field of possibilities ahead of her grows ever narrower, her life becomes ever more distinct, ever more particular, ever more hers!

Now there are so many possibilities, so many possible paths. We wonder: Which one will she take? What will she become? How will her life turn out?

But the question I want you to consider today is this: On which of the many possible paths her life might take do you find God?

You find God on the path that is, always and only on the path that is. God is never found on the path that might have been! You cannot miss God. You

cannot lose God. Nothing can befall you by choice or by happenstance that moves you out of God's way. God does not exist -- God cannot exist -- in what if, only in what is.

Do you realize the implications of what I am saying? Regret has no place in your life with God. Regret is all about what might have been, what you might have been, but that is all unreal, a fantasy game, a waste of time and energy!

God is in, God is only in, what is real. God is with you on the path you're on, whatever direction it takes. It is joy to know that, to embrace that, to take delight in being embraced by God as you are.

Regret amounts to no more than wishing yourself away, wishing yourself away from who you are and wishing yourself away from God! So today I pray for Sophia a life without regret, whatever direction it takes, a life with God, a life with all that God can bring to her. I pray for her to grow as the child Jesus grew:

The child grew and became strong; she was full of wisdom, and God's blessings were upon her!

I might wish for her a long and healthy life, but I pray instead that she will grow strong ... because health and longevity are relative.

Our lives are more or less long, more or less healthy, but strength is an asset available in full measure to any of us, to all of us. Strength of mind and strength of body allow us to fully inhabit our lives as they are, to live the lives we have to full capacity, instead of living with regret, instead of giving up or caving in, instead of living at half-speed.

You know, I am sure, some very strong people whose have had to deal with greater illness or disability or injury than most of us. I do. They prove to us that joy is not a roll of the dice, that a good life is not a matter of good fortune. They show on a large scale a strength of body we often fail to show on a small scale as we deal with the petty aches and pains and annoyances of our daily lives. They show us that strength of spirit and strength of body -- strength of self as a whole person -- is a matter of character, not accident, an asset gifted us by God and cultivated through faith.

That is what I pray for Sophia: that she will grow strong!

I might wish that she grow smart, full of intelligence, but I pray instead that she will become full of wisdom.

Jesus was intelligent. At twelve years of age, he was giving answers that impressed the Jewish teachers in Jerusalem, but it was his wisdom that impressed Luke. It was his wisdom that equipped him to fulfill the unique mission to which God called him.

Intelligence is about what you know. Wisdom is about how you live. Intelligence is relative, granted to some more than others by genetics or opportunity, but wisdom is available to all, a gift of God cultivated through dedication and practice. Intelligence is a matter of lot, but wisdom a matter of character.

Listen to this description of wisdom from the book of Proverbs and tell me, once I have finished, what you heard ...

My child, don't forget what I teach you. Always remember what I tell you to do. My teaching will give you a long and prosperous life. Never let go of loyalty and faithfulness. Tie them round your neck; write them on your heart. If you do this, both God and people will be pleased with you.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know. Remember the Lord in everything you do, and he will show you the right way. Never let yourself think that you are wiser than you are; simply obey the Lord and refuse to do wrong ...

My child, hold on to your wisdom and insight. Never let them get away from you. They will provide you with life -- a pleasant and happy life. You can go safely on your way and never even stumble. You will not be afraid when you go to bed, and you will sleep soundly through the night. You will not have to worry about sudden disasters, such as come on the wicked like a storm. The Lord will keep you safe. He will not let you fall into a trap.

Whenever you possibly can, do good to those who need it. Never tell your neighbors to wait until tomorrow if you can help them now. Don't plan anything that will hurt your neighbors; they live beside you, trusting you. Don't argue with others for no reason when they have never done you any harm. Don't be jealous of violent people or decide to act as they do, because the Lord hates people who do evil, but he takes righteous people into his confidence. The Lord puts a curse on the homes of the wicked, but blesses the homes of the righteous. He has no use for conceited people, but shows favor to those who are humble. Wise people will gain an

honorable reputation, but stupid people will only add to their own disgrace.

What did you hear? What is wisdom like?

Wisdom is loyalty ... standing by those to whom you are committed instead of shifting allegiances for convenience or gain.

Wisdom is faithfulness ... doing what is right instead of doing what works.

Wisdom is trust ... putting your complete trust in God, utterly depending on God, putting God first, not just calling on God to fill the gaps when things get out of hand.

Wisdom is generosity ... knowing it's not just about you, but about us, that you and your neighbor are in this together.

Wisdom is peace ... choosing non-violence as a way of life.

Wisdom is humility ... knowing what you are and what you're not, being strong enough to be weak, being secure enough not to need to be stroked, being content with who you are.

Wisdom is honor ... making it a point to be honorable.

This is what I pray for my children and for my grandchildren and, today, for Sophia, that their lives will be marked by these things: loyalty, faithfulness, generosity, peace, humility, honor, and above all, by trust in the Lord.

These are not assets that garner profit in the usual sense, that win friends and influence people, but they are assets that make a life profitable, meaningful, satisfying, worthwhile, assets that make you a good friend to have, assets that make you God's friend.

This is what I pray for Sophia: that she will be filled with this kind of wisdom, that she will be filled with ... Well, you do know what her name means, don't you? Her name comes from the Greek word, *sophia*, which means wisdom! So I pray that she will be filled with *sophia*, that she will live up to her name!

I might wish that she enjoy great success in life, but I pray instead that she will enjoy God's blessings.

Success is relative and fleeting, and its costs are often high. Sometimes success may require the sacrifice of a friendship or your family or your values. And sometimes success may even come at the cost of your soul.

But God's blessings are lasting and invaluable. God's blessings too come with a cost, but require the sacrifice of nothing you cannot easily do without: worry, fear, selfishness, pride, the need for control.

What are God's blessings? We have already spoken of them this morning as we recalled the gifts of Advent: hope and peace and love and joy. So this is what I pray for Sophia: that her life be filled with hope and with peace, with love and with joy.

My prayers for Sophia are also my prayers for you. You are older. You are farther along the path of your life. The possibilities for your future have narrowed. And yet your life is rich with the possibilities of this present moment! Your life, as it is, may be opened to the empowering presence of God! Your life, as it is, may be filled this moment with renewed hope, with unshakable peace, with deepening love, with lasting joy!

So this is what I pray for you: that you will live without regret and that you will live with God and with all that God can bring to you.

May you become strong; may you be full of wisdom, and may God's blessings be upon you!