



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road
roswell, georgia 30076

31-Dec-2006 Christmas 1

SCRIPTURE: 1 Samuel 2:18-20,26 Luke 2:41-52

SERMON: Some Assembly Required – Batteries Not Included (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

If you pay close attention to what you read and see, you may have spotted that the sermon title in today's bulletin is not the title that was originally advertised. The original sermon title was "Jesus - Home Alone!" and I have the manuscript right here. It is in fact a pretty good sermon, but it is not the one I will preach today!

This sermon that I will preach uses as its title some words that strike fear and terror into many adults at this time of the year: "*Some Assembly Required ~ Batteries Not Included!*" Many of us have been there with a bicycle, a doll's house, a fort, a swing set. It all looks so simple, so easy. The picture on the box is a useful guide and the instruction book breaks the whole process down into simple, easy steps: simple, easy steps... for Einstein maybe!! But not for folks like you and me. I never have the right tools. There is always a piece missing. There are always bits left over when the job is done. It is never easy and things never turn out the way they are meant to. Take my advice: call one of those handyman companies, and let them come and do the work for you. The fee is well-worth it!

On this the last day of the year, as we prepare to enter into 2007, I want to invite all of you into an important, extended, continuing conversation. This conversation is about assembling all the elements of our church so we are fully focused on being a faithful, fruitful congregation able to identify and celebrate and follow God's call.

We have been asking and continue to ask: *What priorities should help shape, direct and energize our life together?* What gifts can we best offer to people in our communities? Where can we do better in nurturing faith, extending compassion, enabling growth, encouraging service to others, provoking discipleship?

Over the past eighteen months, our Elders and Deacons have been partners with the staff in accessing a variety of resources designed to stimulate ideas. We have read articles and books, studied scripture, prayed, listened for God, benefited from the advice and experience of others. At times we wished that things could come easier to us or that an answer would fall from the skies.

Today I am seeking to share one element of where this process has taken me. Even as I do this, I want you to know that what I say is not a final, "written in stone" analysis - not something we could put to an up or down vote. Neither is it off the cuff. What I do offer is by way of a series of hints, hints that will likely not be the final word, dreams, inklings, best guesses. While these hints are not a finished product, I feel that they are worthy of our attention. Just as we heard of all the wisdom that was shared in the Temple when the young Jesus and the Teachers engaged in debate and discussion, I offer this sermon in this Temple, aware that we too are in the presence of our Savior, and that your reactions and discussions and comments, will help us forward.

The first hint I would offer is that I do believe that we need to identify, sustain and move forward to accept the challenges God places before us with a sense of *urgency*. There are people, there are many people in our communities, in Roswell, Alpharetta, John's Creek, Milton, Mountain Park, Duluth, Norcross and in every area incorporated and unincorporated who are looking for a church like ours. People who need a community of faith to comfort them and challenge them, where their questions are welcomed as part of mutual learning. People who long to worship within a church such as ours, who need to be known and to know others in a church of this size.

Our urgency comes from our need to be connecting with such people, and indeed with all people, inviting them to share faith and life with us, growing as we welcome them into the life of Northminster Presbyterian Church as full partners with us, embracing their gifts and inspiration, together being better able to share God's story with one another and with others. This sort of urgency is not about competing with some real or imagined "big church". It is not about keeping up with the Jones' in terms of facilities or programs. It is not about seeking to balance a budget. These are urgencies that are fully and fatally flawed because they are human. The urgency arises from God's desire to strengthen the church to be able to welcome all people into living Kingdom lives. The only batteries that last, providing ongoing energy, are the batteries that come from God.

The leaders of our congregation are to be commended for being willing to look ahead. Only by looking ahead can we discover the direction we need to take. We look to God, looking to discover the route God would highlight on our map, showing us where we are, where we need to get to on the next stage of our ongoing journey and the route to follow. The roadmap that God has for us will not only show us the direction we are to take, it will also clarify where we are not going. Churches do not have the time, resources, and personnel to do everything. God does not expect people or organizations, including churches, to be all things to all people. By looking ahead we can begin to see those things, maybe even just a few things, that Northminster needs to do and to do well. Then we can lay aside any pretense that we can do it all.

By looking ahead, we can get with God's plan, simplifying our calling. Knowing where we are and are not going, we can repack our bags and lighten our load, taking only what we will need for our journey, focusing on nothing else but God's plan for this church. Looking ahead also helps us to create rather than to react. The words, "creating" and "reacting", use exactly the same letters but there is a world of difference between what it means to react and to create. Would we prefer to be like the goalie in an ice hockey game, who, with pucks and players and sticks flying at us all day, can only react or would be better to be creating; making choices, following plans, moving ahead to implement our goals, gathering momentum, being joined by others who will share the journey and work with us on the tasks we undertake?

The four words that I would hold out to you this morning as one way of describing the next steps in our journey together combine to form an acronym: GIFT. **G**rowing, **I**nspiring, **F**aith, **T**ogether – *GIFT!* I have provided a brief summary of these four words and how they relate to and with one another. Even as I describe each of these words, you will hear the other words being used, because all these words connect and influence and expand each other – there is a circle at work. These ideas overlap. Each grows from the others, all of them aid one another.

Growing – in at least two senses - in our sense of who God is, of what it means to be faithful to God; and in the sense that God needs the congregation to seek to grow numerically as we seek to minister to and for one another and to new members whom we readily welcome into the life of our congregation.

Inspiring – excited, engaged, devoted to following God's plan, excited, engaged, devoted in our faith; excited, engaged, devoted in being the church together; excited, engaged and devoted as we ourselves seek to grow and as we focus on seeing that our congregation can grow and expand. Identifying ways to be partners together, challenging one another to new levels of discipleship, sharing in one another's struggles, forgiving one another, praying for those in need, caring for the hurting.

Faith – yes, arguably this is the first of our four words, because it is in faith that we first relate to God and to each other, but FGIT doesn't sound like a helpful memory aid. All Growth takes and causes faith, all inspiration likewise, and what is more conducive to faith than the people of God being Together worshipping and serving.

Together – TGIF doesn't work either – it has already been taken! But only together can these other elements be most effective, and Growth and Inspiration and Faith will bring us closer Together more so than anything else! Only Together can we truly offer our best to God, because every one of us must play our full part if we are to carry out our calling as a church.

Growing, Inspiring, Faith, Together are four words that contain many ideas that you can be thinking about today and as we begin 2007. I am allowing these words, as my best guess, to help shape some of what we will do – today’s “Turning of the Year” Party, our upcoming Northminster Event: “Encountering Jesus All Over Again” designed to aid all who will participate to grow in faith, to be inspired, to work together and to be accessible to people beyond our congregation as a way in which they can be valued and welcomed.

My best guess is that we can best gain traction and build momentum by allowing *Growing* to be the first word. Not just because of the acronym, but because this congregation has a long history in its 25 years of being able to seek, accept and benefit from growth through reaching out to others and welcoming them in. At times this happened even when we were not doing anything special to grow. At other times it has taken a special effort to grow. At times growth has been slow. At this time I believe we can grow steadily and faithfully because, arguably, for the first time ever, we have the wherewithal in our staff, and officers and overall ministry mindset to not only attract new members, but to see that they are fully included and assimilated into the life of the congregation. My friends, *each of you* has a role to help this happen. We can allow this growth to spark our personal, spiritual growth, inspiring in us a renewal of faith and devotion, to doing new and greater things together.

I ask you to give these hints and inklings, to take time to think about them, to see how they hold out to us a promise of a dynamic church, which knowing where God wants it to go, will follow joyfully, faithfully and graciously. I ask you to take time to pray about all of this, to ponder on what you hear and see, to offer your reactions, your questions, your concerns. I ask you to identify those places where you can offer your time and commitment to best effect.

Who among us can best plan and prepare ways for us to welcome a whole lot of new neighbors in the two new housing developments on Old Alabama Road?

Who knows stuff about publicity and marketing, about methods using visual media to communicate who we are to Day School parents and all the other people who pass through our building?

Who has a heart to pray for this congregation?

Who has a story to share to inspire all of us in our faith?

Who is ready to befriend visitors, to greet new worshippers, to mentor new members?

Who needs to get back to Sunday School – as a participant? As a teacher?

Who needs to adjust their weekly schedule to enable fuller participation at BUZZ when we start over on January 17? Have you been there recently and seen all the people and the energy? With your presence we can take further strides forward!

Who will help Susan and my plan to invite visitors to a brunch on a Sunday or to join us as our guests at dinner on a Wednesday night at BUZZ?

Who will pick up Barbara Capes’ idea of Northminster sponsoring an event in every neighborhood?

Who will partner with Sherri Rogers and the entire Fellowship Committee by sponsoring additional Fellowship events, not so our calendars get over-filled – because none of us can do everything – but so we have opportunities to invite friends and neighbors to connect with our congregation?

Who will help plan programs for immigrants new to America? Or care for the uninsured who will form an increasing number within our own church family?

Who will pledge and contribute regularly so that we don’t waste any time or energy on cash flow problems or budget worries?

Who will actively serve on the Leadership Team headed by their Deacon energizing and turning them from Care and Connection Groups into Care and Connection Teams where all of you can actively connect to one other and embrace new members?

Who will hear God's call to serve as a Deacon? An Elder? A Pastor?

Who will share the gifts they have of time and talent and treasure for special events focused on welcoming the community? Events that open up our fellowship or allow other people to join us in making a commitment to those in need through Habitat or Homestretch or whatever?

Who will join Charlie and the Team in making music?

Who has the questions that we need to be asking?

Who will allow GIFT to spark a renewed faith?

It is for all these reasons – and for many, many other ideas and questions and opportunities, that I offer *GIFT – Growing, Inspiring, Faith, Together* – as my gift, as my best guess, my hint to you all. Please receive this *GIFT* and let us all reflect on how it can nudge us and push, and yes drive us forwards and upwards and onwards - *in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

1 Samuel 2:18-20,26

18Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. **19**His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. **20**Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, “May the Lord repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the Lord”; and then they would return to their home.

26Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.

Luke 2:41-52

41Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. **42**And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. **43**When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. **44**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. **45**When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. **46**After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. **47**And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. **48**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.” **49**He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” **50**But they did not understand what he said to them. **51**Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. **52**And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

The New Revised Standard Version, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.