

Idylls without idols (1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52)

There's a lot of a certain sort of pleasure pursued around Christmas.

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One Sunday night, at his grandparents' house for dinner, our seven-year-old son briefly disappeared. We called his name and looked around until he was found: freshly showered, sitting in his grandfather's wingback chair, his hair combed, a crocheted blanket in his lap, quietly reading an old Junior Bible. He wore a half smile, and I still don't know if it was because of the family search or because his posture was performative.

If the latter, we rewarded him handsomely: "My, what a good boy!" his grandmother cried. "Look at you, the picture of piety!" I may have added.

It's embarrassing on paper, but we could hardly contain our enthusiasm. It was the heartfelt fussing that bubbles up from the encounter with this sort of religious idyll, where a delight similar to that derived from a sunlit green pasture emerges from witnessing a child intently engaged with the worship of, or learning about, God.

Like the seasonal tree-peepers driving through the countryside in the fall, there's a lot of this sort of pleasure pursued around Christmas, in the form of pageants and children's choirs and Jesse tree rituals. Now: to say something is an idyll, or idyllic, is not to rudely dismiss it or deny its reality. A verdant rural landscape and a praying or singing child are both real and beautiful creations. But to recognize the idyllic element names that such a picture is an episode, scene, or instance, not the whole

story. It also alerts us to the potentially deceptive nature of such a scene's apparent simplicity, a falseness that most often finds expression in a willful fixation on the idyllic scene as static ideal without allowing for its (real) transience.

A pious ideal of childhood greets us from our lectionary this first Sunday after Christmas. We see Samuel as a boy, "ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod." We see Jesus "in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." And then, here's the kicker: both boys continue to grow, not just in wisdom, years, and stature but in divine and human favor (1 Sam. 2:26, Lk. 2:52).

Now this is a parental ideal if I've ever read one: To have a child who grows to "find favor" with both human and divine audiences? This hits the target on the deepest sources of our parental longings.

When my son was two, he used to go around the toddler-parent music class, greeting people with a back slap like a politician or a frat president. I worried that he would gain human favor but lose his soul. Now that he's in elementary school, I worry that his deep compassion and commitment to righteousness will leave him a sweet-souled, rule-following outcast forever. Clearly, I want him to find favor in both the human and divine arenas. Love expresses itself through a desire to have the beloved find belonging, strength, and healthy relationships both in society and with the Spirit who is the source of all life.

Yet in the heart of the holiday season, with so much idealization of childhood swirling around, these texts and their idyllic images of piety offer a lovely, steadying weight—as long as we remember that they are just part of the story and don't allow ourselves to get fixated on them or to attach to them static ideals for ourselves and our children. Both Jesus and Samuel will go on to lives that continue to find favor with God, but often not with all people. Their ministries will be messy, politically and theologically complicated at nearly every turn. They will go on to lose favor with kings, religious leaders, and even some of their closest friends. This does not negate the seemingly simple goodness of their early formation or the favor they initially found.

[As Matt Fitzgerald reminded Century readers earlier this year](#), the helpful thing to notice is the ultimate trajectory of Samuel's life and Jesus' life. In the end, they belonged and responded to God much more than to human society. God's favor

eventually eclipsed human favor in importance, as it should.

And yet we know, too, that they were ultimately revered as holy men. Human favor is fickle, and lives lived in response to the living God are anything but static and one-dimensional. The challenge, this week and in our own churches, homes, and communities: Can we celebrate the idyllic moments, those scenes or even seasons of “obedience and favor” that we find naturally delightful, without making an idol of them?