

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” – Jeremiah 1:5

Now, the doctrine of Original Sin suggests that all of us are born into the world with sinful natures. Six out of seven days, I hate this notion. We are born pure. Pure as the baby’s butt. As we begin to see, listen, and observe it is then that we develop the capacity for both good and evil. The evil or good that we do is an amalgamation of both nature and nurture, not a triumph of the former over the latter. For some, the struggle is obviously harder than it is for others, and to choose good in the face of overwhelming temptation, or simple want and need, is practically more difficult. It seems that so much of it boils down to the chance of a miracle found in the grand petri dish of life – that place where our DNA mixes in with the lottery of where and to whom we are born. We are either born victims to or benefactors of the environment we are brought into, and there’s not much we can say or do about it at our beginning, but only when we dare to grow up.

And simply stated, it’s far from fair.

For none of us deserve, and yet a great many of us inherit large homes, private educations, and paid tuitions; summer camps, piano lessons, and, well everything that one could dream of. While others, of equal merit at conception, inherit nothing but a sack of potatoes -- poor education, a lack of parental presence, an environment riddled with crime, and only the most fleeting of dreams to even guess at what a summer camp actually looks like. And yet, rather unjustly, it is up to each of us (those who are of able mind) to make the most of that which we have been given. Regardless if we are those found swimming upstream against the current, or blissfully floating along in a golden tube downstream, each of us are presented with options and circumstances that lead to doors we can either choose to open or close. Do we give in to the temptations of sin and darkness, do we give in to the thralls of despair; or do we attempt to overcome them with righteousness and light, seeking after life even where there is only mostly death? It is, most of the time, up to us to make these choices. And it is these choices that we make, especially the ones in our more youthful, vulnerable, and formative ages of development, that are crucial in either altering or sustaining who we were meant to be and who we are to become.

Now out of all the gospels, it is Luke’s gospel which presents us with the richest details of Jesus’ youth. And yet, what Luke actually gives us is hardly anything at all. The majority of the formative years of Jesus’ life are either omitted or simply unknown to Luke. All we get is the proclamation by the angel to Mary; his miraculous birth; and then the boy at age 12 left behind and teaching in the temple. The next thing we know, he’s age 30 in the wilderness beginning his private ministry, immediately followed by the start of his public ministry in the synagogue when reading from the scroll of Isaiah (which we read about in our text today).

Well, what the heck happened to all of those formative years? Who among us would begin telling our life story beginning at age 30, with only a singular narrative from when we were 12 sprinkled in?

So Bob, how did you end up here at Ernst and Young?

Well, you see I’m an accountant and when I was I twelve I read a book with lots of numbers.

Anything else in between?

No, not really.

What about age 5? What about ages 16, 17, and 18; 21, 25, and 28? Surely those years would have had an array of events and stories noteworthy for dissemination. Especially in the Christ narrative. But we get nothing. All we get, fascinatingly enough, are these curious references to Jesus *growing and becoming strong* (Luke 2:40); *increasing in wisdom, and in years, and in divine and human favor* (Luke 2:52).

Which posits a rather interesting question... if Jesus was said to increase, to get stronger, to even grow in Divine favor, then are we meant to assume (quite differently than how we are usually taught), that Jesus was not always FULLY divine, Fully wise, or fully perfect and free from sin at the moment of his birth -- the incarnation? Moreover, when Jesus appears at age 30 in the wilderness, he is said by Luke to be “now full of the Holy Spirit” and our text today begins with a similar proclamation, suggesting as if his divine-power-bar was once half-empty/three-quarters full with still some room to pour in. Fascinating stuff here!

Oh, and this is where it gets really interesting! You see, some early Christian communities began wrestling with this very suggestion. They also asked of scripture, as we have today, what happened to all those missing years in the life of the boy-child Jesus? Just what was he doing all that time? And so, an early Christian movement, as early as 125 A.D., and as late as the mid-2nd century (we're talking about 25-40 years after the Gospel of John was written), penned a document known as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas in an attempt to at least reconstruct, or more appropriately, reimagine the first half of Jesus' life. Unfortunately, we don't get the middle 18 missing years, just the first 12, from his birth leading up to him being left in the temple at 12, when he was teaching the elders.

This Infancy Gospel begins with Jesus at age 5 playing by a brook of water, turning the mud by the banks of the stream into twelve clay sparrows. When Joseph his father comes over to investigate, Jesus the boy makes the sparrows come to life and they fly away. From the onset then, the gospel asserts that this boy has supernatural powers. Now admittedly, it's kind of strange, you know, clay sparrows and all, but so far no huge problems, theologically.

But here is where it takes a turn for the bizarre: sometime later Jesus is said to be playing with the neighborhood boys, but when one of the boys uses up some of the water that Jesus was trying to collect, Jesus curses the boy and he withers away, much like that of the parable of the fig tree in canonized-scripture. Another bumps him too hard on the road home, and Jesus strikes him down dead. The neighborhood then implores Joseph to get a handle on his son, because "he is killing all our children." Jesus laughs at Joseph's attempts to corral him saying he is not his father -- that his true father is from above. So intriguingly, Jesus is presented as a divine malcontent. A divine brat.¹ You might even say, terror incarnate. And even though he apparently knows where he is from, he yet can't figure out the correct way to act in accordance to where he claims he is from -- that is, Heaven; the Kingdom of God, where I imagine sons of God don't harm other children.

Now, later in the Gospel, as Jesus grows in age and wisdom, he eventually chooses to use his divine endowment for the betterment of others, especially for those in need. He resurrects a woman's son after hearing her lamenting from afar; he heals a man's foot after an accident with an axe; he revives a man who had fallen dead on a construction site; he heals snake bites on his brother's hand; he gathers water for his mother at home; and multiplies a harvest from a single grain so to feed the poor. And the Infancy Gospel's final account is a verbatim testimony of Luke's narrative of Jesus in the temple at age 12 teaching the elders, thus bridging the missing splices of Jesus' early childhood.

The gospel's point then, even if [maybe] correctly labeled heretical by later authorities, is not all that different from what those obscure verses in Luke 2 suggest: that even Jesus, the prophesied Son of God, had to learn and grow in wisdom, so to recognize, elect, and become who he was always meant to be -- the realized Son of God. Jesus had to learn to rise above his circumstances (remember he was born into the poor and disenfranchised artisan class), so as to no longer succumb to aggression and hostility, but instead to choose right over wrong; light over dark; righteousness over personal gain, wonder over terror.

"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'" -- Luke 4:22

Biblical scholar Joel Green writes, "In spite of the prophecies regarding Jesus, it remained for Jesus fully to embrace his status and mission as Son of God." So when he willfully goes into the wilderness at 30, and subsequently begins his public ministry (in our text) immediately thereafter, Jesus has in effect chosen to accept his calling, to claim it, and to fulfill it. And when he does choose it, he is then changed. He is no longer the mere carpenter. "Is not this Joseph's son?" He is now, fully, the Messiah.

And in the very first lesson of his ministry he teaches: *'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:24-27).'*"

¹ A title attributed to the Infancy Jesus by priest-theologian John Dominic Crossan.

Now understand that both the widow at Zarephath and Naaman were outsiders. They were non-Jews. They were considered unclean. One was even a leper. And yet, out of the wealth of the entire Old Testament text, Jesus evokes these two names! His point then is simple and clear. God has anointed me and I am now ready to choose this appointed time to bring good news to the poor. To proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. For today I choose this ministry in service to the widow. In service to the homeless; to the poor; to the childless. In service to the lonely; to the children; to the hungry. In service to the outcast and to the subjugated and all those thought to be without merit and devoid of any stature. For truly, I tell you, the last shall be the first and the first shall be the last.

Friends, are you feeling sad today? Then hear the Good news! Are you feeling burdened today? Then hear the good News! Are you in pain? Is a loved one hurting? Are you feeling alone, friendless, isolated and on the outside looking in? Then hear the Good News! For just as Elijah and Elisha were sent to the outsiders in Sidon and Syria, so too has Jesus elected to come to you! And he comes bringing living waters, and a refreshing Spirit, renewing you continuously in the founts of forgiveness, mercy and grace. Indeed, the spirit can be willing even if the flesh is weak.

The events and choices of our past are to be remembered no more. For why, yes, Nicodemus, we can be born again! For like the persecutor Saul became the great apostle Paul, so too, through Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are we able to now start over. So hear the good news! The doors on the street have been opened, and all the daughters of song have been raised high; the grasshopper leaps itself along and hope is won; for the pitcher is pouring at the fountain, and the wheel turning at the cistern; the silver cord has been mended, and the golden bowl has been put back together.² For we have been made new. Original. With a pure and clean slate. For today and tomorrow light reigns over darkness. For today and tomorrow life triumphs over death and conquers despair.

Now, as great as that news is, Luke's Gospel – Luke's good news – does not end at chapter 24, for it marches onward into the book of Acts (which he also is believed to have authored). You see, for Luke, the story of Christ was incomplete if it ended at his death, resurrection and ascension. The story was only alive and breathing if it continued on through his disciples and in their choice to follow him. And so if we too choose to be called his followers, to truly fulfill that designation in 2016, shouldn't we then also choose to live a life following in his footsteps; choosing to imitate his works and his ways rather than our own wishes and our own wants?

In closing, I'd like to offer a short vignette of what that might actually look like, that is in real life, rather than just mere spoken word. Two weeks ago, our youth group went to West Kensington Ministry for a weekend of worship and service. Now, the way they do worship there is just ever so slightly different than how we do worship here... after the sermon, we were counted off such that each of our youth and leaders were separated from each other and dispersed into smaller groups with faces and names we did not know. In these groups, we were asked to share about ourselves -- our dreams, our goals, our fears -- and to listen to our neighbor as they shared the same. Then taking a partner from West Kensington, we were asked to the microphone to introduce our other, who would then reciprocate by introducing us to the group at large. I was partnered with a teenager, from the Norris Square area, whose name is Dayshalee Sanchez. When asked about her goals, she recounted this story to me, where she and her friend Rickelle, upon returning from an after-school work-project, the directive of which is to reduce STD rates in the inner-city, chose to purchase, on their own, three large pizzas so to walk the streets distributing slices to the homeless in and around their community.

My friends, these are the disciples of Christ.

Amen.

² A rewording of Ecclesiastes 12