

Becoming the Person God Intends

This morning's sermon comes to you straight from a roadside marquee. Those who were here last week may remember that I left right after the service to take our daughter back to college. Driving home, I spotted one of those backlit signs with removable letters that small businesses sometimes use to advertise gas prices or special bargains. This one had a different message. It said, "This new year, the devil fears you'll become the person God intends."

The connection between that message and today's Gospel may not be obvious, but stay with me. Last week, we saw the *magi* worshiping the infant Jesus. This week, we see Jesus fully grown and about to launch his ministry. Approximately thirty years have passed. Luke's Gospel gives us a tale or two to fill in part of the gap, but Matthew doesn't say a single word about what happens to Jesus after his family returns from Egypt until he shows up at the Jordan River.

The question of how Jesus lived in what are sometimes called the "missing" years is among the greatest mysteries of all time. People love mysteries, but we don't like to leave them unsolved. Theories spring up, scholars hunt for clues, and suddenly we have books, movies, academic papers, and oral traditions. The prevailing view is that Jesus probably spent those years living quietly in Nazareth, worshiping in the synagogue, working as a carpenter and waiting for the right time to launch his ministry. But more exotic theories abound. The most famous was put forward in the late 19th century by Russian journalist Nicholas Notovitch, who claimed to have found an ancient manuscript in a Buddhist monastery that described Jesus's travels in India and Nepal. Notovitch's claims have been rejected by mainstream scholars but, as author H. Louis Fader observed, the legend of Jesus in India refuses to die. That may be because ambitious writers keep reviving it to make a quick buck, but I think it's mostly because people want so badly to know more about Jesus's life before he went looking for John the Baptist.

Matthew – and God – may have had good reason not to give us a full report of Jesus’s missing years, though. The Gospels aren’t biographies the way we moderns understand them. They focus on the things Jesus said and did for our salvation. From Matthew’s perspective, Jesus’s missing years weren’t relevant to his mission or his ministry, so they don’t matter. From God’s perspective, a “normal” life may be more sacred than we realize. As Bible scholar Chris Burgwald recently observed, “Jesus sanctified the ordinary kind of life that the vast majority of us live ... For we are called to follow the example set by our God and sanctify each moment of our own lives, no matter how mundane or normal [they] might seem.” Because Jesus’s humanity is as sacred as his divinity, it sanctifies our own.

So when Jesus asks John to baptize him, he does so as an ordinary man. John knows, as we do, that there’s nothing ordinary about Jesus, but he agrees to do as Jesus asks. That’s when the other two persons of the Trinity chime in. The Holy Spirit makes a brief but spectacular appearance, alighting on Jesus, and the Father speaks from heaven, saying “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe this moment, and John refers to it. The Father’s words should preclude any and all arguments that come up later about whether Jesus is the Messiah or not. Our Creator has told us that Jesus is his Son. Who are we to argue with God?

But we do argue, and I don’t think it’s only because human beings are irredeemably contrary. Son of God or not, Jesus is *just so human*. He eats and drinks, maybe to occasional excess. He gets tired and cranky. He cracks jokes, teases his mother, taunts the Pharisees, and sometimes gets impatient with his poor disciples, who do their best but can’t quite figure out who he is or what he expects them to do. He may be God, but Jesus is no stained glass saint. How can this brilliant, complex, delightful, occasionally sarcastic, and impetuous man be divine?

That's a question that Christians have wrestled with for centuries. In his book *Christ the Heart of Creation*, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams describes the struggles of the early church fathers to find the best way to reconcile and explain Jesus's divine and human natures. It's not a fifty-fifty split, but more of a 200% thing. Jesus's humanity depends on God, just as ours does, but it's not right to say that God is "in" his Son's humanity any more than he's "in" ours. God is not an ingredient like water or salt. Neither is God a component, like a cog in a machine, that can be strengthened by combining him with something else. Everything that exists depends on God's creative act of bringing it into being, and Creation exists separately from God even as it derives its continuing existence from him. It's complicated and language can't really capture it. That's why describing Jesus as wholly divine and wholly human, while confusing and not entirely adequate, is probably the best we can do.

So, in today's Gospel we see Jesus, a wholly human being, presenting himself to John so they can do what is "proper, to fulfill all righteousness." Whatever happened during his missing years, Jesus has grown up to become exactly the person God intends him to be. And we know that's good, because the Father says unequivocally that he loves and is well-pleased by his Son.

I'm always a little reluctant to recommend Jesus as a role model because Scripture tells us that he was perfect and we, frankly, aren't. But as Archbishop Williams points out, everything in Creation that derives its being from the Father, including us, is whole and complete as created. Even if we think we have bits that are missing or imperfect enough to make God nervous, Archbishop Williams insists that God knows exactly whom he makes us to be, gaps, warts and all. God never requires us to amputate any part of ourselves. I'll go a step further and suggest that, most of the time, God is probably more worried when we mutilate ourselves physically or emotionally trying to get rid of our human flaws than he is about those flaws themselves.

So if we were to take that road sign's hint and spend this year becoming the people God intends, what would that entail? I don't think God wants us to hurt ourselves by trying to amputate our troublesome bits. In fact, the reason so many New Year's resolutions fail may be that they require us to deny God-given parts of ourselves, which never works for long. Perhaps God would rather we aim for greater wholeness and authenticity. Instead of trying to make ourselves conform to some unachievable, cookie-cutter ideal, God might just prefer us to be more appreciative of ourselves as he made us, more grateful for our unique strengths, qualities and quirks, more willing to tolerate and even laugh at our so-called weaknesses. Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us not to judge, so we may not be judged. What if, instead of judging and condemning everything and everyone around us, we were able to be more charitable, more forgiving, more grateful for the many blessings of this world just as God created it? What if we could find the courage to believe that just showing up as our ordinary selves, ready to do whatever is "proper, to fulfill all righteousness," is all God really wants from us? What if we could trust that we truly are God's beloved children in whom he is well pleased?

Only each of us can truly know to what extent he or she has grown into the person God intends, and sometimes it's really difficult to be certain. But the anonymous author of that road sign was probably right that the Adversary is terrified of a world filled with happy, grateful people who cheerfully bear with life's hardships, one another and themselves. Perhaps 2023 is the year to take our lead from our divinely ordinary Messiah and aim to be more, not less, the divinely ordinary people that God created us to be and whom he wants so much to love. If it gives God reason to rejoice, that's a very good thing. And if it keeps the devil up at night, so much the better. *Amen.*