

Childhood Stories and Super-Heroes

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Maybe it's just the season, combined with a rare appearance of this text describing the childhood of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, but how can you read this account and not think of (Macaulay Culkin's) Kevin and the McAllister family in *Home Alone*, when a large entourage of travelers starting off on a long journey lost track of one of their sons, who stayed back in his father's house, impressing audiences everywhere with his masterful originality, with astounding know-how for a young boy, and a slew of miracle-like wonders. Okay, Kevin is no double for Jesus; but he's much more interesting than Jim Carrey's *Bruce Almighty*, even more interesting than that John Cleese classic, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.

Let's face it, people have a fascination with what stars or heroes were like as children. There's a special publication *People Magazine* this month that features photos and stories about the stars, then and now, or think back of the many cartoons and television series that pursued these questions. Did they have extraordinary powers back then? Did they know about them, or misuse them? I recall the television series about Superman as a teenager growing up in Smallville, and also the series that sprung up around Indiana Jones called *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. Our text from Luke's Gospel seems to reflect this universal fascination with what adult heroes were like as kids growing up.

This topic raises some interesting questions, but, as I've said in several sermons now, the earliest proclamations of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did not include any stories about Jesus at all. For Paul it was the Resurrected Christ alive in the Spirit through the miracle of the Church that monopolized his interest and writing. Mark's Gospel makes sure that followers of Christ not forget about Jesus, whose ministry among us he narrates, beginning with his baptism by John in the Jordan River. It was early Christian interest in claims about Jesus being the Son of God that pushed the dating of this claim further back than resurrection with Paul and baptism with Mark to Virgin Birth and Immaculate Conception with Matthew and Luke, and then, all the way back to pre-existence with the Prologue in the Gospel of John.

Our text from the Gospel of Luke attests to the interest that came with thinking about Jesus' growth in grace from the stable in Bethlehem to the cross at Calvary. It may come as a surprise to you, but an entire non-canonical Gospel was devoted to stories about Jesus' childhood. It was called the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. To call it a *non-canonical* Gospel means that it did not make the final cut of four Gospels and twenty-seven authoritative books that have made up the New Testament for almost nineteen hundred years. Actually, it missed more than the final cut; and while it was generally enjoyed as entertaining and even inspirational among those who wanted more anecdotal stories about Jesus childhood like this one in the Gospel of Luke, it just simply never rose to the level of serious historical accounts about Jesus' life prior to the three years of his public ministry. Actually, it struck most authoritative voices for 2nd century Christianity as more like the heresies that Mark's Gospel was designed

to counter, namely, Gnostic heresies that seemed to lose touch with the humanness of the Jesus who lived in history.

There were a number of miracles recounted in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. It starts off with an account of Jesus fashioning birds from clay, and then breathing life into them! Then things take a turn toward the controversial. Jesus curses a boy, who dies, and when neighbors complain, they are struck blind! Then, there are a series of miracles that reverse the earlier negative effect of these unfortunate episodes: Jesus raises from death a friend who fell from a roof. He heals a man who had mishandled an axe and lost his foot. He heals several others who were bitten by poisonous snakes, including James, his half-brother, who would become a leader in the Church in Jerusalem, and the author of the Epistle that bears his name.

The story of the birds made of clay found its way into, of all places, the Quran! It is amazing how widely disseminated these memories had become, even with the church trying its best to hold them in check. The major challenge raised by many of these accounts of Jesus' life and teachings focused precisely on what the Christian faith had always recognized as fundamental when it comes to understanding the truth of the Gospel, namely, whether it preserved the connection of the crucified Jesus with the Christ of faith, our Risen Lord? As Paul writes in 1st Corinthians 1:22-23, "*Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, scandal to the Jew and folly to the Greek, but to those who believe it is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*"

It is the resurrection that set Jesus apart as God's Son [Romans 1:4]; the resurrection was God's decisive confirmatory seal of approval making the crucifixion the full and final revelations of the length and width, the height and depth of God's love. The Gospel of Mark drives this point home, making the Cross absolutely central in understanding who Jesus was, what Jesus did, what he understood his mission to be, what he understood God's mandate to be. Matthew and Luke do not dispute this central thesis. In fact, they add to it, by tying it in with the fulfillment of biblical prophecy in Matthew, and relating it to the unfolding miracle of the Church in the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of John only makes Mark's central claim more profound with heightened clarity and deeper meaning.

Having said this, there are two points I'd like to make in addressing this text from Luke. First, the lectionary series itself draws connections between Jesus' childhood experiences and those of Samuel. Samuel was a decisive bridge figure who moved God's people from the old era of the judges to the dawn of a new era that pointed directly to the reign of the kings, and in particular, to the throne of King David as the sign of things to come. Jesus, too, is set apart as a bridge figure. In John's Gospel Jesus is called the door, the gate, and the way, from old to new, from the old world in bondage to sin and death to the reign of new life in the kingdom of heaven. That's the connection between the First Lesson and the Gospel, between Jesus and Samuel, and between Jesus' mother Mary and Samuel's mother Hannah.

That's the second point I would like to make. Mary's Song, otherwise known as the Magnificat, has much in common - both structurally and substantively, in terms of both its poetic cadence and political content - with the Song of Hannah. This, too, is Luke's way of saying that all hopes for God's promised salvation have found their fulfillment in Jesus as the Royal Son of David sent to establish God's reign of peace forever. There is, of course, one major proviso, namely, that Jesus transforms God's promise as he fulfills it. Jesus becomes with his coming the meaning of what the prophets foretold. Put simply, the meaning of God's promise is transformed by the Cross. The Cross directs Jesus to the fulfillment of the mission; it defines the meaning

of what God's will desires; it is what God's love looks like; and it leads to the true life that salvation promises. This, in short, was the grace that Jesus grew into, from a stable in Bethlehem to his ministry in Galilee. This is the wisdom he acquired in walking in the way that would lead to the cross.

There are two hymns in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* that capture this connection between Jesus birth in Bethlehem and his death on the cross. One is the stark contrast found in the question posed by Hymn #40. "*What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?*" The next verse answers this question, by beginning with another: "*Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding? Good Christian, fear; for sinners here the silent Word is pleading. Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the Cross he bore for me, for you. Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe the Son of Mary.*"

The other hymn that comes to mind is the hymn we will sing as the Hymn of the Day, #417. "*In a lowly manger born, humble life begun in scorn, under Joseph's watchful eye, Jesus grew as you and I. He knew the sufferings of the weak. He knew the patience of the meek. He hungered as but poor folks can. This is he: behold the man.*" Verse three drives home the connection: "*Then, to rescue you and me, Jesus died upon the tree. See in him God's love revealed. By his Passion we are healed. Now he lives in glory bright, lives again in power and might. Come and take the path he trod, Son of Mary, Son of God.*"

These hymns describe the transformation that occurred between the birth of the babe in Bethlehem and the death of the man at Calvary. The Christian faith has always seen clearly this fundamental truth that it is the cross that defines the man. It is Jesus' death on the cross that fulfills God's promise. It is the way of the cross that leads to salvation. Let's listen to that last verse one more time: "*See in him God's love revealed. By his Passion we are healed. Come and take the path he trod - Son of Mary, Son of God.*" That is the Good News we celebrate, the invitation God offers, the call we hear: the call to follow in faith, the call to live each day ... in Jesus' Name. Amen