

It's around this time of year that I start wondering if I've missed something. Not as in, 'what happened to 2009?' More like, 'what is going on with Jesus?' Listen to how the gospel from last week ended:

On entering the house, the wise men saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

And now hear which Gospel we are presented with today:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In the space of seven days, we've gone from sweet baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes, unable to speak or walk or feed himself, to wild Jesus and John the Baptist, men full grown with beards and muscles and deep voices, speaking fully-developed theology.

What happened to Jesus?

If we think about the span of Jesus' life – 33 years, give or take a few months – then we, in one week, have skipped 90% of Jesus' time on earth. We will devote the next three months to covering all of Jesus' three-year-long ministry, the remaining 10%, through his death and resurrection on Easter Sunday. We have skipped over the one mention of Jesus between the years of 1 and 30, in which Mary finds Jesus at the temple at age 12, lecturing to the scholars there.

Why is it that we know so little about the boy Jesus, the teenager Jesus, the young man Jesus? What happened during these lost years?

Back in the second century, not long after Jesus' death and before the doctrine of the Trinity was fully developed by the council of Nicaea in 325, Christians were embroiled in passionate debate about exactly when Jesus became God. Was Jesus God from before time, as John suggested through the passage, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was made flesh?' Or was Jesus chosen at a later date – adopted, as might have been suggested by certain passages in Luke and Mark.

Hear again the words of the Gospel of Luke from today: "The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." This exact same passage occurs in the Gospel of Mark as well. Because Mark records no part of Jesus' birth or childhood, many early Christians believed that Jesus was chosen as God's son after demonstrating as a child that he could be perfect and sinless, and that he merited adoption as God's son. Therefore, the descent of the Holy Spirit isn't just seen as redundant confirmation of Jesus' divinity, but rather as the actual moment of God choosing Jesus to be the Messiah. Luke's Gospel, because it includes the story of Jesus' birth, is not quite as supportive of the theory that Jesus was adopted.

So could it be true? Could we have ended up with a different Messiah, perhaps an Andrew Christ or a John Christ, if only Jesus had messed up as a boy?

While we have almost nothing in the Bible about Jesus' childhood, scholars have long known about extra-canonical sources, or sources outside of the bible, that describe what Jesus was like as a boy. Perhaps the most famous of these sources is known as the *Infancy Narrative of Thomas*. This book was written sometime between 80ad and 150ad, and described fantastic events and miracles that took place while Jesus was growing up. A few are beautiful and innocuous, such as the story of an 8-year-old Jesus making twelve clay sparrows, and setting them to flight. Amazingly, the same story is echoed in the Qu'ran, which twice recounts Jesus bringing clay sparrows to life. I love this image – Jesus playing in the mud, echoing his father's work in the Garden of Eden – much like

children do when they make mud pies, or build tiny houses out of sticks, practicing work they will do when they are older.

The thing is, most of the stories in the Infancy Narrative are not nearly so beautiful or harmless – most of them are scary. As a child, Jesus is said to have been playing in the mud, again, building pools of water, which he then makes clean simply by commanding the water to become clean. When a playmate tosses a branch into the pools, destroying Jesus' work, Jesus curses the playmate, who then falls down dead. Teachers attempt to teach Jesus, but give up because of his disconcerting and even creepy ability to know lessons before they are taught. One of the most complex stories involves Jesus playing on the roof of a house with other boys, when one of the children falls off and dies. The other boys run away, leaving Jesus alone. Because of his previously suspicious behavior, adults nearby suspect Jesus of having killed the child; and so Jesus brings the child back to life, but only so that he can testify that Jesus was not the murderer.

These stories are seriously troubling. They tell of a boy with powers, much like a child in a horror movie – powers to kill, to change the world around him at will, with a creepy ability to know more than adults. This is a boy who is not pure or angelic, who is motivated by anger and self-protection perhaps even more than by love or kindness. This boy-God is not fully in control of his abilities. The only echo we get of this period in the scriptures is found early in the Gospel of Luke, which records that “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”

And so we are left with two official and untroubling images of Jesus: one, as the pure baby in the manger; the other, as the confident grown man, Son of God. The stuff about a questionable boy killing his playmates is left out of the Bible, despite it being written and known long before the Bible was fully canonized, some 200 years later.

While I would imagine that we could all look back on our childhoods and point to parts that were awkward or difficult, I think it's difficult for us to look at those we idolize, and

to imagine that they too might have struggled to become functioning adults. Take, for example, the royal families of England: because of the media explosion, most of the world now knows that Prince Harry dressed up as a Nazi for Halloween once, and that Princess Beatrice has struggled with her weight for most of her childhood. It's easier to look at Princess Diana or Prince Charles, and to think that perhaps they fit the flawless narrative better than their children.

It's this flawless narrative of Jesus that troubles me. We, who have been or are somewhat wobbly rough drafts of human beings, how do we relate to a sanitized Jesus? If Jesus was fully human, did he not make mistakes? Not to say that he committed sins, but rather made mistakes? What would it be like if we knew that Jesus had struggled with how to change and grow, too?

One of my favorite books of all time is called 'Lamb,' by Christopher Moore – no doubt those of you who have read it have been thinking about it while I've been talking. 'Lamb' is a fictional account of Jesus' childhood, narrated by his best friend, Biff. Biff records all of Jesus' mistakes, trials, errors and early successes. My favorite scene is when Biff is helping Jesus to edit a rough draft of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus includes the line (which I've cleaned up a little), 'Blessed are the stupid ones.' Biff advises him not to include this particular beatitude, and Jesus argues back, 'But the stupid ones are blessed!' And he's right – blessed are all people who struggle to learn, to grow, and to figure out the difficult business of being human.

I encourage everyone to read the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, or the book 'Lamb.' It helps to be reminded that Jesus was fully human – mistakes, rough drafts, and all – and that we have permission to be the same.

Amen.