

## The Boy (December 14, 2008)

Robert Osborne

This message is the second in a three-part series we are calling The Story. It is our attempt to consider the meaning of what is called the incarnation, God coming to us in the human life of Jesus. Last week, we talked about the meaning of Jesus as a baby – about the value of being childlike, the joy of embracing simplicity, and the call to become ourselves.

I am going to extend that conversation today as I talk about the boy and his growth towards mature self-identity. We have only one story to tell of his boyhood, which I will rehearse for you today, and then we will spend a few minutes musing together. Do you like to muse? I do. Let's muse together.

Most of the Jesus story is hidden from us. Most of what we might like to know about Jesus, purely for interest sake, is not told us. For instance, in the gospels we are not told what he looked like. There is, in art history, a kind of common representation of him. But the only thing said in all of Scripture is from Isa 53:2 which says: There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. The fact that the gospel writers did not give us a physical description might mean that, for them, his look did not in any sense adequately represent the person he really was. That's something to muse on.

But we do have a description of the apostle Paul from a second century source. Paul was obviously not a good looking specimen of the human race as he is described this way: **“a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose, baldheaded, bow-legged, strongly built...”** Maybe this was why Paul was not so popular with the Greek Corinthians. They liked their orators to be not only well-schooled and skilled in Greek rhetoric, but impressive looking, with style and panache – you know, someone who looked their part. Paul obviously didn't. There are hints that he may have had eye problems, and one can imagine a cultured Greek audience finding it hard to listen to a guy with a watering eye. Poor Paul; he always had to defend himself with the church at Corinth.

But I like the rest of this remembrance about Paul for it continues this way: ... **full of grace, for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel.** The soul has a way of peaking out.

What does this anecdote tell us? Just that there is a way of seeing that moves past the surfaces. And this is what I would like to suggest can help us understand the idea of a picture or a portrait, and the ways we can use artistic representation. For the truest and most Christian meaning of art is that it represents something beyond itself, it points toward something, it acts as a sign, but the image is never the thing itself.

Let me shift from the image to matters of the heart, for that is more my native soil. I speak so often on matters of the heart. I do so, I think, because I have become so aware of the restless activism that permeates our culture and which tends to leak into our way of practicing faith together. We want depth, to be sure, but we are addicted to product and speed, to image. We define ourselves by performance. Notice the architecture we are in – I am standing on a stage, which means that it is my time to be “on”, that I have 30 or so minutes to impress you, and then get off before I say too much and diminish the moment.

Machiavelli’s classic counsel to leaders some 500 years ago was to maximize the image and not worry about backing it up with any reality: “Appearances are more important than reality for the successful prince. For you alone see what you really are, while everyone sees what you appear to be.” But what does that produce in time? What becomes of us in the age of the mask, the performer’s face which projects image more than substance? Anyone who has any experience with this way of living knows how exhausting it can be. Our celebrity performers become so exhausted in projecting the image that when they retreat to their own personal space, they find themselves emptier than ever, trying to fill up the emptiness in any way they can. And our leaders, well – I heard someone say recently that we are being led by our most tired people.

The life I want to present to you today takes no part in this frantic world. The life I present to you today is a life lived with full engagement but not in any way pushed out of shape because of it. It is the life of Jesus – who was not nearly as stressed out as his followers are. And what I want to show you today, is that before his life was presented

to us, it was first a life lived in stillness, and in peaceful knowing love. When Jesus finally went public (so to speak), he moved from the beauty of God-infused silence into the world of noise and politics, crowds and opinions, the myriad frantic ways we try to find life. But he did that for us, and not for anything he was looking for; for he was, and is, the true life.

Let me start with a story from his boyhood. It is a unique story because it is the only piece that we have of Jesus between his birth and the beginnings of his ministry at age 30. It hints at some themes we should consider, especially as they relate to our own lives “off stage”. We find this story in Luke’s gospel, chapter 2, as it reads in The Message Bible:

“Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it.

Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbours. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.”

Jesus’ family lived in the north, away from the political and religious center that was Jerusalem. Being devout Jews, they would join other pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem for the annual Jewish holy days. We are not sure if Jesus had made the trip every year with his parents, but when he was 12 he did. At age 13, a Jewish boy would become a “son of the law” (bar mitzvah – one to whom the commandments apply) and it was custom for Jewish families to take their sons to the feast before their 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. So Jesus went with his family to Jerusalem for Passover. When the feast was over, and the caravan of travellers which included Joseph and Mary had travelled a day out of Jerusalem, they discovered that Jesus was not with them. So they returned to Jerusalem to see if they could find their young son. So the text tells us that...

“The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with

the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about."

Joseph and Mary apparently borrowed from the list of parental clichés – how could you do this to us? But there he was, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. There would have been rabbis and teachers in the Nazareth synagogue – but Jerusalem was where the best rabbis and teachers came together. Here was the place to absorb Israel's story, Israel's hope, Israel's scripture tradition. This was where Jesus intuitively knew he had to be. And so, when his parents asked him how he could put them through this, we hear the first preserved words of the messiah – "Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?" And we realize how clear he was about his own identity, even at that young age. But he makes this surprising choice:

"So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people."

Jesus submitted himself (that is the actual word in the Gk text) to some long years of silence and ordinariness. For the next 18 years we hear nothing from the Son of God until his baptism by John. What can this mean to us?

Whatever these years of silence meant, it was his mother, Mary, who revealed the way. Mary was a contemplative –she treasured all of these things that were appearing to her senses, storing them up in her heart. Mothers do this – mothers remember our lives. Mary remembered and saved all the pieces of the story, and then thought about what everything meant. It is very likely that our record of the birth narratives in Luke's gospel came through Mary's memory. So what does it mean to be a contemplative?

The word is derived from “temple” (the place of divinity) – it means to observe things in a special place, especially in the presence of God. To be contemplative means to look at life in the presence of God, or through the eyes of God. It means to pay attention with a God-focused awareness.

Annie Dillard shows me the way of the contemplative. Her famous classic, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, is one of my favourite books, an amazing exploration of the wonder of what is all around us, the deep mystery of creation.

She literally explores the wonder of the world underneath her feet – a small muddy creek in a Virginia field. But to hear her tell it so attentively, so lovingly, you would think it was like no other place on earth. It really is like every place on earth. Dillard just takes time to explore the neighbourhood and write what she sees.

A bird takes a plunge from a rooftop and hurtles through the air and just before he would meet the hard ground, unfurls his wings and floats to a gracious landing. Dillard just happens to come around the corner and sees this – it is marvellous is it not? She comments: “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.” This is the way of the contemplative and what Annie does at Tinker Creek; treasuring the mysteries and glories of life in one’s heart.

Jesus was immersed in this way of being in the long years before he became known to Israel. He learned to see the world in the presence of God. He didn’t rush to do, without first taking some time to consider what the doing might mean.

Mother Theresa was one of the most famous Christians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, known as an activist for the poor, although she didn’t like that term. Her order, called the Missionaries of Charity, worked among the poorest of the poor, most famously in Calcutta India. But she wanted those who looked upon their work to have the right perspective: “Do not think of us as social workers. We are contemplatives in the midst of life. We pray the work.”

Over these past few weeks, in my regular pastoral engagements with people, I have had lunch or a coffee with probably a half-dozen business men in this community. And I am

not sure why this is, but I have found a theme emerging in our conversations, that for these men at least, business is not all about the financial bottom line. It is instead about the meaning in the work, even how prayerful contemplation can be brought into the world that is seemingly shut off from God (in the big buildings downtown!). I have found some of you very receptive to this way of thinking and I muse at what is going on inside the heart of so many. I am here to announce the results of my investigation: there are contemplatives among you! People like you who are praying their work, noticing life through God's eyes.

We do not see the hidden life of anyone – just the results. But the hidden life is all-important. The silent years of Jesus are testimony to the power of, and need of, this hidden life.

One of the troubles we have from the standpoint of our developed Christian faith is the concept of the true humanity of Jesus. Of course, his contemporaries could not believe he was God in human flesh. We, on the other hand, struggle to understand how fully human he was. For as humans, we learn and we grow in our comprehension and understanding of God and his world. There is nothing false or distorting in the statement “Jesus learned”. And in his learning he became a man.

Though we have no real historical record of these years, we do have a poetic picture from Isaiah that describes the hidden life of the messiah:

“The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed [learned] tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught [learning].” (Isa. 50:4)

This is one of what are called the servant songs, anticipations of the messiah written hundreds of years before Jesus. Considering this piece we can surmise his daily life: up in the morning to listen to the voice that speaks, walking the fields like a watchful pilgrim at tinker creek, contemplating Scripture and life. Praying. Working with his hands during the day, contributing to his family and community. Justin Martyr, a Second Century church father, said that during his lifetime it was common to see people in Galilee using plows that were actually made by Jesus. Those plows would have been

around 100 years old by then, but were of such good quality that they still could be used to break up soil. Jesus did good work. But his work was simply the laboratory for the life he was learning.

My uncle Richard, my mother's brother, was an important friend and mentor to me. He has now passed. But when I was fresh out of university and trying to find my way, I spent a year with him in my old hometown of Kelowna. Richard was a man that few would have known. He lived the quietest of lives. He was a carpenter, and did household renovations. He was extremely generous and meticulous in his work, and so much so that he would often lose money on the jobs he took: he would either take too much time to get the job done right, or spend extra to make sure that his customer would be happy. But that was Richard. And I would say that the carpenter side was not his real identity; Richard was a God-lover. His life deeply impacted me for that alone. I would be with him, maybe working with him for a few days to pick up some needed cash, or driving in his old pickup, and he would inevitably pull out a little scrap of paper out of his flannel, sawdusty pocket and his eyes would light up with absolute joy. And he would say, "you know what I read this morning?" and then he would proceed to read me a text from the bible, telling me something about God, or Jesus, or the Spirit, or our human future. And he would carry these thoughts with him through the day, singing and sawing. I don't remember much of what Richard said to me, but I remember he was a great, great man who loved the mysteries and lived as a carpenter-contemplative. When I had already become weary in my young life, weary of the competition, weary of the anxiety of becoming, weary of trying to figure out where I was going and what I was becoming, Richard spoke words of life to me, words that came from another place.

And I awakened to what I loved. What we find out through the course of life is what we love. Sure, we are all incomplete, but maybe that is the point: maybe the better question is "what are you drawn towards"? A soul is measured by what it loves.

I taught a Jesus course for five years, and I remember telling my students, you will hardly remember most of what I teach you, but I hope that you always remember that I really love this stuff. And, apparently, I wanted them to know that I loved it.

Maybe by this point you might understand that I don't believe in the adage that every moment needs to be seized and made to produce. I don't believe it; I think unproductive time is good – reading and praying and sitting in silence is very good – the command to stop (Sabbath) is right. As Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury says, the world needs to embrace the idea of the “worth-while-ness of people when they do nothing”. Like a sleeping child, we are loved just because we are. Be still and know that I am God.

I remember the very first Suburban Monastery night. A group of people gathered to find out what this strange thing might be – the curious came out along with the God-hungry. But that night, probably for the first time ever in my life as a pastor, I called for a few minutes of silence. I was dumbfounded. I came to see that there is no sight more beautiful than people sitting in prayerful silence, not having to do anything, just being given room to sit and breathe and be aware. This is essential to our spiritual formation, just as much as receiving helpful information. Contrary to the messages “don't waste time” comes the story of Jesus who takes most of his life to prepare for his ministry. In this sense, perhaps, we need a church that slows us down, that calls us to listen, that calls us to know our God first, before we get busy for him.

The late Henry Nouwen is a name you may be familiar with. He was a writer and lecturer at the best universities before he spent his last years taking care of the neediest individuals at a L'Arche community. But Nouwen spoke to us of the condition of our human heart in ways few have ever done. He was a man of deep spirituality, profound intellectual grasp, but very, very human. He had a lot of inner struggles, a real loneliness that caused him a kind of restlessness. Parker Palmer, his friend and another author I much admire, talks about first meeting Nouwen at a retreat:

“I was conscious of being in the presence of a world-class contemplative and I was expecting to have an extraordinary experience sitting next to him during worship. But as we sat... I realized that the bench was jiggling. I opened my eyes... and saw Henri's leg moving furiously... as time went on, the fidgeting got worse. I opened my eyes again only to find him checking his watch to see what time it was.”

Nouwen was to find a greater peace as he continued forward, but the lesson should not be lost on us: even though we might be drawn towards the life that is Christ's – the life in Christ – we are restless, and impatient, and in a hurry. So here is the best advice I can give you in order to live well: take your time. Be still and know that he is God. Because when you do, you might find out that the purpose of your life is not all that you will do (although doing is important); rather, it will be the discovery of what you love. And knowing and learning what you love may well be your greatest contribution to the world.

One of my favorite poems is called "now I become myself", by May Sarton; I will share with you just a little bit (the beginning and end):

Now I become myself. It's taken  
Time, many years and places;  
I have been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people's faces,  
...  
O, in this single hour I live  
All of myself and do not move.  
I, the pursued, who madly ran,  
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

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Finally this: In the adult years of Jesus there came a time when he heard in his soul that it was time to make himself known to Israel. He would identify himself with the movement of people going out to the desert, who believed John's preaching, that the messiah was about to appear to Israel. And so Jesus was baptized by John, identifying himself with those whose hearts longed for the Kingdom of God.

This marked his entrance into the fray – but not for himself, and not to prove himself or become himself – he entered into the noisy incompleteness of the world for the sake of others, for his life had been fully realized. He had found what he loved, he knew the Father and loved him with his whole human life. And in that moment of baptism a voice came from heaven:

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22)

Before Jesus did one thing publicly, before he was known for anything good he ever did, or anything profound he ever said, before he moved on to the stage of life, he knew he was loved. In this life-long knowledge, the boy had become a man.

Prayer: [silence] May we find you in still moments, and may we know we are loved.  
Amen.

Benediction: Go in the love of the Father, in the peace of Christ, and by the supernatural quiet that the Spirit can show you as you rest in him. Have a wonderful day.