

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke Part 2: Back to the Future

Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Luke 4:14-32

I. “Terrible Twos”

Last Wednesday the news was all about the science fiction adventure comedy, *Back to the Future II*, and the fact that we have now arrived at its futuristic date – October 21, 2015. Surprisingly, the film managed to predict at least ten inventions that are commonplace now, but back in 1989 were mere fantasy. Inventions like flat screen TVs, video conferencing, and electronics that respond to spoken command. Too bad about those Cubs, who won the World Series in the film ...

If you could travel back to the past instead of the future – back to the days of Jesus’ early childhood (a time period we know almost nothing about), what kind of child do you suppose you would find there playing tag with his fellow school children?

If Jesus was fully human in every way except for sin, as the Book of Hebrews claims, then he would have been the very image of childlike perfection. But if Jesus is the one proclaimed by Luke, who was eventually baptized in the Jordan River “for repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” then a very different Jesus may come to mind.

This latter view of Jesus seems to be what occurred in the minds of Jesus’ hometown crowd when they heard his first public sermon in Nazareth. Preaching on a prophecy of Isaiah announcing “good news to the poor,” “release to the captives,” and “recovery of sight to the blind,” Luke notes that “all spoke well of [Jesus] and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” (Luke 4:22) Yet immediately, they begin to whisper, “Isn’t this *Joseph’s son*?”

Apparently, they remember Jesus as anything but a perfect, angelic child. This impression is confirmed when Jesus blows up at them for their skepticism. “Doubtless you will quote me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself” – apparently because they think that Jesus, who has developed a reputation for casting out demons and healing people, needs to cast out a few of his own demons, at least if he’s the Jesus they remember as a child! “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown,” Jesus mutters before verbally cutting his critics down to size.

The image of a Jesus as some sort of precocious, hellion child may not sit comfortably with those who prefer to view Jesus as angelic. Yet there may be better reasons than you suppose for embracing a savior who starts out as something of a “problem child.” And if Jesus truly started out as a “problem child,” this may offer us an unexpected and hopeful message in our day, when “problem children” seem to be on the rise in our

society. But first we need to turn our attention to psychologist James Hillman, who writes about a “problem child” from the early 20th century, and an acorn.

II. Back to the Future

Around the turn of the last century, a young boy named Elias Canetti stood impatiently behind the gate of his yard waiting for his older cousin, Laurica, to return from school. Laurica was learning to read and write – something Elias could hardly wait to do himself. He pestered his cousin constantly for her notebook, finding himself drawn by some insatiable desire to examine and touch the blue letters she practiced writing day after day, just as he was drawn to nearly all forms of writing. As the gate opened he cried out, “Let me see the writing!” Holding her journal high out of reach, Laurica zig-zagged through the yard, taunting him as Elias jumped at the notebook over and over, repeating his demand. Suddenly, little Elias disappeared around the corner of the house, only to reappear moments later carrying an ax. Coming straight at his startled cousin, Elias chanted murderously, “Now I’m going to kill Laurica! Now I’m going to kill Laurica!”

Can you imagine what would happen to little Elias Canetti today? Likely he would be diagnosed with some sort of horrible personality disorder and put on every medication under the sun. Perhaps, too, he would be placed in a behavioral health facility to live out his early years until society felt overwhelmingly assured the “demon child” had been cured. Yet according to psychologist James Hillman, author of *The Soul’s Code*, little Elias was afflicted neither by demons nor personality disorders, but by something beautiful, which some of us might even call “holy.”

When it comes to disruptive behavior, much of the psychoanalytic establishment turns to some combination of nurture and nature for explanation. But Hillman claims that a stronger, deeper force is at work in at least *some* children – especially “problem” children like Elias. While this force is harder to pinpoint or describe, the ancient term for it is “destiny” or “calling.”

According to Hillman, some children have a highly developed sense of “call,” even before they possess the intellect or maturity to understand the powerful urges and insatiable drives within them. A child’s soul is a bit like an acorn, he argues. Just as an acorn contains within it the pattern of the fully developed oak tree it will become, so the human soul bears with it something of the energies that will bring us most fully alive in this world if we develop them properly. Of course, a young child with no experience in the world has precious little chance of understanding these forces or putting them to constructive use. Thus, argues Hillman, if you observe *the manner* in which a “problem child” child acts out, it will often betray signs of the pattern that is trying to unfold in the child’s life, albeit in an immature and undeveloped way. It is no coincidence, he says, that little, word-obsessed, ax-wielding Elias grew up to become a writer. And not just any writer, but one who would win a Nobel Prize in literature!

As I have observed before, Melanie and I put Hillman’s “acorn theory” of development to good use with our younger daughter, Maren, and it was a game-changer – turning a hellion in to a “virtual” angel once we learned to stop insisting that she stop building multiple forts per day that would trash her room, and to stop insisting that she leave alone the little bugs and “creepy-crawlies” that she used to bring inside the house to live

in her forts. Using Hillman as our guide, we simply routed all that architectural and biological energy toward less disruptive ends, allowing her to build as many forts as she wanted, so long as she cleaned up her room at the end of the day, and allowing her to play with “creepy-crawlies” all she wanted, so long as they made it no further toward our house than the patio. It would come as no surprise to Hillman that Maren’s vocational direction is in architecture and environmental design, with a special interest in biomimicry (the design and production of materials, systems, and structures that are modeled on biological entities and processes).

I doubt Jesus ever picked up an ax with murderous intent, nor do I see him building endless forts for little bugs, but I do think it’s safe to say that when Jesus’ hometown crowd wondered how *Joseph’s son* could ever be standing before them speaking so eloquently, and maturely, about Isaiah, there’s some history behind their skepticism. The future they would have predicted for rambunctious little Jesus definitely would not have looked anything like the Jesus who stood before them as a mature, eloquent young man.

III. “Where we’re going, we don’t need roads.”

Our embrace of Jesus the savior who was also a hard-to-handle child may have unexpected and hopeful ramifications in our day. Technological advances may very well threaten the future of human civilization through warfare, terrorism, and other forms of high-tech violence. Likewise, unchecked consumption of the earth’s precious resources and release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere threatens to produce irreparable harm to nearly all forms of life in this coming century. Indeed, humanity may well look back not too many generations from now and conclude that the fundamentalists were right (be they Christian or Islamic), that the “end times” were truly upon us. Only, in light of the fact that all this damage will have been self-inflicted, the citizens of a ruined world would also conclude that the fundamentalists misdiagnosed the source of the problem: it’s not *God* but *us*.

We’re the ones who are threatening the world’s future, not God. *God* is actively working to save the world.

Thankfully, if God is *for* the world, not *against* it, then mass destruction isn’t the only scenario that might be envisioned. In fact, we may expect that God is raising up enormous energy right now to help us veer from the road we’ve been following to find and follow a new and better way. And because God works through no hands but our own, we may expect that right now God is calling millions into service on behalf of reconciliation with our neighbor and with the earth.

If this is true, then we can also expect something quite unexpected with respect to our children. We can expect a continuous rise in the rate of juvenile delinquency. If God is calling our youth to act powerfully to save the earth, then we can expect that many children are being moved by powerful energies they neither understand nor have the maturity to do something productive with ... yet.

Perhaps instead of rushing to stop all instances of disruptive behavior, we should at least do what we teach every school child to do at an intersection before crossing: Stop,

look, and listen. I'm not suggesting we bless all forms of childhood belligerence – and I'm certainly not suggesting children be allowed to play with axes! But perhaps if we pay attention to the ways in which our children act out and direct that energy where it is trying to go, we will find that even the most difficult children may be in the process of becoming God's instruments for saving the world.