A baffling question has stumped theologians and teased curious Christians: What was Jesus doing between his birth and the moment he was baptized as an adult? The first time the Gospel of Mark mentions Jesus, he is an adult approaching John the Baptist at the Jordan River. Mark fails to provide even a tidbit of information about the first 30 years of Jesus’ life. The Gospel of Matthew provides us with stories of the birth of Jesus, Joseph taking Mary and the babe to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod and then to Nazareth, presumably when Jesus is a toddler. Matthew leaps from there to the adult Jesus being baptized. The Gospel of John also omits any details about the childhood of Jesus. It is only in the Gospel of Luke that we hear one brief story about Jesus as a child. Luke says that when Jesus was twelve he astounded the sages in the Jerusalem temple with his wisdom.

That’s it. We know nothing of his teenage years or his twenties. However, it is tempting to speculate. Was Jesus a rebellious teenager who defied his parents and smoked a pack a day?

No one knows. But we do know that during his ministry he was considered a rebel for agitating authority figures. When he was in his twenties, did he stay out late at night carousing with the wrong crowd? We have no information. But we know that during his ministry he was chastised for hanging out with prostitutes and sinners.

We might find it intriguing to theorize what Jesus was up to during those missing years, but in the end it is all conjecture. However, I am willing to stick my neck out on one likelihood. Surely a significant portion of this time in his life must have been spent learning. He displayed an extraordinary grasp of the law, the psalms and the teachings of the prophets. He quoted from various parts of the Jewish Scriptures and demonstrated a comprehensive knowledge of the prophet Isaiah.

Perhaps in his late twenties, Jesus was absorbed in intensive study and prayer. Perhaps he had developed a dynamic devotional life in which he meditated on Scripture and prayed to discern God’s guidance.

If Jesus had been scanning the horizon for a sign from God, it came in the form of a brash, wilderness prophet who was dousing people in the Jordan River in an area called Bethany beyond the Jordan. John the Baptist was a fiery orator who barked at people to wash the muck off their lives and to get right with God. His prized word was “Repentance” with which he challenged people to make a radical change in the direction of their lives. We might expect such a forceful figure to grate on people’s consciences so badly that he sent them fleeing in the opposite direction. Yet, the gospels tell us that he attracted people by the droves.
John the Baptist was not the first to baptize people. Water rituals had been a part of Judaism for a long time. The Essenes, the Jewish sect responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls, had an elaborate water ritual. The Essenes separated themselves from society because it was too corrupt. In their desert location away from civilization, they had a large baptismal pool. You would walk down a flight of steps into the pool, where symbolically, you were cleansed of your sin. Then you would walk back up steps on the opposite side to demonstrate that you were embarking on a new direction. There is some evidence that suggests that John may have spent time with the Essenes. If he did, it may have impressed upon him the importance of baptism.

Jesus believed John was the sign he had been awaiting. Jesus felt the tug of God pulling him in a new direction. He felt drawn to the Jordan River where John was baptizing and he asked John for the same treatment he was giving others.

The Gospel of Matthew reports that John balked at baptizing Jesus. He recognized the irony of the situation and tried to reverse their roles. “You should baptize me,” John said. But Jesus insisted, saying that it was to “fulfill all righteousness.”

What does it mean to fulfill all righteousness? It does not mean to become self-righteous; to act smug and pious. That is the opposite of who Jesus was.

To be righteous is simply to do what is right. It is to do what God intends for us to do, to follow God’s will. By being baptized, Jesus was demonstrating that he was obedient to God and he would go wherever God sent him. John immersed Jesus in the river and when Jesus arose from the water the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven announced, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The baptism of Jesus was not focused on cleansing him from sin. It was a moment that declared his identity. Jesus is God’s son, the beloved. At the most fundamental level, this is who he is.

Think for a moment about your personal identity. It takes a number of words to describe each of us. What words describe you? Husband, wife or partner? Mother, father, sister, uncle? Lawyer, engineer, teacher? Musician, golfer, caregiver? Outgoing, introverted, gregarious, serious?

None of us has a single identity. A family member may describe you in one way, while a friend may see you very differently. Both can be right.

However, people of faith possess a core identity. Everything else that can be said about us exudes from this center. Our core identity is that we are a beloved child of God.

Ernest Hemingway told the story of a father in Spain who decided to reconcile with his son who had run off to Madrid and had not been heard from in years. The father took out an ad in the Madrid newspaper that read: “Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.” Paco is a common name in Spain and when the father arrived at the square in front of the hotel at noon, there were 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.¹

We do not have to wait for God. Our baptism declares that God forgives our mistakes, reconciles our relationship and establishes our core identity as a child of God. God does not love the world in general. God’s love is profoundly personal. God loves you as the unique person you are – in all your kindness as well as your quirks, in all your beauty as well as your baffling behavior and in all your noble sacrifices as well as your pitiful shortcomings. Yet, God’s love is not all about you because God also loves your neighbor for the unique person she is.
While our consumer-driven economy bombards us with messages that encourage self-centeredness, God encourages us to look to the well-being of others, because a constant focus on ourselves makes us toxic to be around. A balance of caring for ourselves and reaching out with compassion to others helps us to become more lovable – especially to ourselves.

New York cab drivers are often rushed and brusque, but recently I read about a New York cabbie who failed to fit the mold. He pulled up to the address he had been given and honked. After waiting a couple of minutes he honked again. Since this was going to be the last ride of his shift he considered driving away and going home. Instead, he put his car in park, walked up to the door and knocked. From inside, he heard a frail, elderly woman’s voice. ‘Just a minute,’ she said.

After a long pause, the door opened. It was a small woman in her 90s wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat like someone out of a 1950’s movie. By her side was a small suitcase. The driver glanced into her apartment and noticed that the furniture was covered with sheets and there were cardboard boxes on the floor.

The driver scooped up her suitcase and carried it to the cab; then he returned to assist the woman. She took his arm and they walked slowly toward the curb. She kept thanking him for his kindness.

He said, ‘It’s nothing. I try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother to be treated.’

Once he tucked her into the backseat of his cab, she gave him an address and then asked, “Could you drive through downtown?”

“It’s not the shortest way,” he answered.

“I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m not in a hurry. I’m on my way to a hospice.”

He peered into the rear-view mirror and saw her eyes glistening. She said, “I don’t have any family and the doctor says I don’t have very long.”

The driver discreetly reached over and shut off the meter, then asked, “What route would you like me to take?”

For the next two hours, he drove around the city. She showed him the building where she had worked as an elevator operator decades earlier. They drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. They pulled in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had danced as a young woman.

Sometimes she would ask him to slow down in front of a building and she would stare and say nothing. Then, when the sun was beginning to set, she said, “I’m tired. Let’s go now.”

They drove in silence to the address she had given him. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the cab. The driver opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The orderlies already had the woman in a wheelchair.

Reaching into her purse, she said, “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing,” he replied.

She said, “You have to make a living.”
He responded, “There are other passengers.” Then, he bent over and gave her a hug. She held onto him so tightly.

“Thank you,” she said, “You gave an old woman a moment of joy.”

He squeezed her hand, and then walked back to his taxi. Behind him, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life. He did not pick up any more passengers that day. He drove around pondering questions. What if she had gotten an angry driver, or someone impatient to end his shift? What if I had honked once, and then driven away?

What would happen if you treated each person you encounter as a precious child of God? It could change you. It could change the other person. It could change the world.

NOTES


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Prayers of the People ~ Rev. Dr. Randall T. Clayton

Blessing God, you drowned evil in the waters of the flood, and promised a covenant with a rainbow in the sky. In baptism you caused us to die to sin and raised us to new life in Christ. Trusting in your promises for earth and for all people, we bring you prayers for ourselves, our church, our community, our world.

We pray for your church with its kaleidoscopic views of baptism, that it may meet the needs of all types of people in the world. Where people are oppressed and hurting, let your church be a sign of hope. Where people are lonely and frightened, let your church create a community that sustains and supports. We lift up to you this particular church. Help us to continue to share the waters of your love in our community, and in places across the globe. Let the witness of this church continue to testify to your amazing and inclusive care and acceptance.

We pray for the world, that all people and all creation may know that they are your beloved. Let the news of your love drown out the sounds and sights of hatred that are a reality in some people’s lives. We pray for those who suffer, that they will know your love for them and that we your people may be bearers of comfort. Most especially this day, we pray for those whose heating oil tanks have run dry and for whom there are no funds to fill them up; and for those who face utility bills beyond affordability, and for those who have no warm place to call home. We pray for those nearby and far away who do not have clean water to drink, or food to eat. We pray for those who are in prisons and jails this day, for those who are in hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other places of care. We pray also for those nearing death, that they may be at peace in your love for them.

We pray for your creation and the earth which you gave us to till and to keep. As your earth nourishes and nurtures us, help us to nourish and nurture it so that it may continue to nourish and nurture generations to come.

In one baptism with Christ, and blessed by your Holy Spirit, we praise you and give you thanks, Holy One, for giving us spirit and breath. We pray this remembering the prayer Jesus taught saying…

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, 
but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.

Amen.

Note: Portions of this prayer adapted from Feasting on the Word Worship Companion, Westminster John Knox Press, Copyright 2013.