

Do you hear what I hear?

Having my birthday in Advent makes me wonder: What if Jesus had grown old and dealt with changes like hearing loss?

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I was born two weeks before Jesus.

Since I had a December birthday, my mother worked hard to make sure it didn't get lost in our Christmas celebration. She didn't put up any decorations until December 13, the day after I was born. My father had some unexplained need for all of the decorations to come down on December 26, so Christmas didn't last long at our house.

In my twenties I began to learn about Advent and the liturgical calendar, which changed the way I celebrated the season and how I thought about my birthday in the middle of it. That my birthday falls in the middle of this season of anticipation doesn't make it feel lost to me. As I wait for Christ's birth in our time each year, I have a chance to reflect on what it means that I am still walking the planet.

One question that comes to mind as I stack up the years is I wonder what Jesus would have learned about being human had he had the chance to grow old. Can you imagine if he had been able to be around for three or four decades beyond his baptism? Beyond the questions about his ministry, my aging body makes me wonder how he would have navigated the aches and changes that come with age.

I am also wondering how I am going to navigate them. Specifically, my hearing is continuing to deteriorate and I am not sure what that is going to mean. As an extrovert, I draw energy from connecting with people. More and more, if there are more than two or three folks, I struggle to hear what anyone is saying. It is not just an inconvenience. It is changing who I am and how I see myself in the world. I have spent a lifetime working with young people. I am not a mentor for our confirmation class this year because I can't hear to understand a roomful of teenagers. How am I supposed to be Milton if I'm not hanging out with kids?

My audiologists and the woman from the hearing aid company are working hard to figure out what else they can do. We have reset settings, changed earpieces, and tried everything they can think of. I still spend most conversations saying, "Say that again," over and over. I feel like I am listening to the world through blown speakers.

My point here is not to elicit sympathy. I go back to my original question: what would Jesus have learned about being human had he been able to age? What if he had been around long enough for the disciples to have to tap him on the shoulder and say, "That woman in the crowd is calling your name and asking to be healed."

Maybe I wonder these things because I am learning more about what it means to be human as I am challenged to redefine myself as some of the things I thought defined me are no longer things I can do. I am still Milton and I am learning how to be Milton in my sixties. I am Milton learning how to be me, even if I can no longer hear well. Milton, who loves to sing and listen to music. Milton, who loves to be in a crowd. Milton, who has still spent more summers at Youth Camp than not.

I am not the first to grow old, nor am I the first to lose my hearing. In fact, one of the books I picked up today—yes, reading is a coping mechanism—is [*Hearing Beethoven: A Story of Musical Loss and Discovery*](#). Beethoven wrote symphonies after he went deaf. I figure he has something to teach me. Ginger even wondered if this meant I was going to write a symphony.

When I was in college, I had a hard time imagining myself old. As I have aged, I have enjoyed it. I like the ways in which life has called me to learn how to be less of an expert and more of a fellow traveler. I like letting go of the pressure to change the world, even as I like learning that I am changing the world in small motions. I love pouring my life into my marriage.

Now I have a hard time imagining how to live without being able to hear well. I am planning to be around awhile. My ears are not going to last as long as the rest of me. Again—I am not the first one to walk this road. I read a quote from Hellen Keller this week. She was responding to questions about whether the loss of sight or hearing was more profound. “Blindness cuts us off from things, but deafness cuts us off from people,” she said. I’m not deaf, but my hearing is getting worse quickly. I do feel cut off, often. And I feel incredibly supported and loved.

Life is a chronic condition. That’s another one of those things I am not the first to learn. As my friend [*David Finnegan-Hosey*](#) likes to say, grace is a preexisting condition. Regardless of what happens to my ears, or any of the rest of me, I will be able to feel the rhythm of God pulsating in my bones and hear the melody of grace one way or another. And I’ll keep wondering what Jesus might have been like if he had had the chance to be sixty-two, or seventy.

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