

Sunday, December 9, 2012: Luke 3:1-6

by [Emory Gillespie](#) in the [November 28, 2012](#) issue

In the Broadway show *Book of Mormon*, Elder Cunningham faces a problem. In an effort to gird his loins, he rocks out the hit “Man Up”:

Man up. He had to man up.

So he crawled up on that cross, and he stuck it out.

And he manned up. Christ, he manned up.

And taught us all what real manning up is about!

In a classic Broadway musical, this would’ve been prime time for a song like *The Sound of Music’s* “Climb Every Mountain.” “Man Up” sounds more like a commercial for Dodge trucks. I have laughed so hard at this song that my family is starting to wonder what’s wrong with me.

Here’s what’s wrong with me: apparently, deep in my soul, in the remote recesses of my idol collection, I’ve been harboring an image of Jesus Christ that looked less like the man from Galilee and more like Christopher Robin from the Hundred Acre Wood.

So when faced with a WWJD situation, when I thought I was summoning up a full-spectrum Jesus—a tough, temple-clearing Jesus, a radical, marginalized people-advocating, taking-on-the-Roman Empire Jesus—I was actually evoking a nice little fellow with a pageboy haircut skipping along and rescuing lovable stray creatures such as Pooh, Piglet and Tigger. “Man Up” is funny because it puts its finger so succinctly on the weakness in my Christology: a full-grown woman is worshipping a boy. In the real world and in this week’s text, a man named John, son of Zechariah, suggests that the Jesus who is coming is not at all like Christopher Robin; in fact, he will bring wrath and even an ax for trees that don’t bear fruit (John 3:7, 9).

I first suspected that I might need a full-spectrum Christ when I got to know Sarah, a 20-year-old Amish runaway who was looking for houses to clean. As she mopped our kitchen floor, she explained that she was planning to adopt a farmhouse full of children and become a lawyer to help marginalized people. She made overtures about our family adopting her. My husband and I went into executive session with Sarah, talking seriously about this arrangement. She explained that if she were to

move in with us, she'd be bringing her sewing machine, washing machine, camping gear, computer parts, a dining room table for 12, an upright piano and a dalmation named Buster. We let the idea die a quiet death. We kept in touch, and Sarah continued to live a happy, seminomadic life.

When Sarah bought a fixer-upper, her problems started multiplying. I rounded up some churchpeople to help out, but she didn't like their ideas. When she started to worry about her financial future, I put her in touch with employers who offered jobs with benefits; she rejected them. Finally I sketched some boundaries: I'd be OK with her decisions and jump in only if she asked for help. In the world of Pooh all of this would be fine, because the houses are made of sticks, the animals are made of felt, and when Christopher Robin has an idea, everyone goes along with it. Fixing a problem usually takes about a chapter.

Jump ahead 20 years to Advent 2012. Sarah is almost 40 years old. She's cleaning houses and dating Nick, a department store manager who's stable and respectable. But recently Sarah stopped by our house to explain that she was leaving Nick because, although he wanted to buy a new house for the two of them, he wasn't sure about all of her animals—the ten cats and dogs temporarily farmed out to various friends because her house had been condemned. Plus, she said, she couldn't stay with Nick because when she became a lawyer and went on television defending homeless people, Nick would be embarrassed. How are classes going? I asked. She was taking a break. Then she started to pontificate in circular diatribes, ending with a scathing critique of American society.

WWJD? He would listen until two in the morning, right? I have. He would look at her, then at the calendar, and say, "Jeez, you poor thing. You're going to be homeless on Christmas Day. OK, you and your critters can all move in." Right?

No, wait. Is this the Jesus that John the Baptist points to? Or am I thinking of Christopher Robin?

John the Baptist brings some fresh insights to our examination of ourselves and our behavior toward others. How about repentance? How about recognizing my limits as a human being? You say I'm stuck in a wilderness? You say it's time to get out of the wilderness and prepare the way of the Lord? You mean I'm not the savior of the world? That I need to acknowledge that this situation is a crooked mess and concede that it's been a rough ride? That I need to admit that I won't be able to climb over

this overwhelming mountain of issues on my strength alone?

Hey, John the Baptist, I'm inviting Sarah over for a cup of tea at Piglet's house, and I'd like for you to come.