

# Jesus with a cowlick: Christ's hidden childhood

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

When Andy turned six, an extraordinary thing happened. At the crown of his head there suddenly appeared that mystic sign by which all spirited six-year-old boys are instantly recognized: the cowlick. It looks exactly like Calvin's cowlick in *Calvin and Hobbes*.

Six is a wonderful age. The statute of limitations on being a baby hasn't entirely run out (as Andy says: "You're a person and I'm your pet baby puppy"), but one is also a highly competent being, capable of such complex operations as tracking the damage points of Pokémon characters and negotiating the exchange of Mage knights. Two nights ago, Andy woke me up at 3:30 a.m. to announce his latest discovery: "Mom!" he shouted, making me jump up, heart pounding, on highest alert, "Mom! I figured out how to make a trampoline! You glue slinkies to the bottom of a rock and then you jump on it." "That's great," I said, "but it's nighttime. Go back to sleep."

Instantly Andy was asleep, and while I waited for my heart to stop pounding so that I too could go back to sleep, my mind wandered from images of Andy bouncing down the street on his slinky-propelled rock to images of another boy who was six once. Jesus didn't have Pokémon cards, Mage knights or slinkies, but did Jesus have a cowlick? Did he startle his mother awake to announce tidings from the imaginary kingdom of play? Was he a pest and an angel combined?

Jesus had a real childhood—and this is about all we can say, given the reticence of the Gospels. Apocryphal works like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and the Protevangelium of James attempted to fill in the gaps by projecting fantasies of childhood omnipotence; they portray Jesus as an *enfant terrible* who shows his divinity by smiting playmates who displease him. Wisely, the canonical tradition has rejected such speculation, discerning in the hidden years of Jesus' childhood a deeper message about the hiddenness of God in Christ. As "the hidden God and

savior of Israel" (Isa. 45:15), Jesus remained veiled within the loving cocoon of the holy family, just as during prenatal life he was concealed in the small sanctuary of his mother's womb. He was aware of his divine sonship, the tradition tells us, but experienced it as a mystery and, like Mary, kept it hidden in his heart. He lived in communion with Mary and Joseph as the archetypal family whose intimacy and privacy form the foundation of all good human society.

We can learn some things about Jesus' childhood from the historical and archaeological record of life in a village in first-century Galilee. Beyond that, we can contemplate his childhood by analogy with children we know. Some argue that the analogy fails because childhood as we know it didn't exist in Jesus' time; our premodern ancestors had not developed the sentimental cult of the child, and high infant mortality made it necessary for them to keep their emotional distance. But no one who has ever nursed a baby or played with a small child could be entirely persuaded by this historicism, for there are aspects of childhood and of child-rearing that are simply hard-wired.

For a refreshing alternative, we may turn to spiritual readings of Jesus' childhood like the one found in the treatise "When Jesus Was Twelve Years Old," by Aelred of Rievaulx, the exuberant 12th-century English Cistercian. Here the scant biblical account of Christ's youth provides the Christian seeker with a map of the spiritual life from conversion (birth in Bethlehem) and renunciation (exile in Egypt) to training in virtue (childhood in Nazareth) and tasting the joys of heavenly contemplation (ascent to Jerusalem). It is significant for Aelred that the 12-year-old Jesus does not tarry too long in the temple, but leaves on the third day to return to the loving yoke of his parents. Jesus became a child, Aelred tells us, so that we grown-ups, stuck in our selfish ways, might be reborn. "The great one has been made small, the rich one poor, so that you who are great in your own eyes might humble yourself and become a little child, you who are rich in cupidity might cast yourself down and become poor. . . . Thus will you be born in Christ and Christ be born in you."

Aelred is conveying the new spirit of devotion to Christ's humanity that was a hallmark of 12th-century Cistercians as well as the perennial ideal of spiritual childhood. I cannot read him without thinking of Thérèse of Lisieux and her "little way." But when I think of the child Jesus with a cowlick, I also think of the redheaded baby who on Ash Wednesday kept flinging herself with goofy abandon toward each person heading to the altar to be smudged with ash, of Andy changing the rules of chess so his opponent will win, of our friend Chloe who has tuberous sclerosis, and of

a little girl who is missing. For grown-ups, the way of spiritual childhood carries with it a heavy responsibility, not so much to recover our lost innocence as to protect the innocents, to keep them safe from predators, pornography and violence. Their flourishing matters infinitely more than our quest for freedom and self-fulfillment, for in them the image of the Christ child truly dwells.