

Jesus Began Small



When we get lost in the midst of our daily tasks, it can be good to remember how we started. We have mounds of papers to grade, an inbox flooded with emails, a classroom in need of better organization, new textbooks to evaluate, administrators to report to, and, let's not forget, kids to take care of! It's a fatiguing job that only lets up after the school year closes. Even in summer, many of us work odd jobs so we can pay the bills. I've spent plenty of summers working office temp jobs or department store gigs, or teaching summer school. Maybe some of you even have a second job that you keep all year round. One of my coworkers ran a vending machine business on the side. Another worked evenings and weekends at a bank. A third kept a part-time job at a department store year-round.

While working on this book, I realized that most of the ideas I was jotting down were things that I had known at one point or another, but had forgotten in the midst of a demanding teaching schedule. And I wanted to remember all those reasons I went into teaching in the first place.

Getting the Call

Some of us knew we were going to be teachers from a very young age. My mother would've told you how much I loved school when I was in first grade. I didn't realize it was "uncool" back then. My older brothers might tell you how I used to gather up my stuffed animals when I was little, arrange them in neat rows, wag my little kid finger at them, and tell them that they had better pay attention!

Despite these signs, you should never underestimate the ability of a Cattapan to overanalyze everything and spend forever making a decision. My brothers and I are famous for spending way too much time analyzing a situation. One of my sisters-in-law became so fed up with this family trait that she coined the term "Cattapanalysis Paralysis" since we sometimes get so caught up with our analyzing that we can't make a decision. My decision to become a teacher nearly suffered from CP.

In third grade, I started writing stories. By sixth grade, I had read *Anne of Green Gables* (at the suggestion of one of the loveliest reading teachers I've ever had—God bless Miss Sipiora!), and when I closed the last page of that book, I knew *this* is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life—write stories that touched people's hearts the way L. M. Montgomery's classic tale had touched mine.

A few weeks later, Mom took me to see a musical at our local Catholic high school. I stared, enthralled as these high school kids performed *Guys and Dolls*. When the show ended and everyone stood up and cheered, I thought, *This is what I want to do for the rest of my life—sing and dance on stage until people stand up and applaud!*

By the time eighth grade rolled around, I was back to wanting to be a writer. Maybe it was all those Battle of the Books

competitions or my English teacher, Mrs. Boyle, who made me fall in love with grammar (yes, I said grammar). Either way, in my eighth-grade yearbook, I boldly declared I'd be the "author of teen novels." Well, I was right. I've written books for teens and tweens, but that's not my full-time gig.

During high school, I considered becoming a psychologist, but I thought, *Who wants to spend so much time in school?* Even now I want to plant my palm against my face when I think of it. *Duh, Amy. You became a teacher. You're spending the rest of your life in school.*

Senior year, I had an extremely intelligent and difficult A.P. World Literature teacher, Br. Robert Ruhl. He utterly terrified his students. Some people got physically ill before his class and had to run to the bathroom. He never made me *that* nervous, but I would try to avoid eye contact with him as much as possible. He had these steel blue eyes that I swear could shoot laser beams. He was very tall (or at least he seemed so to me at 5'2"), and his body was as lean and ramrod straight as a solid wood plank.

Despite scaring the daylight out of us, he was one of everyone's favorite teachers. The man was absolutely brilliant. He not only took our writing to the next level, but he made us see how some of the world's most talented authors took storytelling to the next level. One thing he did that appealed to me in particular was to discuss the psychology of the characters—*why* they did the things they did and *how* the author portrayed those feelings.

He'd point out a passage where a jealous character ran his finger back and forth across a piece of green furniture, and he'd bark out, "Why did the author make the furniture upholstery green?"

We would all shake in our metal desks and look down, praying he wouldn't call on us because God only knew why the author made the furniture covering green. Slow, awkward,

painful moments of silence would tick by as he walked back and forth across the front of the room like a tiger pacing in a cage.

Finally, he would scream out, “Jealousy! He’s *green* with envy.”

We’d all nod as if that was what we were all about to say if only he’d given us a chance.

I learned so much about writing and books from Br. Ruhl that you might think he was the reason I finally decided on an English education major and not a creative writing major at Marquette University. But nope, it wasn’t him.

In college, I had an English professor who spent more time discussing the required topics of our papers than how to write. I was arrogant enough to stare at him and think, *Well, I couldn’t be a worse English teacher than this guy!* And that was it. An English teacher was born!

I say this somewhat facetiously because I still hemmed and hawed. My mother did not like the idea at all. In her position as the religious education coordinator at our parish, she had learned firsthand how hard teaching was. Her office was an old classroom, and she often ate lunch in the faculty room where she heard directly from the teachers about the challenges they faced. My mom shared her views with me, hoping to dissuade me. It might have worked if it hadn’t been for that choir at our church.

One weekend during college, I was home from Marquette and attending Sunday Mass at my home parish. I remember praying during that Mass about becoming a teacher. Cattapanalysis Paralysis was setting in deep. Could I really make the commitment to a job I knew would be so hard and pay so little? Then during Communion, we sang “Here I Am, Lord.” I’d heard the song dozens of times before, but this time I was fighting back tears in the Communion line! All I could think was, *Lord, are you really calling me to be a teacher? Do you really want me to*

guide your people? At once, I pictured his “people” as my future students.

And I knew I was sunk. I’d gotten the call. There was no turning back.

I wish we knew what it was like when Jesus got the call to come and be *our* teacher. Wouldn’t that be a wild scene in the gospels? Just what might it have been like when God called his only Son to come to Earth?

God the Father: Son, come here for a minute. I’ve got a job for you.

Jesus: Yes, Dad.

God the Father: I need you to go down to Earth, become human, teach the people our ways—a bunch of them will ignore you, others will completely hate you—and then sacrifice yourself on a cross so that their sins may be forgiven and we can finally open the gates to heaven.

Jesus: Okay, Dad, sounds great!

All right, so we have no idea how this scene actually went. There’s no gospel story that explains it, so for inspiration in answering our call to teach, let’s look to Jesus’s mother.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” (Lk 1:26–31)

A lot of people like to focus on Mary's fiat—her yes—that comes a little later, but I like looking at this part of the story because we see Mary's initial concern. Notice that she is at first “much perplexed” and needs to ponder what type of greeting this is. Perhaps the first time you thought of becoming a teacher, you were also much perplexed and pondered what on earth made you think you could teach. That's okay!

When God first lets us see that he has something amazing in store for us, he often gives us just a little glimpse. Too much at once and we'd be as terrified as Mary trembling in front of a mighty angel.

We might have questions about how God is going to turn us into good teachers. Even Mary questioned the angel: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Lk 1:34). So, too, might we wonder about how to become the kind of teacher God wants us to be.

After the angel explains everything to Mary, she willingly accepts. I had a lot of doubts about becoming a teacher, but when I heard “Here I Am, Lord” at Mass, somehow I knew God was calling me to care for his young children, to hold them in my heart.

Humble Beginnings

If it's still fairly early in your teaching career, you might be questioning your own ability and readiness for this work. My first few years of teaching were filled with the “queasy qualms” (my nickname for the many nauseated mornings I experienced as a young teacher). When you start to feel like you don't have what it takes to teach, take a moment to remember how humble Jesus's own beginning was, and remember that even little babies born in a stable can grow up to be world-changing teachers.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. (Lk 2:1–6)

I love how Luke's second chapter starts with Caesar Augustus declaring that "all the world" must be enrolled. In some translations of the Bible, this is written as "the whole world."³ I mean, *the whole world? Really?* Well, I guess the "whole world" to Caesar Augustus was everything he had his grubby little hands on, but still I find it significant. The story of Jesus is about the whole world. He is a teacher for all the world, and yet he came into this world as a little baby who was laid in a manger, a germ-infested feeding trough for horses or cattle. If Jesus can have humble beginnings, so can we.

My first experience as a teacher came about because of my mother, which is ironic since she was against my becoming a teacher. My mother ran our parish's preschool Sunday school program, which was held during our 10:00 a.m. Mass. I was a teacher helper starting in grade 6 and then a teacher in high school.

Looking back on this experience, I see how much it prepared me to teach. I took attendance, planned lessons based on the provided curriculum, and worked through the occasional disciplinary problem with a squirrely four-year-old who was uninterested in the fact that God gave us the sense of touch because he loves us.

Many of us from that Sunday school program went on to become teachers. My friend Katie became a third-grade teacher. Two of my grade-school classmates also volunteered in the program and became teachers. A girl two years younger than me also volunteered and became a teacher. In fact, Rebecca and I caught up years later when my mother passed. She came to the wake to tell my father and me how much my mother had influenced her decision to become a teacher. A year after that, I met with Rebecca and her students when I did an author visit at her Catholic school. My mom had no idea while she was running that preschool program, but her ability to convince teenage girls to spend their Sunday mornings volunteering as a Sunday school teacher led to a whole army of teachers. These were our humble beginnings. We worked for no pay, but we received valuable experience. And if we're good educators, our growing and learning hasn't stopped since those humble beginnings.

Starting Your Mission

Teaching is a mission, a special call to do important work. No matter how humble our beginnings, all teachers eventually embark on this mission. This was true for Jesus, too. However, he did get kind of a special shout-out when he began his work.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."
(Mk 1:9-11)

Wouldn't it be awesome if we could start our teaching careers the way Jesus started his? Imagine if your first day of teaching had been like that. You walked into the classroom with all the students watching you. The principal excitedly announced over the P.A. that you were her esteemed teacher, and she was very pleased with you! All the students sat in awe. Without even taking roll, you were already loved and respected. While this has never happened to any teacher anywhere, the truth is that God is pleased with you already. He's delighted you've answered the call to teach.

Although I was pretty sure God was happy with my decision to become a teacher, I was also worried that my mother was never going to agree with my decision. As late as my junior year of college, she was still trying to deter me. She said things to me like, "It's not too late to change majors. You could become an engineer like your dad and your brother. Female engineers make a lot of money—and there would probably be less stress."

I would reply, "I don't want to be an engineer, Mom. I've spent enough summers doing temp work in offices to know I don't want to sit at a desk in a windowless office all day."

But still she would push. "But you're so good at math and science. You'd make a great engineer."

My dad, on the other hand, didn't try to get me to follow in his footsteps. He had a friend who had taught in public schools for many years. From my dad's perspective, it was a pretty dependable job (if you got tenure at a public school) that came with a fairly dependable pension.

Still, my mother's lack of support stung a bit. Nobody wants to feel like she has disappointed her mother with her career choice.

Despite my mother's arguments, I pushed on, did my student teaching, and landed my first teaching job as a long-term sub at a public high school outside of Milwaukee. When that

position ended, I returned to my parents' house and took a job teaching seventh- and eighth-grade English at a Catholic school in Illinois. One day I came home with a set of projects to grade. I plopped down in the living room, where my mom was going through some old magazines.

I laughed as I picked up one of my students' projects. "Mom, look at this." I held out a sheet of paper to her. "I asked the students to draw two versions of an idiom: one that shows what the idiom actually means and one that shows what it would be like if we took the idiom literally." I handed her the drawing. "This one's for the idiom 'It's raining cats and dogs.'"

Mom examined the drawing. On one side, the student had drawn a scene of pouring rain. On the other side, cats and dogs were literally falling from the sky.

I rifled through my papers. One after another I handed her some of the better examples. "Aren't these great?" I asked.

She looked at the papers before her and then smiled at me. "I think your students are really lucky to have you as a teacher." Mom didn't say things like this often. She wasn't one to give praise just for the sake of it. She was never about feeding anyone's ego.

I took the papers back quietly, not knowing what to say next. She might as well have opened the heavens and said, "You are my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased."

I don't know if you've ever had a similar moment where a family member has told you how proud they are of your decision to become a teacher. But when you are feeling burned out, remember this: You are a beloved son or daughter of God, and whether you teach for one year or forty years, he is well pleased with you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think about a time you felt that you were called to be a teacher. Was it scary, exciting, a mixture of the two? Have your feelings about teaching changed since then?
2. What were your “humble beginnings,” and how did God use them to prepare you for teaching?
3. What teachers from your youth inspired you to teach? Was it the really good ones or the not-so-hot ones who got you thinking about what kind of teacher you could be?