

Sermon 12.24.16
Pastor Josh Ferris
Christmas Eve, Year A

I love a good story. Most of us do, I think. And what I love most about the Christmas story is that while it's holy and amazing and awe-inspiring, in many ways it's also kind of ordinary and mundane and even boring. In fact, that's kind of the point.

I know it sounds strange to say that the Christmas story is ordinary and boring. Maybe it even feels kind of sacrilegious coming from a pastor. But before you call my bishop, just hear me out. Over the years we have sensationalized and Hallmark-ed and Disney-fied this story until it feels quite fantastical and mythical and ethereal. And on one hand that's good, because Jesus' birth is a unique and universe-changing thing, and it deserves reverence and a sense of awe and wonder.

But take a look. This is a story full of ordinary people doing ordinary things.

After all, what's more mundane and normal than traveling during the holidays? Most of us know what it's like, this time of year, to go back to the place we grew up. Some of us travel to see family with a sense of joy, excited to spend time together. Others go with trepidation and perhaps even nervousness, hoping that maybe *this year* things will be a little smoother and *please oh please don't let anyone bring up politics around the table!* The truth is, a story that begins with a couple traveling for the holidays isn't unique or even particularly noteworthy.

Neither is the *reason* they had to go. This whole journey is happening because the government passed a new law that forced everyone to be registered for a census. So the backdrop for this story is a government passing laws that inconvenience regular, every day,

ordinary people. The census has made things hectic and people are frustrated. They're also a little frightened about *why* they have to register in the first place, and they're worried about *where* this is all headed, and *what* their rulers are planning on doing. Does this sound familiar? A sense of unrest. Bureaucracy. Government. Laws. A *census*. I mean, this isn't exactly earth-shattering, page-turning stuff! Mary and Joseph are traveling to Bethlehem because it's just another thing they have to get done in the midst of the normal, everyday demands of life.

And even Mary and Joseph are sort of boring and ordinary. Just regular people, two poor peasants who are engaged to be married. There's nothing special about that, or about them. When they finally get to where they're going, it turns out there's a problem with their hotel reservation, which – let's be honest – is probably the most common human experience of all. And when things don't go as planned, they just adjust, like we all do, every day.

Do you see what I mean? Even the other human characters in this story, the shepherds, they're just normal everyday folks doing their jobs and working the night shift. This is a story full of ordinary, regular people doing mundane and everyday things.

And that's part of what makes the Christmas story so powerful. That in the midst of regular, ordinary people doing regular, everyday things, the God of the universe is born and comes into our world.

That's crazy to think about! If I was God, I would have scripted it differently. Born to someone as ordinary as poor peasants? No thank you. Announced by people as plain as those stinky, dirty shepherds who were living outside? Pass. Placed in something as mundane as a manger because there was no room in the inn? I don't think so.

God could have come into this world in any way or form that he wanted. Christ could have been born to royal parents in a castle, announced with parades and decrees, surrounded by riches and power. And yet, this is how God intentionally chose to come into our world. Amidst the everyday, common lives of ordinary, regular people.

And for that we say *thank God!* Because so many of us have come to believe, for whatever reason (maybe we were intentionally taught to believe it, or maybe we just picked it up along the way), we've come to believe that God is only found in the extraordinary things, people, and places of this world. This world has a way of making each of us feel inadequate or inferior or just not good enough. It's all around us, from the celebrities we follow to the magazines we read to the advertising we see. This world tells us that we're not enough, that we need to be just a little different, a little more successful, a little skinnier, a little smarter, a little prettier, a little better or faster or stronger or richer. Maybe we wouldn't *call* ourselves *ordinary*, but sometimes we sure feel that way.

I tell you tonight that this is Good News. Christmas shows us that God loves regular, ordinary people, especially those who sometimes feel insignificant or inadequate.

It's easy for us to believe what the world tells us, and to think that God is the same way. That God only works through people who are truly extraordinary and pious and holy. That God won't speak to us because we're just too *ordinary*, or we don't go to church enough or read the Bible enough or we're too sinful or for a thousand other reasons. That God requires us to be different or more.

But God does not think the way this world thinks or operate the way this world operates! Mary and Joseph weren't extraordinary, they were people, just like you and me, and

God used them to bring the Savior into this world and to raise him. And the shepherds? They certainly weren't extraordinary – in fact, they were the exact opposite! In the first century world, shepherds were at the *bottom* of the social ladder. They were seen as unskilled migrant workers with little value and worth little to no attention. They smelled bad. They lived outside. *With animals*. They were considered to be unimportant, and after living at the edges of society and out under the stars, they weren't particularly well-spoken or polished.

And yet God chose for the angels to appear in front of these shepherds. They were the first people to hear the Good News of Jesus' birth. And they were the first people sent out into the world to share that Good News with others.

Faith is for ordinary, regular, everyday people. People like you and like me. Jesus came for *you*. To love *you*, and to show you that you are loved by God just the way you are. He came to forgive *you*. He came to save *you*. To invite you into a life of faith that guides and sustains and challenges you each day. And if God was able to use ordinary people like Mary and Joseph, like shepherds sleeping on a hillside, then I wonder how God might be able to use you.

For when we start to realize that Jesus came to regular, ordinary people and in the midst of everyday life, it changes the way we see the world. We begin to see that the ordinary, regular people around us are loved by God, and that we should love them too. That those people who are overlooked by our society, like Mary and Joseph were as common peasants, that people who are considered worthless or unimportant or a nuisance in our society, like the shepherds were, those are people God loves, and they're the people Jesus is with.

Where might we see God at work in this world if we are able to grasp that Jesus is found in the everyday, mundane parts of life? How might it change the way we talk about our

neighbors, or the way we look at our coworkers, or the way we think of our classmates, if we truly grasped that Christ was born to regular, everyday, common people for a reason? How might it change the way we talk about immigrants, or what we do when we pass a homeless person in our city, or the way we think about the poor, if we truly believed that Christ's birth was proclaimed by people as marginalized, disliked, and dirty as shepherds for a reason?

It would, I suspect, change everything, just as it did for Mary and Joseph and the shepherds that night.

Look, if this world sometimes makes you feel ordinary, or if your life sometimes feels mundane, then tonight let your heart be glad. That is exactly where God is found, even if we don't always have the eyes to see. To you, this day, a Savior has been born. He is Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Lord. The story of his arrival is both boring *and* breath-taking, humble *and* holy, plainly human and yet undeniably divine. May your life be the same, and may it be filled with God's presence and love and light. Merry Christmas, you ordinary people. Jesus has come for you. Amen.