

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)³ And everyone went to his own town to register.⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)

God Used the Ordinary Things to Do the Extraordinary

Christmas is a time when we look for miracles – or at least for something extraordinary. How many Christmas specials focus on miracles hidden in ordinary life? I don't even mean all the Santa Claus specials. Think of *It's a Wonderful Life* or *A Christmas Carol* or "The Little Match Girl." In these stories ordinary people encounter the miraculous while the rest of the world rushes past them without realizing what's happening. It seems that at this time of the year, our natural longing for something truly special reaches its greatest intensity.

I think that longing shows that we rarely encounter even the extraordinary, let alone the miraculous in our lives. It just doesn't happen. So, year after year we go back to those specials and stories to get our fix and we use that to tide us over until next year. But don't cheat yourselves, my friends. Christmas is the celebration of the most extraordinary event in the history of the world: the birth of Christ. There is no more miraculous event than the one that took place two thousand years ago when the Son of God entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and then was born as a real human child.

Does the mere thought of that event thrill you? Does gathering here on Christmas Eve send chills up and down your spine? Do you look forward to celebrating this miracle all year long? I hope so. But, the truth is, most of us have been celebrating this holiday all our lives. There's really nothing I can say this evening that you haven't heard before. And in all the hustle and bustle of this time of year, in all the emotional ups and downs over giving and receiving, it's not at all surprising that the sense of wonder over the manger gets lost. Quite frankly, it's work to convince our children that the real treat of this holiday is not opening all those presents – it's coming to church! Truthfully, what have we put the more effort into? Preparing for and contributing to Christmas worship or buying presents? How many of us will make time to come to church not just tonight, but also tomorrow?

Everyday life gets in the way of celebrating the extraordinary things of Christmas. Our everyday concerns can drive those miracles down in our minds and our hearts until we can't see them anymore and we stop thinking about this holiday as the day when God came in the flesh and we start thinking of it almost exclusively in terms of family get togethers and gift exchanges and credit card debt. In that respect, this Christmas has a great deal in common with the first Christmas. Not that anyone was celebrating that day. But on that first Christmas, the miraculous went almost unseen. The extraordinary was happening all around them, but most of the people that Joseph and Mary passed on the road to Bethlehem were totally occupied with their own pressing concerns and completely unaware of the life-changing events that God had set in motion. Why couldn't anybody see them? Because **God used ordinary things to do the extraordinary.**

The ordinary things that occupied the minds and hearts of the people on the road that first Christmas were not the same things that tend to occupy our minds and hearts today. They weren't thinking of Christmas shopping or holiday meals or running to the airport to pick up grandma. But the things they were thinking of were every bit as all-consuming. The first ordinary thing that Luke records for us is a census. He says, "**In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.**" Why did Caesar Augustus issue this decree? He wasn't just curious about how many people lived in the Roman Empire. He was concerned about revenue. It took a lot of money to run an empire. Soldiers had to be paid. Legions had to be equipped and sent to the far flung borders of the empire to keep it secure. Roads had to be built and navies maintained to keep communication and transportation routes open. Courts cost money to operate. And the list goes on and on and on. Where did all the money come from to run an empire that was

almost as large as the United States? Taxes. To make sure that they were getting the money there were supposed to get, every fourteen years, the Roman Empire conducted a census. This census was probably the very first one.

God used the most boring, mundane thing you can think of – government tax law – to put Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem that year. But that wasn't the only ordinary thing. Luke tells us, **“Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.”** Now, King David had lived a thousand years before this time and he had a lot of descendants. It probably wasn't a particularly great honor. But it did mean that Joseph couldn't stay home in Nazareth. Family ties put him and his new wife on the road. David's family came from Bethlehem. That's where Joseph's had to go to register.

Along side government policy and family connections, God used one more ordinary thing to make Jesus' birth happen in the exact time and place that he had chosen: the nine months that a pregnancy takes. Luke says, **“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.”** When Mary became pregnant, most people probably didn't even think about where the baby would be born. They would've assumed that she'd have it in Nazareth. That's where she lived. But God didn't want that baby to be born in Nazareth. He controlled the timing so that the baby would come when she was at an inn in Bethlehem.

And so a child was born. For all the “miracle of birth” talk you hear when a new baby comes, it happens every day. But this was a miracle because this was no ordinary child. This baby was the Son of God, even while he was the son of Mary. He had come for no ordinary purpose. Jesus was born to save the world. My friends, this was God coming down here to rescue us. That is the miracle. That is the extraordinary in this child's birth. God didn't just leave us to our devices and our own disasters. He did the extraordinary to save us.

You see, all that's wrong with this life is our fault. We're sinners. And our sin hurts us. Every one of us makes sinful choices that make our lives harder. Every one of us engages in selfishness that hurts the people we love and causes them to love us less and hurt us more. Every one of us contributes to our distraction at this time of year and that limits the spiritual benefit of this celebration. But it's worse than that what we do to ourselves. Sin has ruined this world. When God made the world, it was perfect. God made Adam and Eve with perfect hearts and minds and he intended that they would live with him forever, in perfect joy. He intended that every human being would be born like that and then live with him in that same way.

But Adam and Eve sinned. They did more than just damage their own lives. They ruined God's perfect creation. Sin is the source of all the hurt and sorrow in this world. It comes because we sinners damaged the creation, and that causes bad things to happen. It comes because God sent those things into this world as a part of the punishment our sin deserves. Adam and Eve's sin condemned every human being who came after them to death and then to hell. God would've been completely within his rights if he would've just turned his back on this world and let us take our lumps. It would be totally just for God to say, “You made the world this way. You continue to make it worse with your sins and your selfishness and your unbelief. The vast majority of what you suffer is your own doing and the rest you deserve because sinners have that coming – and then you will have to face my justice and go to hell.”

But God did not do that. God loved us even when we deserved nothing but his anger and contempt. God wanted us still to have the joy that he designed this world to give us. But God knew that we could never reach the joy of heaven. He knew that we could never be good enough to even begin to come to him. So God came down here to us. God sent his own Son into this world. God the Son took a real human nature and made himself one of us. God the Son suffered the humiliation of being born in a stable and dying on a cross. God the Son lived life in a cruel and sinful world.

God knelt down here to you and to me so that he could lift us up and bring us home to him. That baby that Mary wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger, that baby was God moving heaven and earth for you and me. While he lay there in the manger, helpless, hungry, cold – needing his parents to do for him all the things that parents have to do for babies to keep them alive, all the while he was also the Son of God. So he was helpless and he was the most powerful being in the universe at the same time. He needed his parents and he was greater than they could ever imagine being. He lay there – he slept and ate, he breathed and in time he grew and learned to walk and talk, and yet he was always almighty God who already knew what the future held.

That baby knew that he would die on a cross and rise from the dead. He knew that he would save us. He knew our names and he loved us. And he came so that we will live with him forever.

That baby is God's gift to you and to me. In ancient times, when people wanted to celebrate, they gave gifts. The idea, I think, is that the gift brings joy to the person who receives it, and that person knows the joy the giver feels. So you could say that the gift represents the greater joy that the giver is celebrating. God gave us a gift on Christmas. He gave us the baby born in Bethlehem. He gave us the child who was a real human being but who was also the eternal Son of God. For that reason, we Christians still give gifts on Christmas.

Oh, I know that the custom can distract us from the true meaning of Christmas. It certainly takes a lot more time to shop for presents than it does to prepare yourself to hear the word. And some historians observe that the tradition of giving gifts at Christmas comes from pagan festivals either in Rome or in Germany that predate Christmas. But none of that really matters. What matters is what we make these gifts mean. We can make them be the end all and be all of Christmas. Or we can make them represent the love that God has for us. We can give them to share the joy of the extraordinary things that God did for us. We can use them to be tiny re-creations of the love God has for us. My friends, do that this Christmas. In your gift giving, in your feasting, in your family time and of course, here in your worship, make Christmas about Jesus. Focus on him and his love for you. Let all the ordinary things that you have to do this year revolve around the extraordinary thing that God did for you. Amen.