

An Ordinary Christmas - I Was Born In a Small Town

Sign Title: I was born in a small town

December 20, 2009

This morning we will look at what happened on that first Christmas morning. But before we do that, in the interest of a little seasonal humor with a good theological twist, I want to read a parody on the poem, "T'was the Night Before Christmas".

T'was the night before Jesus came and all through the house, not a creature was praying, not one in the house. The Bibles were laid on the shelf without care with hopes that Jesus would not come there. The children were dressed to crawl into bed, not once ever kneeling or bowing a head. Mom in her rocker with baby on her lap was watching the late show while I took a nap. When out of the east there arose such a clatter. I spring to my feet to see what was the matter. Away to the window I flew like a flash. I opened the shutters and threw up the sash. When what to my wandering eyes should appear but angels proclaiming that Jesus was here. With light like the sun sending forth a bright ray. I knew in a moment this must be the day. The light of his face made me cover my head, it was Jesus returning, just like he said. Though I possessed worldly wisdom and wealth, I cried when I saw him in spite of myself. In the book of life, which he held in his hand, was written the name of every saved man. He spoke not a word as he searched for my name. When he said, "It's not here", my head hung in shame. The people whose names had been written in love he gathered to take to his father above. With those who were ready, he rose without a sound, while the rest of us were left standing around. I fell to my knees but it was too late. I waited too long and sealed my fate. I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight, if only I had been ready tonight. In the words of this poem, the meaning is clear, the coming of Jesus is drawing near. There is only one life and when comes the last call, we'll find that the Bible was true after all.

This is the third message in our Christmas series entitled, "An Ordinary Christmas". The Christmas story has taught us God loves to use ordinary people and ordinary circumstances to do his greatest works. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was an ordinary mom. An increase in taxes was the way God moved Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for Christ's birth. This morning, we will look at more ordinary elements in the Christmas story. Christmas cards, holiday movies and

bad theology give us a skewed picture of the way things actually happened. We are going to straighten that out.

Luke 2:1-14

Who received the 4:30 A.M. phone call?

It was June 12, 2002, 4:30 am. I was leaning against the exterior glass windows of the hospital's emergency room entrance with the phone pressed to my ear and a finger in my other ear to hear. It was a long night in the hospital, I just had to tell people I love what happened so I had my parents out of bed early that morning. Dad,... Cindy had a girl. Her name is Deanna. The delivery went well. When something exciting happens, like the birth of your daughter, we are bursting with excitement and we have to share it with people we love.

In the Christmas story, who received the late night phone call telling them about the birth? The shepherds. This is important.

The Bible tells us shepherding was a job despised by the Egyptians. Shepherding was a job of insignificance. It was the minimum wage job of the day. You may start your career in it, but you didn't try to stay in it, especially working the night shift. Shepherding was a job nobody wanted and runts of society were the ones who worked in it. Of all the people for the angels to announce the birth of the savior, the people who God wanted them to know they were really important, it was the shepherds. Does anyone see something of significance there? From the moment of Christ's birth, God wants people to know he has a special place in his heart for ordinary people.

Where were the comforts of society?

Where was Jesus born? He was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was known as the city of David. In other words, It was David's home town. Having heard so much about it at Christmas time, you might expect it would be a decent size city. In the days of Jesus' birth, it was a one horse town like some of the towns in Iowa you pass through in 30 seconds because there is one stop light in the center of town and the school, police station and post office are in one building.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah... Micah 5:2

Micah says Bethlehem was so small, it wasn't even mentioned by Joshua when he conquered the land. Jerusalem we know, but Bethlehem? Bethlehem lived in the shadow of Jerusalem, it's elder brother. Think of it like Petersburg, MN.

None of us chose the place of our birth. Jesus chose the place of his birth. Why didn't he choose Jerusalem with it's impressive temple? Why didn't he choose Athens with its cadre of philosophers? Why not choose Rome, it was the hub of world power? In ages past, Jesus chose to be born in a small town; a city no travel agents were interested in. This is the same Jesus who fashioned the entire universe. Why such a humble, small town entrance in Bethlehem? Jesus wants to identify with people who think they are insignificant to God.

How was the road trip?

If you have seen movies and Christmas cards about Christ's birth, they often picture a resolute Joseph leading a donkey to Bethlehem with Mary enjoying the ride. Christmas cards and Hollywood movies aside, the Scriptures

present Mary and Joseph as abjectly poor. It is hard for us to conceive of this in our affluent world, but I doubt Mary and Joseph were financially well healed enough to afford a donkey. Mary probably walked the 80 to 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem while in her 9th month of pregnancy. It was a rough road trip. If you have a topographical map in your Bible, check the elevation changes. Mary and Joseph would leave Nazareth, which was 1,200 feet above sea level. If they followed the normal route into the Jordan Valley, by the time they reached Jericho, they would descend to 800 feet below sea level. The next 15 miles were a climb to 3,600 feet above sea level to reach the city of Jerusalem. Then they had a 5 mile walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. All this while Mary was 9 months pregnant. Jesus was born in Bethlehem at the expense of great sacrifice on the part of Mary.

Where was the baby shower?

When a young mother is pregnant in our church, women frequently get together to give her a baby shower. It is a great help for a young mother. Having a baby involves lots of equipment. There are diapers, a crib, pacifiers, the list could go on for a while. When Jesus was born, Mary laid him in a manger... not a crib. You buy a crib for a child, you don't buy a manger. In desperate circumstances, when you are forced to make do, you borrow a manger.

Mary and Joseph didn't have enough money for a crib, they borrowed a manger.

This wasn't any manger. We picture Christ born in a nicely lit barn with a donkey that was freshly washed and his hair blow dried. The Christmas cards

picture a fluffy white sheep and the hay looks something like velvet. The Bible gives us a rougher picture.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

The word in the Greek for manger means, a public feeding trough. The picture is Mary giving birth amongst animals in a public area. She is giving birth in the corner of an ancient day parking garage. Don't picture the manure cleaned up, don't picture an ounce of privacy. Picture filthy animals, a dirty unkept public parking garage and Jesus is laid in the public feeding trough. Imagine what the smell was like? Those of you who have farmed livestock and cattle can connect the dots.

Christ was born in those circumstances. It was his choice in eternity to be born that way. Why did he do it? So he could put his arms around the poor and say, "I understand!" Christ understand the humility of poverty.

Where was the midwife?

One detail of the Christmas story we often miss is that Luke says Mary wrapped Jesus in swaddling cloths. What are these clothes. They are strips of fabric that were wrapped around a baby immediately after birth. They were not finely woven linen, they were probably the tie down straps they used for travel. Ezekiel 16:4 gives us insight on swaddling clothes. These strips of cloth were wrapped around a baby immediately after birth to protect the baby from hypothermia. Today, our hospitals put babies under a lamp after birth and put a little knit cap on their head to keep them warm. In the ancient world they used

swaddling clothes for the same purpose. According to the Bible, who wrapped Jesus in swaddling clothes? Mary. Does that sound strange? After an exhausting road trip, an intense and painful first labor, Mary had to wrap her own baby in his swaddling clothes immediately after birth. Usually a mid-wife or the husband would help. Where was the mid-wife. Where was Joseph? We don't know. Maybe Joseph was out looking for help.

The text suggests Mary delivered her own baby in a public place alone without help because when she was done giving birth, she had to wrap her own baby in swaddling clothes and the only place she had to lay him was in the public feeding trough.

Who can claim to have a humbler birth than Jesus? Why did Jesus chose to be born this way? *He chose this humble family and this impoverished birth scene so that no human being could think of themselves as outside of his care and understanding of life.*

Some Observations:

There is greatness in humility.

Never before has someone come from so high and stooped so low. We are talking about the one sitting on the throne in heaven and the angels are singing "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty*". John says the person sitting on the throne was Christ.

The Writer of Hebrews says about Christ.

"You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end." Hebrews 1:10-12

Christ humbled himself and came to earth to save us. He chose the toughest of places and the poorest of families. Why did Jesus stoop so low?

In God's kingdom, greatness is not found in scoring the winning goal, greatness is not found in an undefeated season or a 4.0 GPA. Greatness is not found in the size of the end of year bonus or the size of your financial portfolio.

Greatness before God is found in humility.

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:3-11

In the church at Phillippi, they lost sight of true greatness. They thought greatness was in position and admiration. Paul has a different example.

Greatness is found in the example of Jesus. Though Jesus was in the form of God. That means that though Jesus is God and has all the qualities of God, he did not count his equality as a thing to be grasped. Literally that means, Jesus did not insist on his rights and identity as God. He made himself nothing. In humility, he didn't insist on any of his identity but poured himself fully into a human being in Mary's womb, to be born in the humbles of circumstances.

He lived the humblest life. He humbled himself to the point of death on a cross for our sins. Because of his humility, God exalted him to the highest place. At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and earth. *Greatness*

before God is found in humility. Let me give you some practical ways to put this in practice:

- **Listen Instead of Talk** - Over the holidays, we get together with family and friends to swap stories. Let's be honest, we enjoy telling our story more than listening to someone else. Here is a challenge, don't tell your story, be interested in other peoples stories. Be more interested in their live than your own. It will blow them away. That is social humility.
- **Live with Interest in the Isolated** - Care about people who are isolated. Everyone has those people at work or church. People we do not necessarily enjoy talking with because we don't get much out of it. Perhaps they are not intellectually stimulating and we feel we give more to the relationship than we get out of it. In every group there are people that are subtly ignored and cut out rather than enfolded in. Greatness is finding them and enfolding them. Christ, gave more to our relationship with him than he ever got out of it. Loving the elderly and isolated is greatness in God's eyes.

My heart is a filthy stable.

Jesus came for all of us. Someone once said, my heart is like a stable. It is dark, cold and filthy. The truth is each of our hearts are filthy stables and we are unworthy, unclean places.

But 2,000 years ago, Christ's birth taught us something. The God who was willing to humble himself to be born to the lowest of people in the filthiest of places looks at your heart and says, "I will live here too."

I say to those of you who feel rejected because you committed too many sins or you feel you have too many hang-ups... would you invite Jesus to come into your heart today and live in the stable of your heart? The creator of the universe chose to live in a stable 2,000 years ago, his hands are extended to you. He wants to take up residence in the stable of your heart today. What happens when Jesus comes to the stable of our heart?

As Martin Luther said:

Lord Jesus, You are my righteousness, I am Your sin. You have taken upon Yourself what is mine and given me what is Yours. You have become what You were not so that I might become what I was not.”¹

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your love through Christ. Thank you for the incredible example we have of Christ’s humility to stoop so low to love us. Help us fix the humility of Christ’s life as the true north for what greatness means in our life. I ask that you would lift up every person who feels despised. I pray for those who feel rejected, that through your church, they would feel included.

Before I say Amen and close this prayer, if you have never opened the stable of your heart to the God who loves us so much he to take up residence there, as I close I will give us a moment of silence for you to talk to him in your heart and invite him to come in. *(pause)*

Father, In the name of Jesus, we ask that our savior might be born in the hearts of many today. Amen.



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¹ J.I. Packer, Knowing God (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1995), p. 94.