

Finding God in the Ordinary Christmas Eve, 12/24/20

This past year has turned out to be anything but ordinary. And yet, it's the ordinary things of life, like coffee or hot chocolate, that so often we find comfort in. Why? Because ordinary things are predictable. They give us a sense of stability and continuity. Once we've experienced them for the first time, they're easy to understand. Everybody understands what hot chocolate is, and the biggest stress you're likely to face in ordering a cup is whether you want white, milk, or dark chocolate, or whether you want marshmallows or whipped cream added. Nobody needs instructions on how to go to school after the first week and nobody needs instructions on how to go to church after their first few visits. Except, that is, during a pandemic. The pandemic has robbed us of some of the ordinary rituals we need and crave. That's part of the reason that Jana and I put up a Christmas tree and other Advent decorations this year at our home, even though our children and our larger family won't be gathering this year to enjoy them in person. In this most extraordinary of years, we need some ordinary things around us; Hot chocolate for the soul, to prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace.

What are some of the ordinary things you're finding comfort in this year? Did you put up Christmas lights or a nativity creche? Are you baking cookies or writing Christmas cards? Extraordinary things can be exciting, but too many of them for too long can be overwhelming. That's why on this Christmas, we can be especially grateful that we can find God in ordinary things. As extraordinary as the birth of God is, it happened in remarkably ordinary ways so that we can understand it and be comforted by it. And isn't that something we all need this year to go along with the Christmas carols?

Let's start with the name, "Jesus." People often assume that this name was unique, because it means something like, "God saves." In fact, "Jesus" comes to us through a weird process of moving from a Hebrew name to a Greek translation and then a transliteration to Latin and English. His Hebrew friends would have called him something like Joshua or Yeshua, and it was a pretty common name back then. According to the Social Security Administration, the name of Jesus hasn't been a wildly popular name for baby boys in the US over the last one hundred years, ranking as low as 478th place in 1903 and as high as 66th

place in 2001.¹ However, Jesús has been the 6th most popular name in Mexico for at least seventy years and probably longer.² That would be comparable to the popularity of “James” in the U.S. last year.

Why would God tell Joseph to choose such an ordinary name for such an extraordinary baby? Today, parents are practically tripping over themselves to come up with unique spellings and pronunciations of names to make sure their children don't get overlooked in the crowds. Perhaps God chose a common name because Jesus came to save ordinary people, like you and me. Just as it's difficult to trust a politician who doesn't talk like you and dress like you, Jesus came bearing one of our names so that we might know that the one sent to save us was in fact one of us. Being common doesn't do anything to take away from the power and majesty of the name of Jesus. To the contrary, it makes it even more beautiful, because in the name of Jesus, God not only tells us that God saves, but shows us.

And how about that manger? The manger isn't a barn or a structure with a roof, it's actually the little box Jesus was laid in, what the dictionary describes as “a trough or open box in a stable designed to hold feed or fodder for livestock.”³ Jesus wasn't “born in a manger” at all. He was born in a stable and laid in a manger, and a manger is about as common an object as you could find, a dirty animal feed box. That's right, Mary set the son of God down in a wooden box that cows had been licking and drooling in. The real manger scene looked nothing at all like the crèche we set up in my family's living room year after year, with each clean porcelain Hummel figure carefully painted and placed and Jesus neatly laid in a pile of pristine straw. What was God thinking? Why didn't God provide silk pajamas and a feather bed for the King of Kings?

Jesus was born in a barn and laid in a manger for a similar reason that Jesus was born in Bethlehem instead of Jerusalem. Everybody was expecting the Messiah to be the kind of King that lived a more privileged lifestyle than the common people, certainly in a palace or estate. After all, what other kind of King had they ever known. In today's world, we expect

¹ <https://www.ssa.gov/cgi-bin/babynome.cgi>

² https://www.babycenter.com/0_most-common-baby-names-in-mexico_10341179.bc

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manger>

the closest thing to our King to live in the White House. God sent a powerful signal by locating the birth of Jesus far beyond the corridors of wealth and power, to Buffalo or Delano or Montrose instead of Washington D.C. This King was here to serve the people, and if a stable was good enough for shepherds, it was good enough for the Son of God.

But for all of the ordinary things surrounding the birth of Jesus, let's not forget to also celebrate the extraordinary. We need to remember at least some of that lest we forget the miracle of what happened. It was no ordinary person, but an angel, a messenger of the Almighty, who proclaimed to the shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."⁴ It was no ordinary person, but Isaiah, a Prophet of God, who foretold, "'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'"⁵ That's astonishingly good news, especially in these difficult days when we can't gather all our loved ones close to us.

The extraordinary news of Christmas that the angels heralded is that while God was high *above* us, Jesus bridged that great divide. God is now *with* us, Emmanuel. God has a name like us. God had an ordinary birth like us. God worked and got tired like us and got angry and frustrated like us. But unlike us, God's love never fails. And that means that we can continue to find God in the ordinary things of life while also enjoying the extraordinary power of God's love.

When Christmas is over, and the Christmas trees are all put away, will you still be able to find God? When the grief you're carrying around in your heart feels bigger than you are, or you're worried about making the next rent or mortgage payment, will you be able to find God? When the loneliness or fear you're facing are too much for you to handle, where will God be after Christmas? The Christmas promise is that God will remain *with* us, Emmanuel.

⁴ Luke 2:10-11. New Revised Standard Version.

⁵ Matthew 1:22. Ibid.



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