

An Ordinary Christmas

Jesus Had a Soccer Mom

Isaiah 7:14

God is My Travel Agent

Luke 2:1-7

I Was Born in a Small Town

Luke 2:8-15

The Dawn of Redeeming Grace

This is not a picture of a prehistoric beast from a science fiction movie. It is a picture of the Cone Nebula taken by the Hubble Space Telescope looking 2,500 light-years away into the constellation Monoceros. The arc in the system is 65 times larger than the diameter of our solar system.



While God the father willed creation, according to Hebrews 1, God's Son carried out his father's creative decrees, fashioning not just our planet but the Cone Nebula and everything else the Hubble Space Telescope discovers.

What boggles my mind more than the scope of the Christ's creative power is His incredible humility. As it says in Philippians 2:6-8

...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.

The Son poured all of himself into a human body, voluntarily restricting his immense power, so he could be born in an ordinary family, experience the ordinary struggles of life, so he can relate in a first hand way to ordinary people.

It is a great encouragement to know God understands us.

This series was delivered for Christmas 2009 to the congregation of Faith Evangelical Free Church. It is my hope and prayer these messages are a source of spiritual encouragement to those who read them.

Because of God's Mercy,

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Table of Contents

Jesus Had A Soccer Mom.....4

God is My Travel Agent.....10

I Was Born In a Small Town16

Publicity Materials22

Jesus Had A Soccer Mom

Sign Title: Jesus had a soccer mom.

December 6, 2009

Every Christmas, the world celebrates the birth of Jesus to his mother, Mary. One of the ways we celebrate the season is setting up nativity scenes showing the baby Jesus in the manger. It is hard to believe but that seemingly innocent manger scene depicts one of the most controversial moments in history. The birth of Christ has drawn a variety of reactions.

- Marilyn Manson: "I hate Christmas. I like to go around and replace baby Jesus in the nativities with a boiled ham."
- Larry King was asked if he could interview anyone from history, who would it be, "Jesus Christ." King said, "I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin born. The answer to that question would define history for me."
- Bishop Joseph Sprague of the United Methodist Church calls the virgin birth, "a myth".
- Charles Spurgeon, a famous preacher from a previous era, says, "The virgin birth is the greatest fact the history of the world records."

The virgin birth draws strong reactions. What do you think about it? Was Jesus really born of a virgin? Is the virgin birth that important? If Jesus wasn't born of a virgin, what difference would it make? Would it change anything we believe?

This morning we begin a small Christmas series called, "An Ordinary Christmas". In this series we are looking at how God loves to work through ordinary people who have ordinary problems. This morning we are looking at a very ordinary, young girl named Mary.

What does the Bible teach about the virgin birth of Jesus?

The first hint we have that Jesus would have a virgin birth is in Genesis 3:15.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Genesis 3:15

This is one of the first prophecies about Jesus and what I want you to notice is that God promises Jesus would be born of a woman. Christ is from *her offspring*. The rest of the Bible talks about children as sons of their father. When it pertains to the birth of Jesus, no earthly father is mentioned.

Flip a few pages forward in our Bible to the book of Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah is writing seven hundred years before the birth of Christ and this is what he says.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Isaiah 7:14

We hear these words of prophecy all the time at Christmas. Some people struggle with this being a prediction of Christ’s birth. The immediate reference to this prophecy was a son, King Ahaz would have. This is partially true. Ahaz did have a son named Hezekiah. He was a great and Godly king, but he wasn’t even close to being everything Isaiah prophesied. In the Old Testament much of prophecy has dual fulfillment. That means, the prophecy is filled in a partial way immediately but only Christ could completely fill the identity of the prophecy. Let me show you why Ahaz’s son, Hezekiah couldn’t be the one Isaiah is talking about.

Isaiah says this child’s name is Immanuel. In Hebrew, names are significant because they describe someone’s identity (such as Potters, Millers). Immanuel means, “God with us”. This points to the child being more than an ordinary kid.

A few pages later, Isaiah tells us more about this child.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end,... Isaiah 9:6-7

Does anyone get the notion that Isaiah’s prophecy is about more than a normal baby?

A hotly contested word in Isaiah 7:14 is the word *virgin* because in Hebrews the word used here for virgin doesn’t necessarily mean someone who is a virgin, technically it means someone who is a young woman. There is a specific word for virgin in Hebrew and that is not the word used here. Does this mean Jesus wasn’t virgin born?

In those days, unlike today, virginity was a very important thing for a young woman to keep. If a young woman wasn’t a virgin, according to the law of Moses, she was subject to the death penalty. So ladies waited for marriage. Young women were assumed to be virgins.

The link between the word for *young woman* and *virgin* in Hebrew is so tight that in Genesis 24:16, these words are used interchangeably. Meaning a young woman of this age was a virgin.

The young woman (*young woman*) was very attractive in appearance, a maiden (*virgin*) whom no man had known. Genesis 24:16

Two hundred years before Jesus was born, because so many Jews were rusty with their Hebrew skills, the Jews translated the Hebrew bible into Greek in a Bible called “The Septuagint”. You may remember this from our studies in the book of Hebrews because all the Old Testament quotes in the book of Hebrews are all from the Septuagint, not the original Hebrew. In this Greek translation of

the Old Testament that every Jew used, the word for *virgin* in Isaiah 7:14 is parthenos. What does parthenos mean? Virgin!

While the Old Testament sketches an outline of Christ's birth picturing him as virgin born, when we get to the New Testament, the virgin birth is clear as day.

...before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit... for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit... Behold, the virgin shall conceive... but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. Matthew 1:18-25

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;... for nothing will be impossible with God. Luke 1:34-37

In summary, the Old Testament quietly implies and the New Testament loudly shouts the miraculous *virgin* birth of Jesus. Jesus did not have an earthly father.

But I heard...

I heard Mary did not have a normal delivery.

Some Catholic theologians have taught Jesus was not born in the normal way, rather, he was born in something like a miraculous C-section. Joseph cranked her arm like she was a slot machine and Jesus just popped out of her gut. That idea comes more from Los Vegas than the Bible.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth;... Micah 5:2-3

Mary had real labor pains. No free ride when it came to giving birth to Jesus.

I heard Mary remained a virgin the rest of her life.

The belief that Mary remained a perpetual virgin arose in the second century. In fact, the Council of Constantinople in 553 declared Mary to be ever *virgin*. Is it true? Did Mary stay a perpetual virgin? Did she tell Joseph every night she had a headache? If she stayed a virgin forever, we have some major problems.

First, the Bible teaches that sex is a good thing. It is a gift of God and that if you are married you are commanded by God to enjoy it often. In fact according to 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 to deprive your spouse of sexual intimacy is sinful.

Second, Matthew 1:25 says Joseph "knew her not until she had given birth to a son." The clear implication of that is that after Jesus was born, they got busy.

Third, the Bible tells us in multiple passages that Mary and Joseph had other sons and daughters.

[Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? Matthew 13:55](#)

Where did they come from? Is Mary popping out more virgin born kids? No. The picture is that Jesus grew up in a very normal family and Mary, needed to drive a suburban to get and his brothers and sisters to soccer practice. Jesus was conceived through the Holy Spirit in an extraordinary way but Mary was like every other young mother with a family.

[I heard Mary conceived Jesus through a fleshly act with God.](#)

The Mormons actually teach that God the Father had physical, flesh-and-bone sexual relations with Mary, and God impregnated her enabling her to conceive Jesus. If that were not weird enough, they also believe that even though Mary had flesh-and-bone sex with God, she remained a virgin because getting busy with God doesn't count.

If that were true there would be a lot of high school guys changing their name to Zeus so they could take Mormon girls to the prom.

[I heard it doesn't matter if Jesus was born of a virgin.](#)

A popular young pastor in Michigan created a stir recently when he wrote in his book, Velvet Elvis, the following:

[if Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults...we would essentially not lose any significant part of our faith because it is more about how we live.](#)

What do you think? Is it important that Jesus was born of a virgin? If Jesus wasn't born of a virgin:

First, the only alternative is that Jesus would be an illegitimate child and Mary is not much of a Godly woman after all.

Second, we call Mary's character into question. If Mary was behind the bushes with a guy named Larry, then you have a sexually promiscuous young woman lying about how her son was conceived. If Mary is nothing more than a sinful con artist then she and her son shouldn't be trusted.

Thirdly, if we deny the virgin birth, we are denying something clearly taught in Scripture. Therefore the Bible either has a big mistake in it, or it contains outright lies. If the Bible is wrong in what it says about the virgin birth, then the authority of the Bible is gone.

[What should I think about Mary?](#)

Many people have too high a view of Mary that is not based on Scripture. Some people pray to her, others think she, like Jesus was miraculously conceived. That isn't the Mary of the Bible. As we saw, she was an ordinary young woman. Jesus was born into an ordinary family, Mary went through all the ups and downs of being an ordinary mother and a wife. She went through the stress of parenting, cooking, cleaning and changing diapers. Jesus chose to be born in the womb of an ordinary woman, who raised ordinary kids in an ordinary family. Let's be careful about having too high a view of Mary. While many Catholics and those in the Orthodox faith can have too high a view of Mary, those of us who are Protestants can have just the opposite problem. We can have too low a view of her.

Mary is not the object of our faith, Jesus is, but Mary is an incredible example of faith for us to follow. Imagine her emotions when the angel told her she would be pregnant before her marriage in a society that shamed, humiliated, and even killed women they assumed were promiscuous. Jewish tradition describes horrible public shaming treatments for women guilty of sexual promiscuity. Treatments that included a public stripping, binding and beating while the community watched.

Mary knew how difficult her life would be when she heard she would become pregnant out of wedlock. What does she say?

**“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”
Luke 1:38**

That is a young woman who was willing to place incredible trust in God, no matter how weird the curveball that he decided to throw her way.

She is a woman who is an example for us about how to handle divine privilege. When God thrust her into the spotlight as the fame of Jesus grew, we never see her trying to steal the limelight but she is content to humbly stay in the background and point to Jesus, her own son, as God. She refused to grab attention for herself. She knew she was just an ordinary young woman, that God used in an extraordinary way.

Conclusion

My hope and prayer for us this morning is that each of us would follow one more example of Mary. Mary trusted in Jesus, her son, to forgive her sin. That wasn't because she was a proud mother, it is because she recognized him for who he is. Jesus isn't just Mary's son, the Bible tells us he is fully God and fully man and he never sinned. With those qualifications he died and became the perfect payment for our sin. The Bible tells us that is exactly what he did on a cross between two criminals. When he died he became the perfect once for all sacrifice for our sin, but death could not hold him. He rose from the dead, giving eternal life to all who trust in him. The Bible tells us that one day he will return and every knee will bow and tongue confess him as Lord. At that time, he will either be your savior or your judge. Have you asked Christ to save you from the consequences of your sin? Have you asked Christ to be in charge of your life?

If you have never asked Christ to pay for your sins and be in charge of your life, would you open your heart in this closing prayer.

Jesus, come into my heart today. I ask your death to be the payment for my sin and your resurrection to new life to be the power to take away my sin. I ask you to be the king of my heart. I give you my life. Amen

Father, in the name of Christ, I ask there are many who experience the gift of salvation today. Amen.

God is My Travel Agent

Sign Title: God is my travel agent.

December 13, 2009

With the internet, I book most of my travel reservations on-line. Before booking was popular, I planned my travel with our local travel agent. It wasn't as cost effective, but I was assured, my itinerary was right and everything worked out smoothly.

While I no longer have a travel agent, sometimes I still wish I did. How about you? Do you wish there was someone arranging your schedule to insure things work out smoothly?

I have some good news. While most travel agencies are out of business, there is one travel agent whose business is still successful and he gets us exactly where we need to be at just the right time, every time. That travel agent's name is God.

Last evening I was watching 48 Hours on television. As they talked about the murder how did they describe it, "As fate would have it, she was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Some people believe their life unfolds by *fate*. Others believe life happens by *luck*. As they walk into the casino they say, "I feel lucky" or "Lady luck is with me."

The Bible gives us a very different picture about how life unfolds. It is called, "Providence".

John Calvin said, "Ignorance of providence is one of life's great miseries where an understanding of providence leads to it's highest happiness."

Did you know that if you are miserable this morning, it might be because you think your life is about *fate* or *luck* rather than *providence*?

Since providence is so important, let me define providence for you. *Providence means God is directing the events of this world toward an appointed end.* We get a better understanding of this in Hebrews 1:3 when it speaks of what Christ is doing.

upholding the universe by his word of power. Hebrews 1:3

The word upholding means to carry something from one place to another. It is the same word used to describe in Luke 5:18 when a paralyzed man was brought to Jesus on a bed. It doesn't just mean sustain, it means active, purposeful control over what is carried. Christ has active, purposeful moment by moment control over everything in this universe, because he made it.

Because providence is true, we know there is a lot more happening in life than we are aware of because God is using his invisible hand to guide and direct things toward his appointed end.

This is the second of a special series of sermons in our Christmas series entitled, "An Ordinary Christmas". In this series we are looking at how God loves

to use ordinary people, and ordinary circumstances to do his work on earth. Last week we looked at Mary, the mother of Jesus, just an ordinary young girl. This morning we are going to see how God used some ordinary circumstances, a tax census, to move Mary and Joseph a distance of 80 miles to the land of Bethlehem for Jesus to be born. The prophet Micah said that the savior would be born in Bethlehem. We are going to see how God pulled this off.

[Luke 2:1-7](#)

God guides history.

Notice how God guides history. Who was Caesar Augustus? He reigned 43 years, from 27 BC to 14 AD. When he was about 60, he decided to issue a decree that a census would be taken. Why did he take the census? It was for military purposes and for taxation. He had a rule about how he did this. Everyone was to go back to their home town. The practice of returning everyone to their home town for a census was not uncommon. Archaeological evidence tells us they also did this in Egypt.

Interestingly, a census was also a display of Caesar's power. At his word, everyone in the Roman world shuffled, like pieces on a chess board moving back to their starting position. The Bible says...

[The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will. Proverbs 21:1](#)

While all-powerful Caesar issued the census decree as a display of his power, he had no idea he was issuing a decree to fulfill God's plan for the birth of Christ. All-powerful Caesar was used by God to move a poor unknown couple to Bethlehem so Christ's birth would fulfill the word of God in Micah.

[But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Micah 5:2](#)

We can see with the hindsight of Scripture what Caesar couldn't see, possibly Mary and Joseph didn't realize God knew exactly what he was doing till much later when they realized it was prophesied Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. You can imagine what Mary and Joseph may have initially thought. Another census? The Romans mismanage our money and now they want another census so they can leech more money from us. Joseph might have said, God, my fiancée is 9 months pregnant with your kid. This is the absolute worst time for an 80 mile trip. God, how can you let this happen? Don't you care? What bad luck!

The simple truth is nothing was happening by fate, or luck. God was the travel agent who was in complete control and was moving pieces around on the chess board of the world so the pieces would be where he wanted them to be at exactly the right time. Mary would be in Bethlehem to give birth. The fact there was no room in the inn wasn't a mistake. God was fully in control, just at the time, everyone had a hard time seeing it.

Does God still orchestrate history like this? Was God in control when the stock-market plunged? Did God decide on the exact moment when the real-estate market would implode? Was God fully in control when the planes flew into the World Trade Center? Sometimes we see glimmers of God's purposes when we look back but most often we don't see them. Many times life looks haphazard, unrelated and senseless but God is behind the scenes, directing events toward his appointed ends. God guides history.

God guides human events

Joseph also went up from Galilee... with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. Luke 2:4

God doesn't just guide history but he guides very personal events. The Old Testament predicted not just where Jesus would be born but who he would be born to. The Old Testament says Jesus would be born in the tribe of Judah from the line of David. That was a narrow stream from which to fish Christ's human ancestry. Satan knew there were not many who could fulfill this prophecy so he tried to thwart the providence of God.

2 Kings 11 tells us of an evil woman named Athaliah, who wanted to become queen; so when she had the opportunity, she killed 70 of her grandchildren, all of David's royal descendants. Athaliah thought she succeeded and for 6 years everyone else thought she successfully destroyed the line of David. But the Bible tells us God had a trick of his own. God providentially saved one descendant, a little boy named Joash was hidden in a closet with his nurse while his grandmother killed the rest of David's descendants. Little Joash stayed in hiding 6 years in the temple until his grandmother was overthrown and he became a king when he was seven years old. Joash's nurse, an ordinary woman, had no idea God used her to save the only remaining descendant through whom God could fulfill his promise of the Christ. God was watching over his word. No matter how hard Satan or Athaliah tried, they could not thwart God's word.

So while Joseph was the legal father of Jesus who came from David's line, evidently, Mary was also from David's line so Jesus would be a biological descendent of David. Think about how tightly God controls humanity. God knew who Judah would marry, he knew who his grandchildren would marry. God knew exactly who would marry who for hundreds of years. He knew the exact way the DNA would unfold so Joseph would be Jesus' legal father and Mary would be his biological mother, both from the line of David. God knew how and when Joseph would meet Mary, he knew Joseph would propose and they would eventually marry. God interlocks all of those events together for the birth of Christ.

Do you realize God also knows all about you? He knew all about your parents. He decided who your grandparents and great grandparents would be. He knows all that went into you as a person.

your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. Psalm 139:16

All the talents and abilities we have are decided upon by God. He chose to give them to us.

What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? 1 Corinthians 4:7

Your gifts and abilities are not a chance happening. God puts us where he wants us to be and he chooses the gifts and abilities he wants us to have when he puts us there.

For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Esther 4:14

God made us just the way he wanted us to be, our height, our looks, our mind even the basic attributes of our personalities and he did it because he is directing everything toward an appointed end, sometimes we may see what he is doing, many times we can not see it.

God guides nature.

Tuesday night, like many of you, we were watching the weather channel trying to figure out if our children would have school. We watched the weather man throw up charts, radar pictures and national weather maps all in a prediction of what *might* happen. The weather man was talking about the way mother nature might work. The Bible says, there is no impersonal mother nature, the weather, like everything else is the very work of God.

For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth,'... and cold from the scattering winds. By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. Job 37:6,9,10

Who is the real weatherman? The Puritans had a more accurate way of looking at the "laws of nature", they called them "the customs of God." God works in a customary way, but it is always God working, not an impersonal force of nature.

For example, when a baby is born and we see the perfectly formed fingers and toes, we heard the baby cry as he or she breathes in their first breath of air, who do we instinctively give credit to, an impersonal force of nature or God. God created the child, he did it in a way he usually does, with a father.

When it comes to the birth of Jesus to Mary, that was even more miraculous than the birth of any other child because God conceived Jesus in Mary's womb without an earthly father.

God weaves the strands of history, human events and nature together to accomplish his purpose. Life isn't random chance, God is the ultimate travel agent who is in control.

A few observations.

History, humanity and nature work together to serve God's purpose.

For the birth of Christ, everything worked together so Christ would be born exactly where God said he would be born and nothing was left to chance. That is called providence. The reason you are here this morning is providence. God worked history, humanity and nature together to bring you here to hear about Jesus Christ and there is no such thing as luck or fate but that God is in control. Some of you may already know Christ, for others of you this is the first time you heard God is fully in control

There is comfort providence.

Remember that Calvin said an understanding of providence leads to our highest happiness while an ignorance of it leads to great misery? Why is providence so important to happiness?

Have you ever been with someone who is living through a time of fear and difficulty? Someone says to them, "Just trust God." Trust God, they say, last time I trusted God, everything went wrong. Does trust in God mean things will get better? Does trust in God mean our problems will dissolve away? No, when you trust in God, things may get worse. Here is what providence teaches us. *You can be having a very bad day, but because of Providence, in God's sight, it might be a very good day.*

We see this in the life of Joseph in the book of Genesis. He was having a very bad day. His brothers sold him into slavery. That has to be one of the worst days possible. But later on after God had risen him to second in command of all of Egypt he said...

God sent me before you to preserve life. Genesis 45:5

You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:20

Sometimes we can look back and see what God was doing in his providential plan. Sometimes, we may never understand what God was up to, we just know that for God's children, since we are the object of Christ's affection, even the adversity he allows into our life is for our good and his glory.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28

The adversities we face are not given by God to make us bitter, but God intends them to make us better. The adversity God allows his children to experience is intended to teach us greater dependence on Christ, to teach us to find our greatest joy in our identity with Christ, in short, to make us more useful for God's glory while on this earth and to nurture our longing for a richer enjoyment of Christ in heaven.

Conclusion

When I was growing up my parents had a clock on the piano with a precision brass mechanism inside of it. The side of the clock had glass panels so I could watch the gears in action. Watching the clockworks in motion gave the

appearance they were pointless. Some wheels were moving backwards, others were moving forward, still another was spinning back and forth. But you and I know the gears were working together so the hands on the clock would be exactly where they should be, right on time. This is the way God's providence works for us. Just like the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph, there is nothing about the lives of God's children that is fate or luck and everything is designed for our good and to bring about God's glory. He has us just where he wants us to be right on time.

When Jesus Christ came, history, human events and nature worked together for him to be born. The Bible says Christ will come again. History, human events and nature are working together to prepare for His return. When he comes the Bible says every knee will bow and every tongue confess Christ as Lord. Those who have trusted Christ as their savior will experience the full realization of what it means to be the object of God's undeserved affection through Jesus. Those who have rejected Christ, will discover the full realization of what it means to reject God's only offering for sin and they will experience God's fully deserved wrath for our sin.

Sin, evil and God's wrath against it; none of it is outside of God's control. God will even use evil for our good and his glory.

the Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble. Prov. 16:4

If you are here this morning, you are not here by mistake. If you have never asked Christ to forgive your sin and asked him to be the treasure of your heart, today is the day. Is God tugging at your heart even as I speak? I am going to close in a simple prayer. If God is drawing your heart to him today, pray along with me to ask Christ to be the sacrifice for your sin and ask him to take His rightful place as the center of your life.

Father, thank you there no such thing as fate or luck but you are in charge of everything. You arranged for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. You arranged for me to be here this morning. Christ, I ask your death to pay for my sin, I ask you to be the center of my life. I thank you that when I am your child, I can know for certain that no matter what happens in my life, it will ultimately be for my good and your glory. Amen.

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 humblest 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 life 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 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 wants 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.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the EFCA. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics of study are ancient rhetoric and preaching. Feel free to contact him at ktruck@gmail.com or visit his web at www.kurttrucksess.com

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

Publicity Materials
Invitation Cards to the Community



AN ORDINARY CHRISTMAS


DECEMBER 6 JESUS HAD A SOCCER MOM
8:30am, 11:00am on Sunday at Faith E Free

DECEMBER 13 GOD IS MY TRAVEL AGENT
8:30am, 11:00am on Sunday at Faith E Free

DECEMBER 20 I WAS BORN IN A SMALL TOWN
8:30am, 11:00am on Sunday at Faith E Free


DECEMBER 24 THE DAWN OF REDEEMING GRACE
*Christmas Eve Choral Presentation at The SAMI Center,
5:30pm*

FAITH EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH | 2805 Erie Ave., Spirit Lake, IA | 712.336.3537 | www.faithefree.com



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JOIN US
CHRISTMAS EVE
AT THE SAMI CENTER


THE DAWN OF REDEEMING GRACE
Christmas Eve Choral Presentation – 5:30pm

Invest and Invite Commitment Cards

INVEST & INVITE

I will seek to invest in others who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and invite them to **FAITH**.



*“Live wisely among those who are not Christians, and make the most of every opportunity.”
– Colossians 4:5*

INVEST & INVITE

The following is a list of 3 people I am attempting to invest in and invite to **FAITH**.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I WILL:

- Pray God will soften their hearts toward Him
- Share with them my Christ story
- Invite them to **FAITH**

Signature _____ Date _____

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Faith

