

The Ordinary & the Extraordinary

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC, on Christmas Eve 2016

A long time ago, in a land far, far away... something rather ordinary seemed to be happening. A baby was born. A baby who's timing may or may not have been off. A baby born to parents who probably thought they were ready but most likely found out otherwise. A baby born among livestock, by candle and moon light. Two thousand years ago, none of this would have been out of the ordinary. There were no hospitals, no sonograms, no fancy measuring charts to let prospective parents know how far along that expected infant was, though the science of childbirth was probably just as reliable then as it is now. What was extra-ordinary were the two people, Mary and Joseph, who were bringing this child into the world. There's was not an ordinary situation by any means. They each had a visit from an angel, a messenger from God, telling them that this child was going to be special. This child wasn't conceived in the regular way, but by the working of the Holy Spirit. This baby would change the world. From the millions of faithful among God's chosen people, God chose these two to help bring the long-awaited Messiah into the world. Mary says very little when the angel visits here. Joseph has no recorded words, only his faith-filled action to stay with Mary. As for this baby who would be the long-awaited Messiah, there were lots of prophecies about what he'd be like, how he would behave, what he would do to usher in God's reign, and what life would then be like, there was little said about how he would come to be. People had high expectations for God's Anointed One, and yet, here he was, coming into the world in the same way everyone else does.

It was all rather ordinary, wrapped in a blanket of extraordinary... because then the angels went to... the shepherds. They didn't announce it to the commoners and the dignitaries in Bethlehem. They didn't announce it to the High Priest and the Levites in Jerusalem, and Gaius Octavius, the Emperor at the time, could have cared less so why go to Rome or wherever he may have been on that night.

I always wonder what Mary and Joseph thought when those shepherds showed up. Were they worried? Confused? Astounded? Shepherds didn't have the best reputation in those days and here they come, maybe they brought some of the flock with them. Did they tell Mary & Joseph how they knew to come here? Were they wandering the streets of Bethlehem looking for a child born in a stable? Shouldn't have been that hard to find, but it's a bizarre question for shepherds to be asking in the city at night! This is a story that many can say by heart, from hearing it in Church on Christmas Eve or from watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, it's a story that gives us all the feelings of warmth and wonder and hope. And we need that warmth. We need that wonder. We need that hope. We need to be reminded that the Prince of Peace is in the world and alive and working.

In that wonder and warmth and hope, we must never forget what God did in the birth of the one we call Jesus: God turned the world right-side up. God chose an unexpected set of parents in an unexpected place in an unexpected time to come as close to humanity as God could come, which was to be human. And instead of it happening in a place where those with power and prestige could see it and be in awe, God chose an ordinary stable. Instead of an extraordinary display for kings and princes and religious leaders to pay homage to Jesus, God chose ordinary shepherds to be the first ones to lay eyes on this Almighty Child. Shepherds, a group often without power, without a voice in their community, often looked down upon, those with an important task, but a task thought beneath most other people, the outcasts of society. From the moment of his birth, Jesus began to change the world. Jesus' entire ministry was about welcoming those whom the religious establishment and those whom the Empire said were not good enough, and Jesus said to them, "**Oh, but you are good enough.**"

Whatever it was that brought you here tonight, I hope that you will take to heart this Christmas message: Jesus' work of welcoming the outcasts, standing up to those in power, and being the light in the darkness continues today. We have a choice. We can remain silent, thinking about that cute little baby, thinking that this is just one hour of our life and tomorrow or Monday things will be back to how we're used to. Or...

Or can we be like the shepherds. We often gloss over this one little passage in Luke's telling of this extraordinary story:

*When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*¹

The shepherds told what they say, about the angels about the baby about the stable about how it probably didn't look like anything they expected.

What may be more important than being **like** the shepherds is listening to the shepherds. There are those in our culture who are trying to point the way to Jesus, trying to show us what where God is moving and working and yet, we overlook them because they have been out in the fields with the sheep, either literally or figuratively, and maybe they don't fit the mold of what WE are expecting. And yet, these ordinary people are trying to tell us about something rather extraordinary in the ways our God is acting in the world.

The reality is, once Jesus was born, the world could never go back to "the way things were." The message is clear: **We are moved by the memory of this night to welcome those whom society says aren't good enough. We care for those who are poor, who, like this baby, have no real bed in which to lie on a cold night. We are called to be the light to those who walk in darkness. We are called to help change the world.**

No matter why you're here tonight, I don't think you can leave the same person that came in. I hope and pray that you will take this Christmas message, and like Jesus, bring the extraordinary out of the ordinary and turn the world right-side up.

¹ Luke 2:17-18