“An Extra(Ordinary) Birth”
December 24, 2018

These words – these words together make up this story – a story of travel and birth; a story of shepherds and angels; a story of Jesus the Christ, born in Bethlehem.

Despite the royal imagery we heard earlier from Isaiah and Psalm 96 – “There shall be endless peace for the throne of David!” “The Lord is king!” – tonight’s familiar story from Luke reminds us that the birth of Christ wasn’t anything like you’d expect a royal birth to be. Instead, it’s really rather… ordinary.

The Gospel writer Luke sets this story in the days of Caesar Augustus, specifically in a time when Augustus decides to flex his authoritarian muscles. Upon his order, “all [go] to their own towns to be registered,” Luke tells us. As powerful regimes do, the Roman empire moves its people around at its will for its own benefit. For you can pretty much guarantee when a government counts its people, taxes are involved. We’ve seen this throughout history. It’s, well, ordinary.

Mary and Joseph travel 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph’s home town. Writer Barbara Robinson envisions them as looking “like the people you see on the six o’clock news — refugees, sent to wait in some strange ugly place, with all their boxes and sacks around them.” Ordinary people.

When they arrive, “the time [comes] for [Mary] to deliver her child.” And so, the text says, “she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth.”

There is very little detail given about the birth of this baby. We’re left to wonder: Was Mary’s labor hard? Was she expecting to give birth during this journey, or did the baby come early? What time of day was he born? Was anyone there to help her? Was Joseph helpful, or utterly useless?

All we know is the baby is wrapped in bands of cloth, a common practice in those days. All we know is so far, there is nothing unusual about this story.

After giving birth, Mary lays her son in a manger because there is no place in the inn. We like to imagine Mary and Joseph trying to check into the first century equivalent of the Holiday Inn or Motel 6, only to be denied by a rude innkeeper who sends them off to be with the animals in the stable.

But we can’t be certain what Luke means by “inn.” The Greek word kataluma is translated here as “inn,” but elsewhere in Luke as “room,” as in the guest room of a house. Mary and Joseph could have been in a spare room in someone’s home, but as it is a small home and the room is full, the only place to put the baby is in a feed trough.

The word can also mean a place where travelers could spend the night, usually a large room with sleeping space but not much else. So maybe Mary and Joseph are in the
Bethlehem equivalent of a homeless shelter, and again, the only room for the baby is in the feed trough.

Wherever they are, of course all of the space is full – everyone has been summoned to their home town, and Bethlehem is packed.

So far, this is a pretty ordinary story.

Next, our story shifts to the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. They aren’t lodging in their home towns for the census because they don’t even count. Shepherds were seen as dishonest, untrustworthy people who let sheep graze on other people’s land. Their occupation was despised. And yet it is to these lowly shepherds an angel of the Lord makes its glorious appearance.

“Do not be afraid,” the angel says, letting us know with certainty that the shepherds are terrified. And suddenly the night skies are filled with a multitude of angels saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

These shepherds in darkness have seen a great light, and suddenly, our ordinary story has seemingly taken an extraordinary turn.

And yet, angels are abundant in the Old Testament, appearing more than 100 times to God’s people. What’s more, angels are usually seen as terrifying – after all, they speak and act on God’s authority. So even this apparently extraordinary event is somewhat ordinary in the Jewish tradition.

The angel tells the shepherds exactly how to find this new baby and they go “with haste,” perhaps dropping their hooks and abandoning their flock, scrambling over the rocks in the field to find this baby in a manger.

When they arrive, it is just as the angel has said. And when they see this, according to Luke, “they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed.” I can imagine the shepherds, dirty and smelling a bit like the flock themselves, crowding in, straining to get a look at the infant, wrapped in cloth like any other, lying in a makeshift crib — and gasping with wonder, explaining to all the other grumpy lodgers why they are making such a fuss over a baby.

Even when the shepherds make their way back to the field, they glorify and praise God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

So what is so extraordinary about this seemingly ordinary birth?

It’s who is born: the Savior, Messiah, Lord – Jesus the Christ. Love incarnate. The one long-promised by God who will provide endless peace; who will establish and uphold justice and righteousness; who is greatly to be praised. The one who came and upended systems of
death-dealing power, who has never left us, who promises new life, and who loves us without reservation.

Our stories too might seem ordinary. Like the shepherds, we are ordinary people – people with an extraordinary Savior, a Savior made human by an extraordinary God who is still at work in the world today. **This is the Good News: God works in and through the ordinary.** We need no extraordinary sign or message to know this. All we need is this ordinary story, and to go and do likewise. Tonight we seek the baby wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger, so that having seen, we can go and tell of this good news and great joy.

May we remember this, always seeking God in the ordinary, so that God can use us for God’s extraordinary glory.

Amen.