

Christmas Eve: Luke 2
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Remarkably Unremarkable

Something momentous happened in 1971. That's the conclusion one is forced to make after reviewing the "WTFHappenedin1971" website. I came across this website this fall as I was doing research for my class on Christianity and economics. The website presents graph after graph of various subjects—everything from US worker productivity to rates of dual income families, from the ideological distance between political parties to the number of physics PhDs awarded in the US, the number of children born to single parents to red meat consumption. Some eighty graphs in total, all pointing to the evident fact that, in 1971 or thereabouts, something happened that set off massive changes in American economics, politics and culture.

But what was it? You tell me. Those of you who were alive then, 53 years ago, what do you recall? Nixon was president, the Colts won the Superbowl against the Dallas Cowboys, the first Starbucks coffee shop opened in Seattle, NPR went live, Charles Manson was found guilty of murder, the US went off the Gold Standard, and the Pentagon papers were published. All of these are significant in their own right, but none of them explains why house prices took off, why the price of Campbells tomato soup shot up, or why political speeches became dumber after '71, as other graphs show.

So what happened? It's not clear. To most of you, I expect, 1971 wasn't too different from the year before or the year after. But something, evidently, happened then that forever changed America and the world.

The same can be said—to a much greater extent—about the first Christmas, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. To almost everyone alive then, the day Jesus was born—when the Lord Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, came into this world, took on flesh as an infant—it was just like any other day. We might imagine that there must have been something noticeably different, that the sky had to hold back the thunder and the moon found new reasons to glow, that joy ricocheted off the mountains, and the stable walls strained to contain the power and love within. But, no. With the exception of a handful of shepherds in the surrounding hill country, pretty much nobody outside of Jesus' immediate family even took note of the event.

In fact, many of the details of Jesus' birth that we think of as notable or distinctive, actually weren't. The story as it's usually told has it that Mary and Joseph came to town late one night and couldn't find a place to stay, and so they end up squatting in a stable. Jesus' family is thus depicted as homeless, alone and scared, so destitute they have to resort to using a feeding trough as a crib. That account is, truth be told, a romantic *misreading* of Luke's story.

Scholars who are more familiar with the kind of Middle Eastern culture Jesus was born into point out that, according to Luke, Mary and Joseph were *already* in Bethlehem, perhaps for weeks, when it came time for her to give birth. And it would have been unbelievable that in that time, in

a culture like that of ancient Israel which is based on family ties, Joseph couldn't find some distant cousin to take in him and his very pregnant fiancée. Indeed, we presume he must have been able to find a house because Luke tells us that there was no room in the "inn." Now, in that time "inn" didn't mean a local motel, but the guest room at a house, often on the roof. With the guest room evidently occupied, Mary gave birth on the bottom floor of the house, which is where the family would keep their livestock at night. Hence, the reference to the manger, which would be a natural feature for such a room. And while this place was surely rather smelly, it likely afforded Mary more privacy while giving birth than she would have had otherwise in the cramped rooms above.

The import of Luke's account was then not how *odd* Jesus' birth was, but rather how *normal* and *unexceptional* it was: the birth of a child at a private home surrounded most likely by family relations. This interpretation is confirmed by the sign the angels told the shepherds to look for---a baby lying in a manger—a sign that the savior was not some royal prince birthed in a remote palace. He was born rather in a simple peasant home with livestock in the family room. The baby, the shepherds would understand, was 'one of them.'

You may be wondering, if this is the case, does that not take something away from the celebration of Christmas? Doesn't Christmas lose some of its meaning, its message, its magic, to say that Jesus' birth was pretty normal for the time? Well, the meaning of Christmas was never really about how extraordinary the circumstances were of Jesus' birth, but rather precisely *how ordinary, how common* they were.

The gospel writers, indeed the whole of the New Testament, take pains to tell us that in Jesus, God became one of us, he identified with us, "laid his glory by" and became human, humbling himself to become one of us, even the least of us. So we would expect his birth, far from being a cause of fanfare like a royal birth, would have been pretty understated. I mean, the shepherds *had* to be told that the savior was born and where to find him; it wasn't obvious to them or really anyone else.

Now, what I am saying in no way takes away from the divine mystery of the Incarnation. I mean, how could you diminish such an incomprehensible thing like that. God becoming man is like trying to contain Niagara Falls in a teacup! Is there anyone here who pretends to understand that, who imagines they can comprehend the awesome love in the heart of God that inspired and brought about Christmas? The point is rather that, to the outside observer, the birth of Jesus was *remarkably unremarkable*.

That fact hasn't stopped Christian piety down through the centuries from prettifying the Babe in Bethlehem. Christian art has trivialized the divine scandal with gingerbread crèches, sentimentalized the smells of the stable into dignified pageants. Pious imagination and nostalgic music have made Christmas into something it's not—a sanitized, rarified, otherworldly event. You can understand this—people want to draw out its theological significance by gilding the momentous event. But in doing so, we run the risk of missing the point, of losing the present in the wrapping paper.

This happened to me when I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem years ago. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher houses both Calvary, the hill on which Jesus was crucified, and the stone tomb where his body was laid. Despite the importance of these sites to the Christian faith, the church building is pretty unimpressive architecturally, in comparison to the great cathedrals in Europe or even those in the US. But that doesn't mean that the ecclesiastical authorities in charge of the church haven't done their best to festoon the sites, decorating them with vivid icons and silver engravings, colorful hanging lamps and gilt mosaics. To my Western artistic sensibilities, I thought the church rather ugly, to tell the truth, dark and cavernous.

More problematic though was that the decorations more often than not *hid* the places they were intended to highlight. I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher three times before I realized that the upper chapel where I had been was *Calvary!* The rock outcroppings of stone had been so hidden by the crowds and by all the decorations that I completely missed it!

The same thing happened at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Before I got there, I had seen a photo of a silver star which marked the place traditionally held to be where Jesus was born. But just as at Calvary, I entirely missed it! It wasn't until I got home and was looking through my photos that I realized that behind the crowd, through the screen of decorations beneath the altar was that silver star. I had managed to be ten feet from the site of Jesus' birth but didn't realize it, concealed as it was by all the ornamentation!

I wonder if the same could not be said of *us* in our celebration of Christmas? How much of the shaking reality of God-becoming-man, the inbreaking of the divine into the world, has been obscured by our preoccupations with Santa, gift-giving and turkey dinners?

Let's be honest, it's hard to get excited about something as ordinary as the way I've described Jesus' birth. It's so much easier to focus on the ornamentation, the embellishments, the customs that have grown up around the event. The challenge is then to see the miraculous in the midst of the commonplace.

To go back to that first Christmas, before all the traditions and ornamentation began to crowd out the cradle, and to see in the normal-looking baby something truly special, holy, divine; to see in the scrunched-up face of the newborn babe the face of the Creator of the universe; to hear in his plaintive cries the voice of the One who spoke order into being: "Let there be light"; to feel in his balled-up fist the power that set the galaxies in motion; to recognize the majesty, the sovereignty, the power and might contained in the flesh of a fragile, helpless infant; to see in an ordinary looking baby the one who would change the world—apart from the shepherds and perhaps Mary and Joseph, no one else saw that.

The question remains for us, can we look at the Christ child and not see a baby but the messiah, the one who would give his life that we might have eternal life in him? Can we see that, see it through all the tinsel and wrapping paper and Christmas lights?

This is not just some academic or pious question. It goes to the heart of the situation that we are in as a people and as a country. We are in the midst of a people, a nation that is beset by fear, by loneliness, by addictions. By all measures, we are not doing well—physically sick, starved of

meaningful relationships, anxious about our careers and afraid to commit to marriage and parenthood, killing ourselves slowly through deaths of despair.

No amount of jingle bells, or eggnog, or pumped-up Christmas spirit is going to help people like this, those who walk in darkness, who live lives of quiet desperation. These people have no problem seeing through the façade of holiday cheer and know it's all pretense and poppycock. In fact, they are keenly aware of the illusions of life, having seen so many of the things they trusted in, hoped for, fall apart. What they lack, what they miss, is hope, hope for something better, hope that what appears to be true—their life is over, meaningless—is not the case, a sense that in the commonness, the humbleness, the brokenness of their lives there is an opportunity for God to intervene, to break in and redeem them.

But how can they know this unless they are taught to see? How will they recognize it unless they are shown to look beyond their everyday misery, shown how to see by people who know that there's more to this life than meets the eye? How can they have hope, unless someone shows them that despite all appearances, they are worthy of love?

This is where we come in. We come together each Sunday, to rehearse the story of God, hearing how God has acted in the past, how over and over again He has used the unremarkable and commonplace to carry out his grand acts of salvation. We rehear and rehearse these stories so that we know them and can then recognize God acting in our lives today, so that we can show others where He is working in their lives too.

Jesus came in the midst of unremarkable circumstances. He was easy to miss. Even when we draw attention to him and try to pretty up his birth, decking the walls of the stable with tinsel and holiday cheer, it is easy to lose him. Yet God calls us to the manger, He invites us to see the Christ child, to see in an ordinary-looking baby the hope of the world, that others may have hope too. This is our charge and our joy, our Christmas joy. Thanks be to God!