

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 25th, 2016
Christmas Day: God at Three Miles an Hour
Rev. John Crow

Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98:1-5
Titus 3:3-7
Luke 2:1-20

The largest ship ever built, on its maiden voyage across the Atlantic. A young couple with a forbidden love. The ship sinks, revealing both heroism and cowardice among its passengers. Whether or not you've seen the movie, I'm sure you have figured out by now that I'm describing the movie *Titanic*. It was the top-grossing movie of all time. Now imagine another story. Like *Titanic*, this too is a historic event with which you are all familiar. A regional government orders a census for tax purposes. A blue-collar worker is betrothed to a young woman. They are travelling, but can't find room at the village hotel. They have a baby while travelling, and some guys working the night shift hear about it. Nothing too exciting here. If this were pitched to a Hollywood executive for a movie, it would almost certainly be turned down based on this plot. It's too *every day*—too mundane. And yet, this is the story we read in today's gospel reading. Luke records details of life that are completely ordinary. People get engaged. People have babies. People pay taxes. I grant you that when the angels show up in verse

9, it ceases to be just another story about a young couple. In fact, knowing the back story as we do, this is no ordinary child, and it is no ordinary birth. But Luke still makes his point: we are all bound by the mundane. No surprise there; but what *is* surprising is that even God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, became subject to the mundane. The Son of God, who was there at the beginning of time, and will be there at the end of time—who is the central actor in all of history—lived as one of us. That is so utterly absurd, and yet, so beautiful. The Word became flesh: this is the central theme of probably every Christmas sermon ever preached. This sermon will be no different. We need to unpack this, however. There are a few key points that deserve our attention today. First, we shouldn't down-play the mundane things of life, because Christ became subject to them, and in so doing, elevated them. Secondly, we should be concerned for the physical well-being of others, while remembering what we do in the body matters. Lastly, we should live in such a way that demonstrates our understanding that the mundane is not in competition with the spiritual.

When the Son of God became born of Man, it created a two-way movement. Yes, He lowered Himself, and came down to the level of humanity, with all its pains, discomforts, and limitations; but in doing so, He also elevated humanity. In the

unique person of the God-man, humanity has been lifted up. This goes **way** beyond Michael Jordan promoting Nike. While an athlete can lend his own credibility to a product, Jesus chose to forever intimately connect himself with us. Humanity became part of the God-head! If you're like me, trying to wrap your brain around this truth is an exercise in futility, so I'm not even going to try. But we can accept this as truth: The Son of God elevated Humanity.

There are world religions and philosophies that take a very different approach to the mundane things of life. They don't elevate them to something worthy of honor, but rather encourage adherents to rise "above" such things. The spiritual is good; the physical is bad; therefore, we must rise above the physical. In fact, the next time you meet someone who is extremely hungry, or cold, or sleep-deprived, just tell them to rise above such mundane needs. I'm sure they will feel better immediately. No, we know the truth: We are physical beings with souls. We are not one without the other. Even in Heaven we will have bodies. In life we must eat and breathe. We need to work and rest. These are not bad. These are not boring. These are not beneath us. And unlike some other belief systems, Christianity accepts, and even celebrates such things.

We have a word for people who understand this idea of the mundane being honorable; we call it *humble*. Such people have successfully withstood society's message that one's worth is based on how much they make. Those things that society tends to consider as lowly, the humble person understands as being perfectly worthy of our time. While capitalism has done a lot of good for mankind, one of the biggest dangers it presents is the very subtle idea that everything, and *everyone*, has a value that can be quantified in dollars. Some have said *net worth is how we keep score*. Christ says, "why are you keeping score?" The humble person understands there is no score to keep, apart from pleasing God. Jesus embraced the mundane, and was humble. Apologies to Andrew Lloyd Weber, but Jesus wasn't a super star flying overhead in His private jet; He was the man walking at three miles an hour along some dusty road.

Let's go one step further into Luke's narrative of the mundane surrounding the birth of Jesus. It wasn't just a series of mundane events; it was a story exuding shame. In those days, it was considered a requirement of etiquette that one open his home to strangers in need, but even more so to family. The exception to this would be if someone lived such a life of disgrace that to be seen with that person would be to bring shame upon oneself. If Joseph was returning to his ancestral

home of Bethlehem, then it is fairly likely that he had some extended family still living there. Why, then, would no one in his family open their home to him and his betrothed? The likely answer is because she was obviously pregnant prior to being married. Of course, there is no way to prove such a conclusion, but I would argue that it is quite likely. So Jesus was born in shame, and as a result, he was placed in a feeding trough for barnyard animals. The birth of the King of Kings should have been celebrated around the world, but instead found the Babe born not in a palace, but in a place where only animals should be born. The Messiah's life didn't just begin amidst mundane details, but in a story of humiliation. I would hope this would give us pause next time we see someone we are tempted to dishonor because of their shameful existence. Might we be too quick to judge, rather than to help? And in doing so, are we not puffing ourselves up with sinful pride? I think Jesus' example later in life shows how we ought to treat others whom we are tempted to scorn.

In addition to elevating humanity and teaching us to avoid scorning others, the nativity shows us that we should be concerned for the physical well-being of others, while remembering what we do in the body matters. Some churches are very strong on evangelizing. Typically, those are not the same churches that are

strong on caring for the needs of the poor and marginalized. I think Jesus' embrace of the mundane demonstrates that physical well-being matters. If one isn't healthy, warm, and fed, it is hard to focus on spiritual matters. Psychology calls this the *hierarchy of needs*. Jesus met physical needs throughout His ministry, thereby setting the example for us. If we want to look at an extreme example of using soul-care as an excuse to ignore the body, look back to our own history when slavery was common in the US. Some slave owners justified their actions by saying that while the slaves may be under harsh physical conditions, they were encouraged to have worship services every Sunday; so their spiritual needs were being met. Christ's life revealed the lie in such thinking.

And we cannot ignore our sins in the body by rationalizing that what I do in the body does not matter, since it is my soul that is eternal. Wrong! The Son of God took on a human body, and felt what we feel. The body is a temple, we read in 1 Corinthians 6:19. And as I mentioned earlier, we will have bodies in eternity. We praise God with our hands, our voices, our bodies—so let us refrain from doing evil with those same bodies.

The last point I want to highlight is that the mundane is not in competition with the spiritual. In his book, My Utmost for His Highest, Oswald Chambers wrote, “Beware of allowing yourself to think that the shallow concerns of life are not ordained by God; they are as much of God as the profound” (327). God used a very mundane census decree for the purposes of taxation to be the means by which Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem when it was time for her to give birth. If God can use taxes to accomplish His purposes, He can use **anything**. The everyday, mundane things of life often present unexpected opportunities to develop a Godly character and minister to others. The truth is, we rarely face momentous decisions that clearly impact our spiritual growth. It’s the little things, like how you handle it when another driver is careless or rude, that we face regularly, and builds, one brick at a time, the foundation of our character in Christ.

This realization should bring about two responses in us. First, we should see the mundane in a new light. See every-day circumstances with joy, because what appears mundane to us, can have significance in Christ. Standing in line at the grocery store may not be the waste that you think it is. If some good can come

out of it, then waiting isn't a waste of time, and I should respond in joy to my God who gives all things meaning.

Our second response is to see all the mundane circumstances as opportunities for worship. Unless you are the President of the United States, you face mundane situations all day, every day. And as we know, God uses the mundane to accomplish what He desires. So we should turn these circumstances into acts of worship. We can't get out of the mundane; in fact, we shouldn't. What we should do, is worship God through them. This can be hard to do when we don't see what good will come of a particular circumstance, but that is precisely what we ought to do. Praise God when you are brushing your teeth. Praise God when you are having a business meeting. And yes, praise God when you are paying taxes. Jesus Christ embraced the mundane when He entered our world as a babe. And he strengthens us today, through the mundane elements of bread and wine—physical elements through which He continues to work His grace in us. God uses the mundane for our spiritual benefit, so we can worship God through the mundane in our life.

Christmas is a time for believing. So many Christmas movies encourage children to believe in Santa. Well we get to believe in something so much greater than a jolly man in a red suit! We get to believe, and know down in the very depth of our souls, that the Messiah:

Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance a man, he humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, 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 2:6-11, NIV)