

Ordinary People

Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25

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I love the way Matthew begins his story, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” He begins in an ordinary, matter-of-fact kind of way. Matthew doesn’t tell us anything about the birth itself, just its conception and how and why Jesus received his name. Jesus means “he will save his people” we are told, and it is the Hellenized or Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua.

Joseph does what he is told by the heavenly messenger. He obeys. Quietly, unwaveringly, and with steadiness, Joseph risks public humiliation, fear of becoming a social outcast and goes on. An ordinary man obedient to God even though he has no idea what all God plans to do through these events. Joseph simply does what he is told to do. That is why the church has traditionally referred to him as one of the two first disciples.

Traditionally, the church has called Mary the first disciple. She was the first to believe and obey. And even though Luke tells her story with a bit more drama than Matthew’s telling of Joseph’s, we still get the message that here was an ordinary young woman – really a teenage girl – who embodied extraordinary courage and faith in God to be able to say, “Let it be to me according to your will.”

Here is the story of two ordinary people caught up in the grand purpose of God, because they both obeyed.

More than one theologian of the church over the centuries has said that the great miracle that surrounded the birth of Jesus was not the miraculous conception of Jesus or the virgin birth, they have said that the real miracle that happened here is that Mary and Joseph believed and obeyed.

In Mary's story she responds with wonderment and eventually, with her cousin Elizabeth, Mary sings her great song the Magnificat. And her obedience was enough for God to begin the great work of the salvation of all creation.

Joseph never says a word in the whole story. In fact, Joseph never says a word in the whole of the New Testament. But he did what God told him. And it was enough.

There is an old rabbinical story of one of the great rabbis who when there was a great crisis in the life of God's people, this great rabbi went to a particular place in the forest, built a great fire, said a particular prayer, cried to God for salvation, and the story says, "It was enough; for God saw the fire in the place, heard the prayer and heard the cry, and God saved his people."

A generation passed and another grave crisis came upon the people. This rabbi, a disciple of the first did not remember the place in the forest and he could not remember the words to the prayer, but he built a fire at home and cried to God for mercy. And the story says, "It was enough."

Another generation passed and another crisis came upon the people. This third rabbi, a disciple of the second, could not remember the place in the forest, could not remember the particular prayer, and could not remember to cry to God for mercy, but he remembered the fire. So he built the fire at home. And God said,

“It was enough.”

For Mary and Joseph, the great miracle was the simple act of obedience. And it was enough.

And through it all Joseph never says a word.

Mary receives the news and it causes her to become literally involved in body and soul in the movement of God in the world. But Joseph receives the news about Mary. And I’ve wondered about that. Most of us might be more like Joseph in this regard. Most of the news we have about Jesus is second-hand news. We have someone else tell us about Jesus or perhaps we hear of someone else who has had some extraordinary experience with Jesus. But most of the time for most of us, we quietly hear of others, and we go on and seek to obey God. No trumpets, no dramatic songs. We seek to do the right thing, the godly thing. And God says, “It is enough.”

One of the finest Christians I’ve ever known is a fellow named Laddie. He was a member of my first congregation. Raised on a farm, poor, he still lived out in the country but worked for the electric company climbing poles. He could be one of the shyest men I’ve even known.

The second time I was at the church was the Sunday they voted on whether to extend a call to me as their new pastor. I stood out on the front porch with Laddie while the rest of the church called an official business meeting inside in order to vote. Laddie’s job was to keep me company. They couldn’t have chosen a more uncomfortable job for Laddie. All he could do was put his hands in his jeans pockets and dig his toe in the porch and stare at the ground. He was a nervous

wreck trying to keep me company. Finally, someone opened the door and handed him a piece of paper. He looked at it and broke into a big grin and said, “They’ve voted 12 to 1 to call you as our preacher. What do you say?”

I didn’t know if I could be their pastor or not. What did I know? I was twenty-three years old. But I thought that I might be able to be his pastor, so I said “yes.” Looking back, I think God said, “It was enough.”

Laddie May never would say a word in church. Never. He would just turn red in the face. But over the years I learned time and time again, that every time there was a death, every time someone got sick, every time there was a crisis, Laddie would quietly show up and fix whatever needed fixing at the house or mow the grass or cut wood. He’s the man, along with his brother-in-law, who got me to help cut wood every fall for the elderly women in the church who had old-timey wood-burning stoves in their houses. Sitting on the tail gate of his pickup one Saturday morning, we had sharpened the chain saws and oiled and gassed them up. He reached over and offered me the bag of Red Man chewing tobacco and said, “Preacher, you can’t cut wood without a chaw.” We both got a chaw and proceeded to cut wood, until about 30 minutes later when I got sick. He laughed, then turned red that he laughed. And I have to give them credit, he and his brother-in-law never told a soul about me getting sick.

The time a big fellow started coming after me in a church business meeting saying that he was tired of me talking about race and that he was going to whip me right there in the church, Laddie was one of the four men who stood in front of the man, blocking him. The only time I ever heard him speak in church he said, “If you’re going to whip the preacher you need to take it outside.” After they got him

outside, they stood in front of him and said, “Now if you’re going to whip the preacher, you’re going to have to whip us first.” Laddie blushed through the whole thing, but he didn’t back down. And I’m grateful.

That was nearly forty years ago.

And for most of those years he kept the elderly women supplied with firewood, fixed their plumbing, changed their light bulbs, worked on their water heaters, and did the same at the little church. Over all those years he rarely said a word.

And God says, “It is enough.”

What is interesting to me in these stories of Mary and Joseph is that these two ordinary people, living everyday ordinary lives have their lives disrupted by the Living God. And in turn, things are never the same. They live ordinary lives preparing themselves for the unknown. That’s the essence of Christian discipleship: preparing ourselves with daily habits of fidelity and integrity, so when God intervenes, we’ll be ready, we’ll be able to hear, and we’ll be able to follow.

Back in the mid-1980’s, when I lived in Atlanta, GA, I got to know a couple of men who worked for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. Now you probably don’t know this, but back in 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s the SBC Home Mission Board had some really good people doing good work on justice, peacemaking, and anti-racism. What I discovered is that several of them were former pastors who in the late 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s had made a stand one way or another in churches somewhere in the South against racist segregation. Their stories were mostly

untold and are still untold and unknown, but they were ordinary people who, when the time came, did the right thing.

Most of the stories of pastors making a stand, did not go well. They were fired and run-off. Many found employment somewhere else doing something completely different from ministry. But a few were able to get on with the Home Mission Board.

One man I got to know never talked about it, but one of his friends told me his story. He was the pastor of the First Baptist Church in a county-seat town in the deep South in the mid-1960's. Someone in town called a meeting to organize and come up with a plan to stop this "commingling of the races" by the courts, and make sure no so-called "outside agitators" came to town and got the local black people in an uproar so they would try to register to vote.

On the night of the meeting, the local high school auditorium was packed to the rafters with the mobilized, angry White citizenry. It was explosive, mean, ugly, and heated by both the summer temperatures and the crowd's temperament. After the meeting had gone on for some time, and the atmosphere being racked with tension, this pastor stepped to the microphone.

He was distinguished, and it was obvious that he was well-known and well-respected in the community. The crowd quickly fell silent in order to hear what he had to say.

"I am ashamed," he began with tones and rhythms well-known to people hearing Southern Baptist preachers all their lives. "I have labored here for many years. I have baptized, preached to, and counseled many people in this room. I

might have thought that my preaching of the gospel had done some good. But tonight, I think differently. I cannot speak to those who are not of my congregation, but to those who are, I can only say that I am hurt and ashamed of you, and I expected more.”

His short, sincere sermon given, the pastor departed from the microphone and left the meeting. Awkwardly, over the next hour or so, other people began leaving as well until the meeting adjourned having lost its bluster. Schools integrated a month later without incident.

Yet, a couple of months later, he and his family were told that in a quiet church vote, he had to leave the church and leave town.

Here was a pastor, an ordinary person, who had labored for decades doing ordinary things among ordinary people, for the privilege of being a witness on one night in August.

And God says, “it was enough.”

Joseph never says a word in the New Testament. But he has his challenges. He and Mary have to put up with public humiliation and embarrassment. And he is responsible for protecting the child – even though the child is not his biological child, he still had to risk his life, and Mary’s too, in protection against Herod. He and Mary, no sooner had Jesus been born, had to flee for their lives to the strange and frightening land of Egypt. Furthermore, as Jesus grew up, Joseph had to put up with all kinds of strangeness of God made flesh in Jesus. Matthew does not tell of the incident, but Luke does, of the time when Joseph and Mary were up at the Temple, and embarrassingly left young Jesus behind. (Anyone here ever left their

child behind at church?) But you remember what happened with Jesus. This precocious child was debating the biblical scholars at the Temple. I wonder what quiet Joseph thought of all that?

Matthew tells us that not only will this baby be named Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins,” but also that he will be known as “Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” I like how Matthew and Luke give the genealogy of Jesus. We usually bypass the genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 because they are a boring list of names. I like them because they are boring lists of ordinary people. And it is into those lists of ordinary people that God intrudes to be with us. Emmanuel.

This Fourth Sunday of Advent let’s remember these ordinary people, Joseph and Mary, and how God is with them. As we move close to the Feast of the Blessed Nativity, Christmas, maybe we can identify with these plain, ordinary people. After all, that is who we are. Ordinary people. Most of us live and work in plain, ordinary places. Joseph and Mary were from Nazareth – and as the old saying goes from back in those days, “can anything good come from Nazareth?” Well, we don’t hear that about Nacogdoches, but we do hear the derogatory term, “Nac-a-nowhere.”

And like Joseph, we are rarely the first to get the news when God makes some large move. We hear it from someone else. And we mind our own business. But then, perhaps when we least expect it, or because we least expect it, God intrudes in our ordinary lives. God comes upon us. And even if you are not good with words, don’t have much to say, and couldn’t burst into a hymn if your life depended upon it, if you will at least whisper, “yes,” then that makes you like

Joseph.

God calls us to be disciples. Somebody who is willing to follow the strange and unexpected movements of God in Jesus Christ wherever that takes us.

And that is enough.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.