

Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-20

Making the Ordinary Extraordinary*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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One of the best things about being in New York City this time of year are the Christmas traditions all around us. I'm thinking of the windows at Macy's and Saks Fifth Avenue. The Christmas trees at Rockefeller Center and all around the city. And the performances of the Messiah in so many churches and concert halls. Even after some two decades of living here, I still find it all quite amazing.

But, to be honest, there's one thing that says "Christmas" to me even more than these marvelous traditions. And that's the animated holiday TV specials that I – and I suspect many of you – grew up with. You know what I'm talking about. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. The Little Drummer Boy. A Charlie Brown Christmas.

It's amazing that these TV shows have lasted for more than half a century. Did you know that Rudolph is celebrating his 54th year in our living rooms – and now, digitally, on our phones and tablets? What is it about these shows that are so enduring and that appeal to so many people?

Well, I believe that there is one theme that ties these specials together. And it's this: At Christmas, the ordinary becomes the extraordinary. All of these specials are about ordinary individuals (or ordinary reindeers or elves). None of the protagonists have great power or social status. In fact, you might even say that these shows are about social outcasts.

There is Rudolph who is made fun of because of his nose. You have Hermey the Elf who is rejected because he wants to become a dentist. You have the orphaned Little Drummer Boy, Aaron, who has nothing to his name but his drum and his beloved lamb Baba. And you have a melancholy boy named Charlie Brown who is mocked for his pageant-directing skills and his choice of a wilted Christmas tree.

But, then, each of them becomes extraordinary in their own right. Rudolph is the one who saves Christmas on a foggy night because of his shiny nose. Hermey saves the day for the residents of the North Pole by pulling out the teeth of the Abominable Snow Monster. The Little Drummer Boy gets to perform for the Baby Jesus and makes him smile. And Charlie Brown helps his friends to understand the true meaning of Christmas. At Christmas, the ordinary becomes the extraordinary.

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Tonight is Christmas Eve, and tonight we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said in his Christmas Message to the Episcopal Church, it was on this night, some two thousand years ago, that “Love came down.” “God so loved the world” – and God so loved us – that the divine became human, and the Word became Flesh.

And what a celebration of God’s love this is! There is something extraordinary about our Midnight Mass at the Little Church. Just look around. The beautiful choral and instrumental music. The exquisite liturgy and vestments. The poinsettias and the greenery in the church. Everyone dressed up in our Christmas finest. Extraordinary indeed.

And yet, as St. Luke’s gospel reminds us tonight, at the very center of this celebration – and at the very center of this extraordinary beauty – is a simple story of an ordinary young woman and an ordinary stable. The Nativity story is about a young woman who is unmarried and about to give birth. She has little political power or social standing. She and her fiancé are required to travel to his ancestral town, in a far corner of the Roman Empire, to be registered for a census. But because there are so many other people around, they can’t even find a place for her to give birth.

And, so, this young woman, far away from home, gives birth in a ordinary stable, surrounded by ordinary animals. Instead of a fancy crib, the baby is placed in a feeding trough. (That’s what the word “manger” means, after all.) The woman, her fiancé, and her newborn son are visited by none other than shepherds. Shepherds, of course, were nothing special in the Roman Republic – they were about as far away from the ruling elite as anyone was.

And, yet, it is in this ordinary setting that the course of salvation history changes. It is in this ordinary time and place that God chooses to enter human existence. Not some fancy royal palace or wealthy estate. Not with the ruling classes or the financial elite. But a smelly, dirty stable with plain old animals and shepherds. The Incarnation happens through a seemingly unremarkable, unwed mother, who is traveling on the borderlands of Empire. At Christmas, God makes the ordinary extraordinary.

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But that’s not all. It’s not just the stable and the animals and the shepherds and the Holy Family that God makes extraordinary. God transforms you and me – that is, each and every one of us – by the miracle of Christmas. God became human so that we humans could become divine.

It’s what theologians call the Divine Exchange. God came down and took on flesh so that we could be lifted up and be redeemed as God’s beloved children. In the Incarnation, God begins the reversal of original sin. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, the yoke of our burdens – and the bars across our shoulders – have been broken. In fact, the Nativity even points to the

Resurrection. The baby's swaddling clothes and the manger at Christmas is a foreshadowing of the shroud and the empty tomb at Easter.

In other words, Christmas is an extraordinary love letter to us by God. Through the miracle of Christmas, God says to each and every one of us: I love you. To all those who are made fun of – and to all those who feel rejected, isolated, or mocked – God says: You are everything to me. To all the Rudolphs, Hermes, Aarons, Charlie Browns, and Marys out there, God says: I love you so much, that I have chosen to come down, to live and die among you. And you will be forever changed by this.

No wonder the angels appear and sing the Gloria tonight. They proclaim “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom He favors!” God takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary.

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Later in tonight's mass, we will move from the Liturgy of the Word to the Liturgy of the Table – from sermon to sacrament. Through the Eucharistic Prayer, our ordinary gifts of bread and wine will be transformed into the extraordinary grace of the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Feed on him in your hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving. Once again, God takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary.

On this night some two thousand years ago, Love came down and dwelt among us. Through the Incarnation, God took the ordinary and made it extraordinary. And this transformative work of Love continues to this day, as the Christ child is reborn in the mangers of our hearts. May we recognize God's loving and transformative work all around us, tonight and always.

Merry Christmas.