

- An old, dirty, smelly stable or cave... a manger filled with hay...
- A young couple weary / worn from their long journey and the happenings of the day...
- A tiny newborn baby, wrinkled and red... resting in his mother's arms...
- A bright heaven-sent star shining above... angels announcing "*Good news of great joy*"...
- A group of shepherds—rough, dirty men with skin calloused and hardened by the sun and wind—gathered at the entrance... peering in by the light of a fire to see what "heavenly thing" has happened...

The nativity scene looks pretty much the same year after year, doesn't it?!

Most of us have heard Luke's Christmas story so many times that we know it by heart. We listen to the words being read... and our imaginations take over—we picture the scene... we hear the sounds... we enter into the story in our mind's eye.

It is a story that we love. But do we really believe it / claim its promise for ourselves? Do we allow ourselves... our lives...to be impacted by the TRUTH of this *extra-ordinary happening* of God?!

That is what Christmas is, you know. In the truest sense, Christmas is so much more than just a holiday season we celebrate each year... much more than just a story that we return to hear, year after year. It is a happening—an *extra-ordinary happening* of God! It is something that happened in history long ago... but it is also something that happens to us, still today. It is something totally unexpected that God did... that God continues to do—a gift of grace... a gift of love... a gift of God's own presence—that has the power to change us... and the world!

That is what it was for the shepherds that first Christmas so long ago—an *extra-ordinary happening* in the midst of their very *ordinary* lives... on just another *ordinary* night...

After a long hard day of tending their sheep, they were sitting on a hillside... resting around a warm campfire... eating a simple meal... probably swapping stories / jokes... just like every other night for the past who-knows-how-many nights...

... when, suddenly, the pitch-black night sky exploded with brightness. One minute they were groggy and falling asleep; the next they were rubbing their eyes... as they found themselves drenched in heavenly glory—or as Luke puts it, "...*the glory of the Lord shone around them.*"

The *ordinary* was *ordinary* no more! In the blazing light, an angel—a messenger from God—appeared to them with a startling announcement: "*I have really good news for you,*" the angel said, "*good news of great joy – for you...and for everyone!*"

"*Something amazing / something extra-ordinary has happened! A Savior has just been born in David's town—a Savior who is the Messiah you have been waiting for. Let me tell you how you can find him. Go and look for a baby wrapped in bands of cloth...lying in a manger.*"

And as soon as that angel finished talking, a whole choir of angels appeared and began singing God's praises: "*Glory to God in the heights of heaven... and peace to all women and men on earth.*"

Can you imagine such an *extra-ordinary* thing?!

Well, the shepherds talked it over amongst themselves and decided, “*Let us go down to Bethlehem and see for ourselves this extra-ordinary happening that God has told us about.*” So they did... and they found the baby, just as the angel had told them, lying in a manger. And seeing it, they couldn’t help but tell everyone what the angel had said about this special baby boy.

Then they returned to the fields forever changed, glorifying and praising God for the gift of the baby Jesus—the Savior... the Messiah... the Lord.

But... have you ever wonder *why* in the world God would choose a group of shepherds, of all people, to share this news with first?!

Lowly shepherds seem like unlikely messengers for such an *extra-ordinary happening* – hardly ones we would expect to be entrusted with such earth-shattering news. I mean, while we might view shepherds as quaint and hardworking, shepherds in the ancient world were of considered by most to be outcasts. As one biblical scholar put it, “*In the first century, shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on others’ land.*” In other words, shepherds were NOT looked upon favorably. They were held in very low esteem.

So, to our way of thinking, a group of shepherds would be among the least likely to receive a visit from God’s messengers. And yet, they were the ones led to Jesus’ birthing place... they were the ones who left the stable rejoicing and telling the good news to those they met.

To our way of thinking, shepherds would hardly be considered trustworthy witnesses / sources for news of such importance. And yet, they were the first to hear... the first to see... the first to tell of Jesus’ birth.

Perhaps this *is* part of the message of Christmas... it begs us to realize that *the holy* doesn’t just happen to “religious people” in the house of God... not just to “important people” in places of power and prestige... but to *ordinary*, undeserving people the world over—from the “lowest of the low”... to people like us!

The story of the birth of Jesus reveals the great paradox of the incarnation. Think about it. The Savior of the world... the Christ... the Lord of all—born in the most unlikely of places... in the most unlikely way... with a very unlikely cast of characters gathered around as participants and witnesses to this *extra-ordinary happening*.

- Jesus was born to an unwed teenage mother engaged to a humble carpenter... far from “home” in a tiny town in the corner of a forgotten land...
- Jesus was wrapped in simple bands of cloth to keep him warm... and laid in an animal feeding trough instead of a crib / bed...
- Jesus was welcomed into this world by a bunch of lowly, “outcasts” / shepherds...

Does that sound like the proper place... the proper way for God’s Son—the long-awaited Messiah—to be born?! The majesty of God... clothed in such humbleness?! The mystery of God—of God’s very presence—found in a tiny, vulnerable baby?!

The truth is, most of the world missed that *extr-aordinary happening* because it came wrapped in such *ordinary* trappings.

- As far as the inn-keeper was concerned, Jesus was just another baby.
- To his childhood friends and neighbors in Nazareth, Jesus was just the son of a simple carpenter—Mary and Joseph’s son... nothing more.

Sometimes God comes to us, as God did to the shepherds, through an angelic *holy moment*.

But more often than not, God reveals God's self in more mundane, *ordinary* ways – like “*a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger*”... like words of encouragement spoken by a friend in the dark hour of sorrow... or in a child's smile... or even a sermon. More often than not, it is in the unexpected... in the unlikely... in the *ordinary*... that God meets us.

The apostle Paul talked about God's strange ways in his letter to the church in Corinth. This is how he put it: “...*but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are...*” (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

It is a mystery, indeed, that we celebrate each Christmas—one that reaches beyond even what Luke can tell us. The birth of Jesus is an incomprehensible *extra-ordinary* in-breaking of the holy into the *ordinary*...

The reality of the *ordinary* is that it is made up of joy mixed in with pain and sorrow, uncertainty and adversity...

The reality of the *ordinary* is that it has blessings and pain intermingled...

For the *ordinary* human experience—our experience—is filled with struggle and pain... it is filled with anxiety and fear... questions and doubt... Yet, at the same time, it is also filled with hope and joy... love and faith.

As we know all too well, there are many troubling things in the world right now—a global pandemic... devastating wildfires, hurricanes, and storms... bitter political divides... social isolation... private pain... and so much more.

The coronavirus pandemic has turned life-as-we-knew-it upside down...

We wonder what will happen next... what the new year will bring...

Many today carry the pain of loss – of people... relationships... safety... dreams...

Many today are upset / anxious about the state of the world / the state of our nation... about racial injustice... inequality... climate change / devastating storms and fires... and so much more.

Dear friends, it is precisely into this reality—the reality of our real, *ordinary* lives—lives filled with distress... and pain... with grief / loss... with fears... and brokenness / need—that God comes!

That is the promise of Christmas! That is what Christmas celebrates—that in Jesus, God became one of us—that in Jesus, God came to dwell with us... Emmanuel, “God with us.” Which means that God is, indeed, *with us* in the muck and mire (and joys and blessings) of our current realities—with us... alongside us... in us... and around us...

It wasn't just for the shepherds... or for Mary and Joseph that Jesus came.

It was for you. It was for me. It was for us. It was for all people!

“...*unto us a child has been born, unto us a son given... and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*”