



The Normalcy of Christmas

The first Christmas was not picturesque, but messy, real-life. We learn that Christmas isn't about eradicating our difficulties but seeing God's plan unfold in the midst of them.

Luke 1-2, Matthew 1

INTRODUCTION

We all have a natural inclination and desire for significance. I don't know anyone who doesn't want to know that their life matters. We often measure the significance of our lives by the miraculous moments in it. If we could choose, our lives would be lived on spiritual mountaintops.

EXAMPLE: When Peter, James, and John witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain and Peter, awestruck by the supernatural weight of the moment opens his mouth without thinking much (surprise) and says, *Luk 9:33 – 33 ..."Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said.*

But can we blame him? Who would have thought any differently?

TRUTH: We long for the miraculous, but here's the reality, most of our life is not lived on the mountaintops but filled with the seemingly mundane, challenging, everyday difficulties of the seemingly endless valleys. The everyday drudge and the ins and outs of life; the wondering and wandering of when and why and how long, and how much? The mundane can discourage us, weigh us down, and even convince us that God is inactive in our lives or that we are nothing more than complete failures.

This is often accentuated and amplified during the holiday season. When holidays draw near, expectations go up. We want Christmas to be incredibly memorable. We set our expectations high for gifts and, giving, family. The decor rises to the occasion, along with our waistlines! We want to go away from Christmas, feeling like something significant has happened.

And, of course, our desire for the miraculous and significance is not all bad. It's only when we begin to measure our significance only by the miraculous that we can easily get off course.

We must be careful, for if we gauge our value or set our expectations only on "Bigger than life" moments, we will miss the value of what God is accomplishing in all the moments in between. The moments of work we'd rather not be doing. The moments of difficulties we'd rather not be facing. The moments of normalcy that just don't seem significant enough to matter.

ILLUSTRATION

[chart 1] You see, we too have a tendency to mark all the "big" moments and remember the supernatural events of our lives. These are the moments we tend to live for and live from. We draw big circles around these events and highlight them. If it was our choice, every day of our lives would have a big circle event. But that's not how God works.

[chart-2] Between those events are the daily joys and struggles that end up defining us. God places concentric circle events that seem to us to be extra baggage. They often seem unimportant to us. They are moments of frustration or just plain normalcy that don't seem to have a value or purpose. When those seasons last a long time, we find ourselves becoming cynical and doubtful.

CHRISTMAS

As we examine the Christmas story, we recognize something incredibly important about God. **Sometimes the most supernatural workings of God are housed in some of the most seemingly natural and challenging events of life.** It is when we learn to trust, in faith, that God is working in all our normal moments that we can enjoy those moments for what they are.

In the Christmas story, we see inconveniences, and ordinary moments that God used to orchestrate His perfect plan. We see difficulties that God uses as opportunities. We see moments of rejection that God used for divine redirection.

Before we move on, let's say the obvious. The first Christmas season is full of supernatural events. We might call them GLORIOUS MOMENTS. These are moments that our Christmas plays and songs are built around.

- Divine visitations and visions of angelic announcements to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. A divinely placed star in the heavens, divine warnings through dreams.
- What we don't often think about are the monotonous, every-day events that filled the gaps between those supernatural moments.
- How frustrating was it for Zachariah to wake up every morning for nine months with no ability to speak? How many unanswered questions did Elizabeth, his wife, have about this strange phenomenon?
- Mary received a visit from an angel who delivered to her the most amazing promise ever known to human being, but what was it like seven months in when she hadn't had any more divine revelations, she was sore and sick, and on top of that, a national census came at the most inconvenient time because now she would have to make a long, arduous journey by foot and donkey and your back is already killing you! What are you going to do when you get there? Where are you going to stay? What about all the little problems that will occur between now and then?
- The shepherds had an incredible once-in-a-lifetime moment as they observed angel choirs declaring the Messiah's arrival, they rushed to see the Baby, they left rejoicing and telling everyone what they saw, yet the next week they were still in their fields with their dirty, frustrating sheep. They were still as poor as last week, nothing seemed to have changed all that much.
- Let's not miss the obvious. The most glorious moment in human history was shrouded by normalcy. God, the Creator, the Eternal One, became flesh. But only a few unlikely candidates were aware of it. There was no red carpet. Herod's halls weren't prepared for the newborn King; the priests, scribes, and Pharisees weren't awaiting with excitement and anticipation. There was just another young, poor, pregnant couple who could find a place to stay. Another peasant baby was born alongside animals and placed in a stone trough on top of some rags. Heaven's glory was in earth's manger, and the entire world was unaware.
 - ***It's true that sometimes the most glorious moments with God are the ones that seem as though nothing significant is happening at all.***

Sometimes we forget that all the people God used to orchestrate the incarnation were people like us. People who were afraid. People who were doing all they could to hold onto their past experiences with God and look forward by faith toward God's promises. These

were people who got discouraged, asked questions, and became frustrated in moments when things didn't seem to be going according to plan.

- The beauty of the Biblical accounts of the first Christmas is that they bring Christmas back down to earth without compromising its glory. It's a picture of what our lives should be, "Naturally supernatural."

The first Christmas brings hope to those of us who have to live "real-life," with real struggles, real disappointments, and real waiting. It reminds us that there was a point in human history when God became like one of us in every way, apart from sin, so that one day we might ultimately be with Him. But it's the *WAY* God did it that encourages us. ***God worked the most significant event of human history through the normal, everyday lives of people whom no one had ever heard of and who were all just doing their best.***

TRANSITION

So this morning I want to look at the "Normal" side of Christmas. I say that tongue-in-cheek because with God there really is no normal. This morning's message will challenge our view of normal.

Let's start leading up to the typical Christmas story by looking at Zacharias and Elizabeth and discover how God uses seasons of uncertainty in life.

1 Seasons of Uncertainty (Zacharias and Elizabeth)

BACKGROUND - LUKE 1

I think these first events are an intricate part of the first Christmas. The pregnancy of Mary with Jesus coincided with the pregnancy of her relative Elizabeth with the Messiah's forerunner, John. It was here, with John's parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth, the countdown

began to the Messiah's arrival. John's birth would be a supernatural moment of prophetic enormity. Isaiah prophesied that John would be:

[Isa 40:3 NKJV] 3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

But for the parents, it was anything but a season of certainty!

- They were both older and past childbearing age.
- Having been childless for so long, there was probably a stigma in the community about the couple.
- Even though a child was always considered a blessing and an answer to prayer, I'm sure at this point, they had put the hopes of a child far out of their thinking. Talk about a change of plans and redirection of course!
- So one day, this well-loved, highly revered, righteous man was fulfilling his annual duty of ministering in the temple before the Lord. But this day he was anticipating to be "normal," was anything but.
- I don't think any of us could blame him for his response when the following happened:

[Luk 1:8-9 NKJV] 8 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

So far, it seems like nothing supernatural is going on, but notice God's timing is interwoven into the normal schedule.

- **Approximately 20,000 priests were serving in Jerusalem at this time. In the order of Zacharias' division (the division of Abijah), there were probably 1000 priests. That order of priests would only serve in the temple twice a year. We get the sense that to be the chosen one to burn incense in the Holy of Holies was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity... but today, randomly, it was Zach's day.**

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 1:11-13 NKJV – 11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

CUSTOM

He goes on to describe the kind of man John will be, then the angel receives a response in verse 18:

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 1:18-20 NKJV – 18 And Zacharias said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.” 19 And the angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. 20 “But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”

APPLICATION

Zacharias hears this unbelievable news but backtalks the angel! He hears the news, and he knows it's divine! It's not every day an angel visibly stands right in front of you, in the temple, and verbally talks to you! ***“But how do I know?” Seriously Zach!?***

- Unlike Mary, who when visited by an angel received his message gladly by faith, old Zach has some questions and excuses for his doubt.
- "How will I know? I need more evidence. I can't simply take your word for it!"
- We are old and this is impossible! It's the same faithless laugh that Sarah had within herself when God told Abraham she would have a child.
- Zach would have done well to think about Abraham at that moment and keep his mouth shut!
- The angels looked at him and said, ***“If you want to open your mouth in doubt and faithlessness, then just shut up... and he did, for 9 months!”***
- God's words will be fulfilled in their own time (20)! ***Zacharias, it's God's job is to fulfill His promises, your job is to believe Him at His word.***

APPLICATION

You say, “Yeah if an angel came and spoke to me, I would believe him!” Would you? If it was about to change your life forever? If it ran against the entire realm of human possibility?

- As cool as it would be for any of us to receive a message from an angel, the book of Hebrews tells us that we have received a greater message from a greater messenger. God has spoken all of His promises to us through Jesus Christ!

[Heb 1:1-2 NKJV] 1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds;

- That means every promise in this book from God to the church is sealed by the perfect sacrifice of Christ.
- Do you believe him in seasons of life when you are uncertain? Do you believe He is working all things out for your good when things don't seem so good? Do you believe Him that he will use you and has prepared purposes for you when all you see are unanswered questions and all you have is a bunch of excuses as to why not?
- Let us be careful not to approach God with unbelief or cynicism. Like He did to Zacharias, God might allow something in our life that humbles us and magnifies our inabilities.

QUOTE

“*Sometimes God humbles us with the inability to control our circumstances in order to silence our unbelief and bring forth faith.*”

Josh

QUOTE

“ We must stop listening to the voice of our own unbelief.

ELIZABETH

What about poor Elizabeth?

She had to perceive that something divine was afoot, but the only one who saw the angel and heard the promise couldn't talk. Perhaps he wrote it to her, but she still never saw or heard herself, she had to trust the word of her husband that the Lord was at work through the confusion. Doubtless, she took note when the baby in her womb leaped when Mary came near when she was pregnant with Jesus.

But what did it all mean? Only time and faith could tell.

ILLUSTRATION

There have been countless times in my life when God refuses to answer my questions and explain all the details to me. He simply asks me to trust Him and to know that all His promises will work out in their own perfect time.

- **It's hard to verbalize, but I've even sensed times in my life when God has bridled me with a weakness or limitation so that I am helpless to do anything except watch His promise unfold.**
 - **Oh, I want to control it! I want to have a say in the process! I want to open my mouth and figure the whole thing out! But God has put me in positions where none of my words would provide any sense, and my strength would only get in the way. But through this season of prohibition and silence, Zacharias learned to wait on God.**
 - **He, no doubt, learned how to pray a lot. He was able to watch without getting in the way and listen without hearing his own objections.**
 - **When the promise came to pass, just as the angel said, the time came for His mouth to be opened.**
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BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 1:59-64 NKJV – 59 So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. **60** His mother answered and said, “No; he shall be called John.” **61** But they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.” **62** So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. **63** And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, “His name is John.” So they all marveled. **64** Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.

APPLICATION

We will all have seasons of uncertainty when God seems to be doing something outside the comfort of our borders. We will have questions, excuses, and doubts. There will be times when God silences us or straps us with a hindrance or weakness to bear. But all of it comes to build our faith and cause us to remember that even though we are uncertain about the present, ***God is not uncertain about anything.*** If we hold on to faith through the process, we too, will rejoice and glorify God when he does all He said He would do.

2 Seasons of Disappointment (Joseph)

QUOTE

““ *Disappointment is the natural result of unmet expectations and dashed hopes.*

- We are pretty spoiled. How many kids on Christmas will be disappointed because the glorious gifts they were expecting from their parents didn't meet their expectations.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 1:18-19 NKJV – 18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

JOSEPH

Who experienced more disappointment that first Christmas season than Joseph?

- We're told that Joseph was an honest and upright man. He was righteous and had done everything right in life.
- It was finally time for him to be married and have a family that would bring honor to his name.
- To a Jewish father, honor was everything, and in the Jewish mindset, **honor came to those who deserved it, dishonor to those who deserved it.**

Everything is going great. You have a secure trade, you are betrothed to a beautiful young lady from a family with a good reputation. Your future is looking bright! Then your fiancée comes up to you one day and says, ***"Um... I'm pregnant, but it didn't happen the way you think it happened. Merry Christmas!"***

- Not only would it have been a tremendous source of shame upon the family, but to have sexual relations outside of marriage was an offense punishable by death. Talk about your world blowing up overnight!
- Joseph was a just man who cared about Mary and would never see her stoned, but he still couldn't believe the story, I mean, would you? He decided to put her away quietly and dissolve the betrothment.
- ***What Joseph didn't know yet was that the blowing up of his world was the birthplace of God's plan.***

Eventually, God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream and told him what was going on, but even then, Joseph had to accept this reality by faith. And even after finding out that things

weren't as they seemed or as he thought, there was still an unexpected baby coming, and the baby still wasn't his blood child. **No matter how you slice it, Joseph's life was about to change forever and take a different course than the one he was planning.**

ILLUSTRATION

I know we can all retell stories of disappointments in our life. We've all had our share of them, some to greater degrees than others.

- Some disappointments are smaller: you didn't get what you wanted for Christmas or your friend forgot to call you on your birthday.
- Some disappointments are bigger and more far-reaching: Your spouse cheated on you or you got news of cancer. Your job changed, a big move happened unexpectedly.

But here's the thing: In every season of disappointment, small and great, we need to recognize that the disappointment is always more than what it appears to be on the surface.

- Whether the disappointment is a result of living in a sinful world with sinful people, or it's a result of a God redirecting your path, God will always use that disappointment to accomplish a greater purpose to those who look to Him through that season.
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QUOTE

“It's only when we choose faith in the midst of disappointment that we can begin to see the bigger plan of God unfold before us.

Josh

APPLICATION

Another Joseph, in the Old Testament, experienced intense disappointment as well. Being traded as a slave by his own jealous brothers, being falsely accused of a crime and thrown in prison, and all this while he had these promises of God that his father and brothers would

one day bow to him! Eventually, the plan of God unfolded and when his brothers finally discovered his identity, they fell down with a great apology. Remember Joseph's statement?

BIBLE PASSAGE

Gen 50:20 NKJV 20 "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God mean bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.

QUOTE

“ Don't ever assume the outcome of your disappointment. When God is involved, your disappointment is never the end of the story! Don't fall into the trap of believing that everything should go the way you were hoping because you did everything right.

Josh

APPLICATION

When Joseph actively chose faith over fear, He began to hear God in new ways. Later, He would hear the Lord again telling him to escape the hand of Herod and move to Egypt. He had learned to tune into God's voice and had allowed that season of disappointment and frustration to build His faith and trust the good hand of God.

Disappointment is inevitable for every person, but when you choose to look to Christ and trust in God's ability to redeem and restore, you can find hope and even joy through those disappointments.

3 Seasons of Inconvenience (census)

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 2:1-5 NKJV – 1 And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. 3 So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

ILLUSTRATION

After watching my wife go through the process of pregnancy 3 separate times, I know that having consistency, safety, and steadiness in life can be important to a woman who is pregnant. My wife didn't always get that in the circumstances, but it would have made the process easier and ideal.

- Mary had received word from Gabriel regarding her supernatural pregnancy. She received confirmation from Elizabeth when she visited and John leaped in Elizabeth's womb as soon as Mary approached.
- Things were going well with Joseph at this point.
- And then Ceasar Agustus had to issue a census of that land that required everyone to travel to their family's city of origin.
- For Joseph, who was of the line of David, had to travel to the city of David (the city King David was born), Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Today this would constitute about a 90-100-minute drive. But back then, a journey of 70-90 miles, depending on which route you took, while 8-9 months pregnant would have taken anywhere between 4 days making great time and 7-9 days if things were moving slowly.

- **If any of you guys have a wife about to give birth, ask her if she'd like to take a 7-day, 90-mile hike through the wilderness with nothing but a little bread and whatever you are able to kill for food. On top of that, tell her you're going to a place she's never been, and there's most likely not going to be much space anywhere in his relative's homes for her to sleep and have her baby. Just see if she's all in.**

ILLUSTRATION

EXAMPLE: After 6 months of marriage, Ashley and I packed up and moved across the country to Georgia. The trip took us several days of driving. For some reason, Ashley was nauseous and extremely tired the entire trip. It wasn't until we arrived in Georgia that we found out she was pregnant the entire trip there!

- She was in a new environment with no family and pregnant well before the time we were "planning" to have children.
- Thankfully we had the ability to have family fly out and a wonderful church family that took such great care of us. It made the transition a bit easier. Looking now at my 17 and 15 -year-old daughters and the course God has taken us on throughout our lives, I can see now that it was the perfect time for us to have children, but then, for both of us, there were moments that it felt like an incredibly inconvenient time.

ILLUSTRATION

I can't speak for Mary, and it's not written, but don't forget that Mary was a normal human being, just like the rest of us. I have a feeling that on the trip there, Joseph might have gotten an earful about the timing of the journey. If not, I'm confident that she thought once or twice, ***"God, what's going on? Why couldn't this census have happened earlier or later, why now at such an inconvenient time?"***

Little did she know that what was an inconvenience for them, was actually God's direction to make thousands of years of prophecy come to pass in one moment and one place!

BIBLE PASSAGE

Micah 5:2 NKJV – 2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.”

TRANSITION

So why didn't he just have Mary and Joseph live in Bethlehem the entire time? Why add Nazareth to the picture?

- Well, Nazareth was probably the most despised place in ancient Israel. There was a saying, *“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”*
- Jesus had to eventually go back and be raised in Nazareth so that he could fulfill the prophecies of the Psalms and Isaiah about being despised and not esteemed by men.

All of these inconveniences were God's way of establishing the veracity of Jesus' messianic claims. Afterward, people could look at the prophetic picture and be assured of Jesus' identity as God's Messiah.

APPLICATION

It's been challenging for me, but I'm learning more and more to roll with inconveniences and try to believe that God has a bigger plan. If things always went my way, life might seem easier, but I also might be missing out on something much bigger and better God has in mind.

- *Sometimes the pathway into God's perfect will comes through redirection. And often God's redirection comes through inconveniences.*
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CONCLUSION

Time does not allow us to look at the various other examples of God's providence through different seasons in the Christmas story.

- What about the shepherds who were minding their own business when a divine interruption changed their lives forever. Apparently God works through seasons of interruption!
- What about Simeon the priest and Anna the prophetess who were at the end of their lives and had been waiting a lifetime to see the Messiah, holding on to nothing except the hope that God would do what He promised. Apparently God works in seasons of waiting.

If it seems like I've just been saying the same thing a few different ways, it's because I have. This Christmas, right now, whether you're uncertain, disappointed, inconvenienced, interrupted, or waiting, or happy, or joyful or excited, God is working something far greater in and through your life than you can see at the moment. All those monotonous, normal, difficult, or challenging seasons in between the "glorious" moments of our lives, actually are significant moments within themselves. May we learn to find the beauty and handiwork of Christ in each one of them!

BIBLE PASSAGE

[2 Corinthians 4:16-18 NKJV] 16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, 18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

ILLUSTRATION

Notes on a piano:

- **Can be a mess or can be a beautiful chord**
 - **One day we will find that God is actually writing a symphony.**
 - **There are no bad notes, only bad composers, and God is not bad composer!**
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