

Just Plain Folks

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
January 13, 2019 – 1st Sunday after Epiphany
Text: Luke 2:21-40

The shepherds are long gone back to the fields with their flocks. The angels are only a shining, echoing memory. The gifts from the resplendent kings have been secreted away while the kings themselves are back, safe and sound, in their far away palaces. Mary and Joseph have settled into life as the parents of a newborn, getting by on little sleep and loads of love. Life, such as it was for them as poor peasants eking out a living in a backwater Palestinian town, has slid back into a new normal, just like it does for all new parents and their infants. But, of course, this was no ordinary newborn, if we are to believe the accounts in Luke and Matthew. This baby, born into the lineage of King David by the power of the Holy Spirit, was to be the savior the Jews had been awaiting for centuries. That's what the angel Gabriel told Mary when the whole fantastic adventure began. That's what the heavenly host told the shepherds who found them in that stable, come to see for themselves if the words of the angels were true. But, as the days and weeks slipped past, Jesus became just another newborn baby with anxious, doting parents.

We seldom pause to think about this part of the story of Jesus' birth and early life. That's not surprising because the Bible

doesn't talk about it much. Only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke talk about the birth of Jesus at all, and they both handle it very differently. Matthew's version of the nativity story is the only one in which the Wise Men appear and it is their interaction with Herod which causes Joseph, after receiving a message in a dream, to flee to Egypt with Mary and the baby for safety. Matthew also includes a horrific story about the murder of the innocents brought about when Herod sends his soldiers to kill all boys under two years of age in Bethlehem when he realizes the Wise Men have no intention of identifying the newborn king for him. Joseph is the primary focus of the entire birth narrative in Matthew because it is Joseph who is repeatedly visited by angels in dreams first telling him he still needs to stick by Mary when he finds she is with a child not his own. An angel tells him they must to flee to Egypt after the Wise Men's visit and then a few years later, tells him in another dream it's safe to return because Herod is dead. Then in yet another dream the angel tells Joseph to settle in the safe obscurity of Nazareth in Galilee rather than in Judea. This is where Matthew's story about the child Jesus ends with the next chapter fast forwarding to John the Baptist crashing about in the wilderness proclaiming repentance to all who would listen.

Luke, on the other hand, has a much softer narrative of Jesus' early life. No frantic flight to Egypt to escape a brutal king Herod. Instead, Luke portrays Mary and Joseph as loving and

dutiful Jewish parents of a firstborn son. At the age of eight days, the baby is circumcised and formally given his name – Jesus, just as the angel had instructed Mary to do. Then, about 40 days after the birth, Joseph and Mary made the trip to the Temple for the presentation of Jesus as a firstborn son and the purification of Mary following childbirth. This ritual, just as the circumcision already performed, was outlined in great detail in the Torah, the 12th chapter of the book of Leviticus. Mary, as his mother, is to present herself to the priests to be purified following the birth and Jesus was to be presented as a firstborn son. They were to present sacrifices as a part of this rite, and it is important to note that the sacrifices they offered – two turtledoves or two pigeons – are the acceptable substitutionary offerings when the family is too poor to offer the preferred sacrifice of a lamb. From his earliest days, then, Jesus was identified with the poor, the least of these, which would become the focal point of his ministry.

Two extraordinary things happened in the midst of this very routine and ordinary event in the lives of what was, to all outward appearances, a very ordinary – just plain folks – Jewish family. The first happened when, as they entered the temple, they were met by a man named Simeon who was guided by God to the Temple at that precise moment, the text says, in order to encounter Jesus because God had promised him he would not die before witnessing the salvation of Israel. The words or canticle of

Simeon, known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, are still sometimes a part of the services for the deceased. Simeon intones, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation...” The text says Joseph and Mary were amazed at what this stranger was saying about their tiny son. We can only imagine how they felt when, after blessing them, he said to Mary that “this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Yikes, a far cry from someone coming up and saying, “Cute baby! What’s his name?”

Also unique to Luke’s story is Mary and Joseph’s encounter with yet another person before leaving the Temple. Anna, an aged prophetess who had lived most of her adult life in prayer in the Temple after being widowed at a very young age, also recognized something special in Jesus. She began praising God and commending this child to all who were yearning for the redemption of Israel.

So as Mary and Joseph were heading back home from the Temple, we can only imagine how they were feeling. As they made the journey to the Temple, they were just another Jewish family with a newborn son. But, on the road back home, suddenly they were confronted once again with the extraordinary promises that had accompanied this tiny baby’s conception and birth. I’m thinking that before this trip, they had almost forgotten all the

craziness of the birth, like it had been some kind of weird dream. They had settled into a new life centered on this beautiful baby and everything that happens when a new family is formed with the birth of a first child. They were just doing what they were supposed to do as parents raising a child in the faith of Judaism when suddenly the extraordinary circumstances of this child's birth were front and center once again. How jarring it must have been, especially Simeon's words of warning to Mary about the piercing of her own heart too. No parent wants to look at the little bundle in their arms and imagine dreadful things happening to their child. You only want the best for that baby! You know your child is destined for something special, yes! You believe with all your heart that this child is a gift from God. But surely nothing awful is going to happen! Not to this child. Not to our baby.

Just plain folks. At this moment, Mary and Joseph were just plain folks, just like the rest of us. New parents who want to believe that everything wonderful in life will come to this child. New parents content in the happiness their little family finds together. They were just like every other young family in the village they called home. Or so they wanted to believe. But they weren't. Not really. But reality wouldn't catch up to them again for a long time, when the baby had become a man.

I am intrigued by this particular story of the infant Jesus fading into obscurity with his parents following this dramatic

encounter at the Temple. I wonder, did Mary and Joseph tell him all this when he got older? Or, did they convince themselves it had all been a dream, a crazy dream they both shared? Did they look at their growing son and see God, or just another little boy? There are stories of the child Jesus found in documents which didn't make it in to the canon of Scripture called the infancy gospels. In this collection of stories, Jesus acts like a precocious little brat – killing birds so he can bring them back to life and even pushing a child off a roof so he can bring him back to life. The origins of these gospels were always suspect which is why they never made it into the Bible. But, they point to the fact that we don't know anything about Jesus as a child or even a young adult. All we do know is that he was born to loving parents who took the responsibility of raising him as God intended very seriously. Perhaps they thought they had a some rudimentary understanding of what God had in mind for him, but maybe not. Or maybe they just refused to think about it too much because it was just too overwhelming to deal with in the midst of the day to day realities of life with a young boy to raise.

I do think this just plain folks reality of Mary and Joseph as Jesus was growing up offers us an opportunity to reflect more deeply on how it is that we cope with life as it unfolds in all its twists and turns. In John Lennon's song "Beautiful Boy," he reminds us that life is what happens when you're busy making

other plans. This is the simple truth Mary and Joseph point us to in this lovely story about their commitment to do the right thing for this child entrusted to them by God. They received Jesus as precisely that – a gift from God. And they trusted God to show them what to do as he grew. They lived life each day as it presented itself to them, finding joy when they could and accepting the challenges and sorrows as they inevitably showed up too. Dear friends, this is what we all strive to do. Mary and Joseph were indeed just plain folks, just like us.

They did have one advantage over us, though. What it was God asked of them, expected of them, was never in doubt. They never had to worry about figuring out what it was God needed them to do, hoped they would do. That had already been made abundantly clear to them, by angels no less. They were to raise this sweet boy to be the extraordinary man God needed him to be. No small task to be sure, but also not ambiguous either. Would that God's plans for each of us could be so clear. But then again, maybe it is, if we can dare to be like Mary and Joseph and listen to those voices of the heart God sends our way. Could it be as easy as listening to those little nudgings we sometimes have – like suddenly thinking, maybe I should give so and so a call to see how she's doing. Or maybe I should check out that job change I've been thinking about. Or maybe I should really see if I can make the math work so I can retire and spend time doing what I really

want to do. Or maybe simply wondering if maybe I should pause to pray more so that God is more central in my life.

Dear friends, dare to be like Mary. Dare to be like Joseph. Dare to consider what it is God is inviting you to think about, ponder, more deeply in your own life. Dare to try something new if that is where life seems to be pointing. Dare to reach out to someone if God keeps putting them in your thoughts. But don't stop there. Dare to reach out to someone if you need help. Dare to help someone if you see them struggling. Dare to be who it is God is inviting you to be each day, remembering always that life happens one day at a time. Most importantly, dare to believe that you are precious to God every moment of every day – because you are. Amen.