

December 18, 2011 - Put on Your Travellin' Shoes

We've been in this series for the last several weeks, if you've been here and what we've been trying to do is put ourselves in the shoes of the people who were actually there, who were actually eye witnesses to the birth of Jesus and try and get a sense for what that would have been like and what that would have felt like. So, we're going to continue on that thought a little bit this morning so I would like you for a little bit to put on your travelling shoes this morning because we're going to take a bit of a journey, it's going to take us half way around the world and we're going to travel back in time about 2000 plus years into the past and we're going to journey to the side of the manger where the baby Jesus was laid to rest and try and put ourselves in that space and imagine what that would have been like.

You know, as I think about this story that we've heard so often and has become very familiar to many of us, perhaps the most intriguing part of this story, as we look at it, is that the Bible states that Jesus was born to Mary, who had never been with a man, and therefore, could not possibly be pregnant. I was always under impressed by that point and by that unexplained pregnancy because when I was young I didn't really understand why that was such a big deal because that was just the way things happened, right? You get a phone call from an aunt or an uncle or you come to Church and there's an announcement, someone is going to have a baby. That's just the way it was. I didn't understand the biological challenges that kind of stood in the way of something like that happening. As I got older, I never really appreciated the astonishment that this fact should bring. You know, aside from some poorly thought out Si Fi movies, this doesn't happen. Not ever. This never happens. And thus, I was still left with this rather lack-lustre understanding of the Christmas story. But this year, as we've tried to put ourselves in the sandals of the eye witnesses, I discovered that there is a lot more going on in this story than I typically considered. There are a lot of things that are actually kind of tough for me to wrap my head around. When you put them all together I think you'll discover that this story is anything but ordinary. So we have a lot of ground to cover here this morning so I hope you have your laces tied up because we're going to take a walk or perhaps a jog through some territory. So here we go. Let's begin.

We're going to start about a year before Jesus was born, actually a little bit more. We're going to start with a man named Zechariah. Zechariah was a priest and just a little over a year before Jesus was born, Zechariah was in the Temple offering some incense and all of a sudden an angel showed up and appeared to Zechariah. He told Zechariah that he was going to have a son. Zechariah finds this a little hard to believe cause he's rather old and so, kind of as proof that this is actually going to happen, Zechariah can't speak from that moment on. Can't say a word, which brings us to Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a woman who is too old to bear children. She's past her child bearing years and not only that, even when she was in her child bearing years she was known to be barren. So she becomes pregnant even in spite of all of this stuff which isn't ordinary. Zechariah, when the baby is born the baby is named John and suddenly Zechariah can speak again at that very moment. He prophesies about what his son is going to become and none of that is really ordinary. Luke says that when this happened,

awe fell on the whole neighbourhood and the news of what happened spread throughout the Judean hills and everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked “What will this child turn out to be for the hand of the Lord is surely upon him in a special way. In other words, this is not ordinary.

As an adult John wasn't typically ordinary as well and he got people's attention and he gave them this sense that something big was about to happen and he prepared people for Jesus' message and ministry and even beyond his passions as John was not ordinary.

John's first story, we talked about this a little bit last week, it kind of imitated the story of Abraham and Sarah and how they had a child in their old age. John's ministry had people calling him the New Elijah, in fact, the angel when he talked to Zechariah, said that's what he will be ‘the spirit of Elijah will be upon him.’” All of John's ministry was in preparation for the Messiah and the new Messiah was supposed to usher in the new reign of King David. Now if you look at those three things that's kind of the ‘Hebrew Trifecta’ if you put those three things together. Abraham the first one, was known as the Father of the Faithful. He was the one that God made His special covenant with. The nation of Israel derived it's name from Abraham's grandson but in fact, the Israelites were very proud to call themselves “Children of Abraham” and they took quite a great pride in that designation.

Elijah is arguably one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament. You might remember the story where he defeated hundreds of the prophets of Bale on Mount Carmel and he called down fire from Heaven, so much so, that it consumed the stones that made up alter. At the end of his life he was taken up to Heaven in a fiery chariot. That's some pretty significant stuff and definitely not ordinary.

David was the greatest King of Israel. His reign boasted the greatest military; the farthest stretch of their borders; the greatest the most prosperous economy; the greatest devotion to God, that's when the Temple was designed; that's when most of the Psalms were written. So he was really the epitome of the King of the Jews. He was described as a man after God's own heart. So if you put these three guys together, you have symbolic dynamite for a first century Israelite and that is not normal.

Well about six month's into Elizabeth's pregnancy and angel appears to Mary. Now, you may not believe me when we get done doing this but, angels appearing was not a common occurrence it was rare, even in Bible times. An angel appearing to a young girl was even more rare and less likely the happen. The angel's message that he brings is completely unfathomable. He comes to Mary and says “You are going to have a baby and that baby is going to be the Son of God and, that is not ordinary. And then later an angel appears to Joseph as well. And again, angels didn't just show up every day but if it weren't for this angel the story would have ended up a lot different because Joseph's actions would have been totally different. He probably wouldn't have married Mary. He would have left her a total outcast and as mentioned earlier, perhaps even vulnerable to being stoned. He wouldn't have raised

up Jesus as a boy. They wouldn't have travelled to Bethlehem for the census which was important because the prophesy said that that's where the Messiah would be born.

Now, speaking of travelling to Bethlehem. The journey took them from Nazareth at the top to Bethlehem at the bottom of the map. That is a journey of about 40 miles, as the crow flies, but any good self-respecting Jew would never go through Samaria and so, the journey was actually a little bit longer as they took the scenic route. Probably about 80 miles to travel. Now, just try and put yourself in Mary's shoes. You are eight months plus pregnant and you are travelling 80 miles. Perhaps by foot or maybe by donkey. The Bible doesn't actually say there was a donkey but as I try and imagine what that experience would have been like, I'm thinking riding on a donkey at eight month's pregnant isn't going to be any pleasure trip either. So it probably took them four days to maybe as much as a week to make this journey and that my friends is no ordinary trip.

When they get there, we talked about the shepherds out in the field and yet another angel appears and seriously this doesn't happen every day that angels appear. At first there's just one angel and then there are some more that show up. The Bible doesn't give us an exact number but it uses phrases like "a vast host; a great company; a bunch; a whack; a pile on angels all of a sudden appear and that is nowhere near ordinary. And the angels tell the shepherds where to find the baby Messiah. The shepherds go to Bethlehem and they find the baby exactly where the angels said and they bow down and worship Him. Now, I don't know about you, but when my kids were born, people came to visit us in the hospital and they came to hold the baby and to take pictures and maybe bring flowers and gifts. None of them bowed down and worshipped because that's not ordinary.

Skip ahead about 40 days now. Mary and Joseph take the baby to the Temple to offer special sacrifices. When they are there they meet this man named Simeon. Now God had promised Simeon that he would not die until he saw the Messiah. The Spirit led him to the Temple that day and when he saw Jesus out of the hundreds of thousands of people that he had seen at the Temple over the years, out of the dozens or hundreds of people that were there that day, Simeon somehow knew that Jesus was the Messiah. When this other woman named Anna, who was actually a widow and the Bible says she spent all day and night there worshipping, when she saw Simeon holding the baby she put two and two together and came over and worshipped Jesus as well, and that is not ordinary.

Let's talk about the star. I don't know what it was about the star, but I do know these two things. It wasn't ordinary and somehow, some way, it managed to lead the wise men to exactly the place where Jesus lay and stars just don't normally work that way. The wise men's visit is something spectacular on its own. This is where they came from and the journey, as the crow flies is probably about 450 miles. But to make that trek you have to go across the desert so it is possible that instead of doing that they took the easier route which would make the trip almost double what the straight line was. Ezra made that same kind of trip in the Old Testament and he records it as taking 120 days to get from one place to the other. This is not a journey that

you make on a whim. There would have to be something really special for you to want to make that journey, either across the desert or all the way around which took 120 days. There would have to be something super special about this infant to prompt you to make that journey. Just think about it. What would you be willing to travel 120 days to get to? That is not ordinary.

The wise men bring three gifts. They bring gold and frankincense and myrrh. Gold is what you give to a new king. Frankincense is what a priest offers up in the Temple and myrrh is what is used for embalming. These were all symbolic gifts. Jesus was going to be the King of Kings. Jesus was going to be our great High Priest. Jesus was going to give His life as a sacrifice for us. But they are not just symbolic gifts but depending on the quantity they brought, they could have been quite valuable. After the wise men have come and offered their gifts to Jesus they had a dream. In the dream God warns them “Don’t go back the same way you came, go the other direction because Herod is planning something not nice for you.” Now just take a look at the map here. To go to Bethlehem back to where they came from, whether they went the route up North or across the desert, no matter which way you went, to not go through Jerusalem is out of the way. That is the natural path you would go. So they don’t go the ordinary way, they take a detour. Imagine what that must have meant to Mary and Joseph when they asked the wise men “Are you going through Jerusalem?” “No, actually we had a dream that said we should go the long way around.” That is not ordinary.

About the same time Joseph gets another dream, a visit from an angel and the angel tells him “Get out of here because the King is going to hunt down your child and try to kill him.” Can you imagine getting that memo in the middle of the night. That was not ordinary. And so, Joseph and Mary flee down to Egypt and if you were here several weeks ago when we talked about Mary and Joseph going to the Temple and offering their sacrifice, we mentioned that the sacrifice they chose was the sacrifice that typically, poorer people would tend to bring. And so, you might wonder how someone who is not very wealthy manage to make this spur of the moment trip down to Egypt for two years. Some scholars suggest that, you know what, the timely gift of the wise men might just have financed their trip down to Egypt and kept them through those couple of years.

Well, after two years they realized that Herod is dead and so they return to Israel but they find out that the new King isn’t much better than the old King so they decide to return to the outer rim territories up North to the obscurity of Galilee and that’s where they settle down to live.

Skip another ten to twelve years forward and to make a long story short, Jesus is twelve years old, Mary and Joseph take Him down to Jerusalem for the Passover and they are there for awhile and then they start to head home. They are travelling with a big caravan and they just assume that Jesus is somewhere among the relatives. A day along they find out that no, He’s not actually there. The next day they travel back to Jerusalem. They spend three days in town looking for Him. So after almost a week they eventually find Him and He is in the Temple, talking to the teachers of the Law and the religious scholars and blowing everyone

away by how well He understands God. That is not ordinary.

At least one of these things is impossible; some are implausible; many of the rest are improbable, but together they make the story of Jesus' birth utterly unbelievable; amazingly astounding; magnificently miraculous. This is no ho hum event. It is a barrage of out of this world happenings. It is an overwhelming wave of super natural intervention. It is jaw dropping; eye popping; head spinning; knee wobbling; sock knocking off; explosion of the extraordinary and as out of this world as all of these things are, they are actually just window dressing. They are merely accessories. They are just the opening act to the main event.

John writes in his Gospel "So Jesus became flesh and made His home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness and we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father the one and only Son." God entered our world. He became one of us.

John writes later in John 1:14:

"We proclaim to you the One who existed from beginning who we have heard, who we have seen. We saw Him with our own eyes. We touched Him with our own hands. He is the Word of Life."

You see, the eternal became mortal. The invisible became tangible. The invincible became flesh and blood and skin and bones. The all powerful, became an infant. And that makes all of this other stuff, as amazing as it is, seem plain and common and in a word, ordinary. And yet, somehow, I still seem to miss it so often. I still seem to overlook it. I still seem to somehow lose sight of it. Even at this time of year with all of its perils and cards. All of its decorations and desserts. All of its Christmas concerts and Holiday movies. All of it screaming out that there is something special that needs to be remembered here, even at this time of year, when the story of God's arrival is all around us, I still miss it. As I wondered why that might be, I came across two verses tucked away rather inconspicuously in Luke's account. After the shepherds who came to the manger to see Jesus, Luke says in Luke 2:18-19:

"And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them, but Mary treasured up all of these things and pondered them in her heart."

Later after they found Jesus in the Temple, Luke records in Luke 2: 47, 51:

"Everyone who heard Him was amazed at His understanding and His answers. He went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them, His mother treasured all of these things in her heart."

Mary kept these things in her heart. She remembered them. She treasured them. She pondered them. And it occurred to me that I don't spend nearly enough time pondering. I spend a lot of time talking about Jesus. Discussing Jesus; reading about Jesus but perhaps if I

pondered the story of Jesus more often, I wouldn't miss seeing He is spectacular. Perhaps that's what the Christmas season can do for us. Perhaps it can give us the opportunity to ponder. Where some of the noise is turned down. Where there is more talk about the birth of Christ. Where there are more songs on the radio about that Holy Night. Where there is a spirit of love and harmony slightly more prevalent. Where there is more time for family and friends and things that are truly good. Where there are moments of celebration and joy. Perhaps that is our time to ponder.

So, for the next eight days, I want to invite you to ponder with me. Now, I know we have a wide range of people here this morning who are here for a wide range of reasons. Some of you are here because this is where you are every Sunday morning. Some of you are here because you are curious about this whole Jesus thing and want to see what it is all about. Some of you are here because you're just starting to dare to believe that God might actually be out there somewhere, and more importantly, he might actually love and care for you very much. Some of you are here because a friend invited you to come and hey! Free turkey dinner. Well, all of those reasons are valid and whatever brings you here this morning, I am thankful that you have come to be with us. Wherever you are at on your journey this week, I challenge you to ponder Jesus.

To help us out with that, we've made up some little booklets. There's a green package on each of your tables, if you open that up you'll find some little booklets inside. Each one of the adults, take one of those home with you this week. Each one of those booklets it's divided up into every day from now until next Sunday. Every day it gives you something to ponder about Jesus. We tried to write it in a way so that, whether you are a lifetime believer or a cautious investigator, or a doubtful sceptic, no matter where you are coming from, these questions will give you something to ponder about this week. Wherever you are at, I challenge you this week to spend time pondering Jesus and see where you end up. Who knows, this week could be anything but ordinary.