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First Christian Church
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Into the Ordinary

The advertisement read: “Come, experience the glory and the pageantry of the Christmas season! Tickets start at \$75 per person.” The ad – which we saw when Barbara and I lived in California – was for the San Francisco Ballet’s version of “The Nutcracker Suite,” and the reviews of it said that it was indeed a glorious, spectacular pageant, perfectly choreographed, well worth the price of the ticket. Barbara and I did not take our family of six at those prices. But it wasn’t just the price, really. No, Barbara and I both had and continue to have theological qualms about emphasizing the “glory and pageantry and perfection” of the Christmas season. It’s the same sort of objection I have to some of the Christmas goodies portrayed in places like the *Williams and Sonoma* Christmas catalog where you can buy things like spectacular and sophisticated and perfectly decorated Christmas muffins for only \$75.00 a dozen, or four “handcrafted Christmas snowflake marshmallows” for only \$6.00.¹ For, you see, what Christmas is really about is the utter **opposite** of the perfectly choreographed, the spectacular, the sophisticated..

No, Christmas is about God coming down into the **unimpressive**, the **un-**spectacular, the **unsophisticated**, into all that we think of as plain and ordinary and common. Now given the distance in time and place between that first Christmas and tonight, to our ears the story of Jesus’ birth may sound strange and exotic. But we have

¹<http://deadspin.com/the-2013-haters-guide-to-the-williams-sonoma-catalog-1481230580>

to understand that when the story was written it didn't sound exotic or strange at all to those first folks who read it and heard it. It was full of non-spectacular people and ordinary places familiar to all. What do I mean? Well, Luke starts his Christmas story with some words about Caesar and the local governor, Quirinius. And while these may be exotic names to our ears, to Luke's listeners these were familiar names, names found in the daily news. You see, Luke starts his story in this way in order to locate the birth of Jesus smack-dab in the middle of an ordinary, particular in a particular place on an ordinary day. Which means that to get a sense of just how shocking this may have sounded to those who first heard it, to those sophisticated Roman readers who expected God to come only in spectacular ways, let's try hearing the Christmas story as if it were happening right here, right now, to us, on the Front Range:

Now the birth of Jesus took place this way: When Barack Obama was president and John Hickenlooper was governor, a young couple, a couple of teenagers engaged to be married, piled into their 1996 Toyota pick-up truck just outside of Rocky Ford and headed west, meaning to get to his hometown of Fountain. Their names were Mary and Joe. But their truck overheated near the Pueblo airport, so they left it by the side of the road and began hitch-hiking. They hitched a ride and their driver, who lived on a ranch in that scrubby area just north of Pueblo, let them at his exit where the now-closed gas station is. Mary was pregnant and not long after this, she went into labor. It was very dark, late at night. There was no sign of anyone around, no lights on anywhere, and Joe's cell phone was broken so he couldn't call the paramedics. Mary ended up having that baby in the meager protection of one of the service bays at that gas station. Joe found an old peach crate. He took off his sweatshirt and they laid that

baby, wrapped in that old sweatshirt, in that old peach crate because there was no other place, as they waited for someone to stop at that lonely exit who might help them.

Not too many miles away, two UPS truckers had been driving down I-25 from Commerce City, and they stopped for coffee at the Denny's at the Bijou exit. In the big parking behind the restaurant they saw a stranger standing under the bright lights. Now, it's not unusual to see strange people at that Denny's late at night, so they didn't think much of it – until the stranger called to the truckers, saying, *“Hey, great news! A baby has been born near Pueblo tonight. And He's the Savior of the whole world! You'll find him at that old gas station a few miles north of Eagleridge, wrapped in an old sweatshirt and lying in an peach crate.”*

You see these names and these words - Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, Nazareth, Bethlehem, shepherds, swaddling cloths, manger – were just as common and real to the ears of those who first heard them as Barack Obama and John Hickenlooper and Pueblo and Rocky Ford and truckers and sweatshirts and peach crates are to our ears. Part of what the Christmas story means to do by these very details is to say and to emphasize that this is real, and that God's love did indeed come down in a particular time, at a particular place, among a common, ordinary, unspectacular people like us. What the story is trying to tell us is that our eternal, most holy, gracious God meets us in the most common, everyday, unspectacular occurrences of our lives.

Yet sometimes our grandiosity can keep us from grasping this. Many of us may still sometimes look for the “real” meaning of Christmas only in the extraordinary, only in the spectacular. And when we think of own “moments with God,” we often indeed think of those extraordinary encounters that we have had, those “mountaintop” experiences

of great joy, or those “valley of the shadow” experiences of great sadness or pain. Yet, as important as these are, and as true as it is that life has its peaks and its pits and that God is with us amidst both, most of us don’t spend our lives on either the mountaintop or in life’s darkest valleys. Most of us spend most of our lives in long, ordinary, unspectacular days, neither soaring or sinking, but sometimes trudging along in the prolonged redundancy of this common rut. And it’s in the quiet tedium of such times that many of us can drift away and forget the need for a sense of God’s presence in those ordinary times of our lives too.

My friends, that is exactly what the Christmas story is. It is the claim that God’s love came down from the extraordinary heavens and now meets us quietly in common things, in small things, in ordinary feelings and faces, and in the most everyday of human experiences. For Christ is not just in the spectacular. And His coming does not depend upon our well-staged, carefully choreographed, perfectly planned Christmas. No, Christ is to be found in stables and peach crates, in Bethlehem and in Rocky Ford, and Fountain and the Springs, in your formal dining room set with your best china and in your backyard on paper plates. Christmas doesn’t depend on the good manners of the children or whether you can keep your uncle’s politics from offending the cousins. It doesn’t matter whether the gifts are all a perfect match or a perfect fit; it doesn’t matter if our Christmases are sometimes more confusion than choreography. No, the story, then and now, reminds us that Christ is in the ordinary, the wonderfully ordinary and yet oh-so grace-filled. And so with that in mind, I would invite you to please notice and enjoy these wonderful, ordinary, grace-filled things on this Christmas:

-- Notice your son’s sense of humor and your daughter’s dancing,

- Notice the shape and sparkle of your beloved's eyes,
- Notice the pleasure of good music,
- Notice the smells of cinnamon and sage coming from the kitchen,
- Notice the wonderful sight of the snow-flecked mountains that God has arranged outside our windows in this beautiful place we are blessed to call home,
- Notice the arms that have held you and the voices that have spoken words of life to you and the care of those of have graced your journey.

Notice these things, for all of them, and so much more, are indeed the ordinary but exquisite signs and the wonders of Immanuel: God with us, God with us! Merry Christmas!²

²This sermon is substantially based on one that Rev. Barbara Blaisdell and I preached together - although she was the principal writer - at the Hilo Coast United Church of Christ, Honomu, Hawaii, December 21, 2005, entitled "The Christmas Story, Hawaiian Style."