

Christmas Eve, 2009

Luke 2:1-14

Now I promised you this would be short, so here it is. After imagination and story telling, comes analysis. If we look at Luke's story, it falls into two halves. The first is very ordinary, very this worldly. And Luke emphasizes that. He places the story in ordinary time: When Quirinius was governor of Syria, and that's how you told time in those days. You told it by who was running the show. Luke places the story in ordinary space: Nazareth and Bethlehem. He's careful to identify the story's geography. Then he identifies the human beings involved: Joseph, Mary, the child, and, by implication, someone in the inn.

So the story is grounded in a geography of ordinary experience. The events in the story are ordinary: journeys one perhaps doesn't really want to make, government regulations with which one would rather not comply, and birth, sometimes at awkward times and in awkward places.

In the second half of the story things get unusual. We have angelic messengers and heavenly choruses and great lights. I have had people ask me, "Do you think it actually happened that way? Is it true?" Now, I have trouble with truth. It's a pretty slippery thing, rather like trying to hold on to a well-greased salmon with very cold hands. So I don't know whether the story is true or not. I don't even know what people who ask me if I think it's true mean by truth.

But there is something about this second half which is important. That is, in this story the supernatural explains the natural. The angel chorus doesn't do anything. They comment on the meaning of the ordinary actions in the first part of the story. They call the attention of the shepherds to something which has happened by quite ordinary means. The extraordinary in this story is, if you will, explanatory. What's really happening is the ordinary. Heaven is a commentary on earth.

There's something quite Christian in that – even something quite Godly. Perhaps, also, something about the church. When the church is doing its job properly, it's not trying to be extraordinary. It's not trying to do or be anything unusual. It is trying to do what Luke is having those angels do, point toward the extraordinary which is hidden inside what we think, on first examination, to be the ordinary. If we knew ourselves, if we knew our true humanity, we would know very extraordinary things in each other.

Sometimes I wonder if the supernatural is not the unfolding of the ordinariness of things, just truly perceived. Sometimes I also wonder if the origin of our debate with God may not lie in the human tendency to flatten out the ordinary, to rob it of significance by always looking for something marvelous. Perhaps, given this season, I could say looking for something spiritually decorative.

The point to the story is that, yes, God is here. In birth, in death, in eating dinner, in studying for exams, in making a pot of tea at four in the afternoon. It's not finding God in some special place or time or in special people, but it is finding God in the ordinary that's the goal of Christmas. I'm always suspicious when anyone wants to find God in a special person. The reality of God is something which a whole community shares, or that reality is at least maimed, not whole. God is in our relationships, not some separate external thing. He is in our

relationships. Therefore, to be sought, found, appreciated, treasured, witnessed to in the ordinary, in the same way that the angels in all their supernatural extraordinariness, pointed the shepherds towards something not supernaturally extraordinary, but very everydayish is the heart of the matter. The heart of faith is in the ordinariness of every day. It is there Christ is born, or his birth is of no significance. Seek him there, prepare to meet him at the street corner, or the vegetable counter, or even during the coffee hour. The birth of Christ points to the extraordinary significance of all that is ordinary, all that is trammelled in the binding ropes of time and place and specific person.

Please stand for the creed.