

Luke locates the birth of Jesus in the context of normal human history,  
when Caesar Augustus ("Augustus" means "the exalted one")  
ruled as emperor of Rome during the years 27 BC to AD 14.  
Luke goes on to tell us that in order to expand the tax rolls,  
Augustus orders a census. Nothing out of the ordinary there, eh?  
Government leaders directing bean-counters to try and find  
new ways of raising taxes by finding or creating new taxpayers.

In the same way, when Quirinius, the governor of Syria,  
enacted the decree of Augustus by mandating  
that all the people in the territory he ruled on behalf of the Caesar  
should return to their ancestral home in order  
to be tallied by tribe and clan, Joseph and Mary complied.  
Nothing unusual in that either—that peasant people obey the laws  
of the "occupying oppressors" even if they don't agree with the laws  
or find them difficult to follow.

And so, even though Mary was far along in her pregnancy,  
she and Joe trekked 150 klicks from Nazareth in the northern province of Galilee  
to a little town in the southern province of Judea—  
a nondescript burg known as Bethlehem,  
2000 kilometres from Rome and about 10 from Jerusalem—  
in order to register with the government.

Unfortunately for them, even though they may have had distant relatives  
living in the town—family members who often do what family members  
so often do. . . which is to avoid other family members—  
in this case, refusing to give this teenage girl  
and her mid-20's husband a place to stay.  
As a result, they ended up bunking down in a cave  
just outside of town where cattle were stabled.

Now, although a bit out of the ordinary, even that situation  
wouldn't have raised too many eyebrows in this backwater municipality.  
After all, it must have been a busy time  
with lots of crowds and noise and souvenirs being hawked—  
and we all know how our frustration at waiting in line boils over into anger. . .  
and how anger morphs into pushing and shoving and shouting—  
and that's just in the mall parking lot.

Anyway, it was while they were there, in that cave, away from the madding crowd,  
probably near to where a few obscure shepherds stomped their feet to keep warm  
and gossiped to stay awake through the night shift—  
it was while they were there, Luke writes, "that the time came for her to be delivered."

And as ordinary as it is for a pregnant woman who is at term to give birth,  
 what happened next was most decidedly out of the ordinary.

In fact, in her poem *BC:AD* the British poet U.A. Fanthorpe, the first woman  
 to be nominated as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University,  
 captures the unremarkable. . .and yet remarkable. . .circumstances  
 surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Out of that ho-hum normalcy of everyday life, Fanthorpe observes,  
 burst a staggering paradox—the reality that this one ordinary night  
 is the single greatest moment in all of human history. . .

a night when, in her words,  
 “When a few farm workers  
 and three Members of an obscure Persian sect  
 Walked haphazard by starlight straight  
 Into the kingdom of heaven.”

What a remarkable thing that birth was. . .and not only because--  
 as the story underneath the words of Luke's story imply—

not only because a pagan government's bureaucratic decree initiated  
 the sequence of events that lead to God becoming flesh. . .human—  
 but also because this is how the king of kings entered the world,  
 in the same unceremonious way as we all do, as a helpless baby. . .  
 as an ordinary, red-faced, squalling, no-bigger-than-a-loaf-of-bread baby,  
 squeezed out of his mother's birth canal. . .

and who then, with or without the help of a midwife,  
 is immediately transferred to his mother's breast where, after a few false starts,  
 he found the nipple and began to feed. . .to live. . .to grow.

And when done with his first meal, his mother did the ordinary thing  
 that mothers always did in those days—  
 she wrapped her newborn in strips of cloth and, then,  
 quite extraordinarily, "placed him in a manger"—  
 a feeding trough used for animal fodder.

And by that act and from that moment on,  
 nothing has been, is, or ever will be ordinary again.

For, because of the child's birth—  
 and the theological doctrine or teaching it carries—  
 that of the "incarnation" or "enfleshment" of God—  
 (literally, God putting on "meat")—  
 because of the incarnation, there is no longer such a thing  
 as "ordinary" time or an "ordinary" place or "ordinary" people.

Nor is there any longer or anywhere, an ordinary school,  
 ordinary soccer team, or ordinary job.

There is no ordinary marriage or friendship;  
 no ordinary days or nights; love affairs or grudge matches.

In fact, the implications are endless. Because if it is true that the Son of God  
 gasped his first baby breaths while screaming in a feeding trough. . .  
 and if it is true that decrees by pagan emperors  
 and visits by rustic shepherds working nearby all played their role  
 in the drama of salvation--then nothing is "ordinary" anymore. . .ever.

John Shea, a wonderful story-teller, speaks of a time  
 when he was trying to get across to his audience  
 about the wondrousness of the incarnation that we so often miss  
 because we are too caught up in the stuff of daily life.  
 After his speech, a man came up to him and said,  
 "I think I know what you were talking about.  
 You see, I was a school teacher and at Christmas, the kids always brought me gifts.  
 They brought them in different types of boxes, but after a while,  
 I got pretty good at figuring out what the gifts were,  
 no matter what the box looked like.

Anyway, one Christmas a student gave me a thin handkerchief box  
 and I knew immediately what it was, so instead of opening it,  
 I put it in a drawer so that when I needed a handkerchief, I could get one.  
 Quite some time later, I needed a handkerchief and opened the box. . .  
 but there was no handkerchief in it.  
 Instead, inside was an antique pocket watch.  
 I had had a beautiful engraved pocket watch the whole time  
 and never knew because it was wrapped in something very ordinary."

We have so many defenses against hearing the Christmas readings  
 and getting them to register as extraordinary—  
 in part because the images are so familiar. . .  
 and the stunning nature of the nativity story is so coloured by images  
 of cute kids in oversized bathrobes and towel turbans  
 that we cannot hear the story as stunning. . .as extraordinary.

We try and listen attentively as the magnificent titles that Isaiah foresees are proclaimed:  
 "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"—  
 and yet, despite our best efforts to stay tuned to the reading,  
 we suddenly remember that we forgot to take the rolls out to thaw. . .  
 which means that our despised sister-in-law will have gained another weapon  
 in her game of one-upmanship over who puts on the better spread  
 after the Christmas Eve gift-opening.

And yet, whether we realize or not, believe it or not, grasp it or not,  
 we are, in fact, celebrating the greatest moment of change in human history—  
 a moment, an event, when God enters history  
 leaving nothing the same any longer.

For the incarnation is not merely God becoming human once upon a time.  
 The incarnation means God coming now—  
     coming now into our time and into our space  
     and into our lives and into our comfort zones. . .  
     and shaking things up and shouting at us  
     or whispering to us to take note of the fact  
     that nothing is or will be ordinary again. . .because God is no longer  
 something, someone, separate, distant, apart, removed  
 but that God is one of us, among us, with us, in us—and is therefore and forever  
 always transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.

In 1994, two Americans were invited by the Russian Department of Education  
 to come to Russia and teach teachers. Nearby was a large orphanage  
 and, at the orphanage, there were about 100 boys and girls  
     who had been abused and/or abandoned by their parents  
     and then left in the care of the government.

One of the teachers related the following story:

"It was nearing the holiday season, time for our orphans to hear—  
     for the first time—the traditional story of Christmas. . .  
 and both children and staff sat in amazement as they listened.

When we were done telling the story, we gave the children  
 three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger,  
     and each child was then give a small square of paper,  
     cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me  
     since no coloured paper was available in the city.

Following our instructions, the children tore the paper into thin strips  
 and carefully laid them in the cardboard manger for straw.  
     Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown  
     left by an earlier American visitor, were used for the baby's blanket. . .  
 and a little doll-like baby was cut from the tan felt we had brought with us.

The orphans were busy assembling their mangers  
 as I walked among them to see if any needed my help.  
     All went well until I got to where little Misha sat.  
     He looked to be about 6 years old.  
     He had finished his project and I was startled to see,  
     not one but two babies in the manger.

I called for a translator to ask the little boy why there were two babies in the manger.  
 Crossing his arms in front of himself and looking at his completed manger scene,  
 the child began, very seriously, to repeat the Christmas story. . .

and for such a young child who had only heard the story once,  
 he related the details quite accurately—  
 until he came to the part where Mary put the baby in the manger. . .  
 and here he made up his own ending.

He said 'And when Maria laid the baby in the manger,  
 Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay.  
 I told him I have no momma or papa, so I don't have a place to stay.  
 And then Jesus told me I could stay with him.  
 But I told him that I couldn't,  
 because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did.

But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had  
 that I could maybe use as a gift. . .and I thought  
 that if I kept him warm, that would be a gift.  
 So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?"  
 And Jesus said to me that "That will be the best gift that anybody ever gave me."  
 So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me  
 and told me I could stay with him—for always.'

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears,  
 and he put his hand over his face, his head on the table, and he sobbed and sobbed.  
 It seemed to me that this orphan was weeping at his joy  
 at having found someone who would never abandon him or abuse him,  
 but someone who would stay with him—for always."

Maybe we just have too much "ordinary" stuff in our daily lives  
 that gets in the way of being able to see and hear and understand  
 and experience how extraordinary this story is. . .  
 and how it has changed everything in our world, our lives,  
 our days and our hearts.

You see, after all the office parties and family gatherings,  
 after eating way too much food and drinking too much eggnog and rum,  
 after the kids return to college or university from their semester break,  
 or the grandchildren go home to be with their parents  
 and after one or more special worship services at church—  
 all the wonderful treasures of Christmas we rightly enjoy without apology—  
 after all of this, we return to what we mistakenly call "ordinary" time.

And that mistake, my long-suffering friends, is my only point tonight:  
 That even the dullest of winter days, filled with tedium,  
 shadowed by monotony, drenched, if not by cold drizzle,  
 then at least drenched by the commonplace and pedestrian—

even the darkest of days and the dullest places and the dimmest of people  
are the days and places and faces where the Holy One is present,  
where the Wonderful Counsellor is found,  
where the Everlasting Father and Mother can be seen,  
where the Mighty God is made known  
and where the Prince of Peace is experienced.

And, if we look and listen carefully with the ears and the eyes  
of our hearts and not our heads, we can and will realize  
that Ms. Fanthorpe was right when she reminded us that,  
"along with a few farm workers  
and three members of an obscure Persian sect,"  
that we too might walk "haphazard by starlight  
straight into the kingdom of heaven."

Amen. SDG