

Nothing is Normal Again

[Luke 2:39-40](#)

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I love this Sunday in the church year. This is the first Sunday after Christmas. This is the day we get to ask, "So what?"

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According to Luke, Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem a little while after Jesus was born. They had him circumcised on the eight day according to custom. Then they gave him the name Jesus, as the angel told them to. Then they went to Jerusalem, the next city over, and made their sacrifice in the temple, again as was the custom for new parents. Then we get to our text today, which begins, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth." That is what they were doing all this time - fulfilling the requirement of the law of the Lord. That is what the circumcision, naming, and sacrificing was about. It was the law.

When we hear the word "law" we tend to think that it refers to a standard that is imposed upon us. We think of it as something you've got to obey, because, well, it's the law. But the Jewish idea of the law had more of a connotation of ritual to it. By fulfilling their many rituals they rehearsed their identity with God. They remembered who they were. Thus, even the law was a grace for the Jews because it drew them close to God. Anything that draws us to God is a grace.

We have rituals in the church also. I know that it has become quite stylish to throw off all rituals, as if they were nothing more than mindless formalities. But they are only mindless if you are not paying attention. Actually our rituals are as important to us as the Hebrew law was to them. They are a means of remembering who we are. Sacraments are rituals. On Christmas Eve we celebrated the Lord's Supper to remember that the real family gathering that night was at the table of Jesus Christ. This morning we celebrated Baptism to bring our children into the covenant of God's grace and to remember that we too wear his mark on our foreheads. Sunday worship is a ritual - a weekly drama that tells God's story with our lives.

These rituals are critical to our self understanding because the society around us also has rituals that will tell us we are someone we are not. Staying late at the office is a ritual. So is complaining if you don't get something you want, or trying hard to make the grade. If you do not allow the church to tell your story with its rituals, then you will believe the story that our society is writing through its rituals. The rituals of the church help us see the sacred mystery that lies behind our ordinary days. The rituals of society claim that you are on your own to do what you can with life. You can choose which rituals to follow, but don't think that you are not following a script that someone else has written. The only question is who is the author of your script? God or the society around you? And don't dare think you are writing your own script in life. That is just society's favorite ritual to get you lost.

We just finished a major ritual of the church called Christmas. Here again, society offered its competing rituals of manic shopping and frantic schedules. But those of us who were paying attention to the biblical story prepared the way of the Lord through Advent. Then we celebrated the birth of our only Savior. Now today we are at the exact same place where our text finds Mary and Joseph. "Having finished everything required by the rituals of the Lord, they returned to

Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth." The excitement was over. The celebration was done, and Mary and Joseph were taking baby Jesus back to life as normal, just like we are now about to do.

We know nothing about Jesus' life for the next 12 years, except, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor, of God was upon him." The word for favor in the Greek is *charis*, which is most often translated as grace. Thus, we could also translate this text by saying "the grace of God was upon him." Other than that, we know nothing about the next twelve years.

It has always been hard for the church to accept this blank spot in Jesus' life. We want to know what kind of baby and child he was. Imagine raising a child who never did anything wrong? By the third century some interesting folktales began to circulate about Jesus as a child. Many of these were collected in a document called the Infancy Gospels. They are completely fictitious, and are useful only for illustrating that we can't stand the thought that Jesus had any ordinary time.

According to one of these stories, Jesus and some other children were making clay animals. One of the kids started to gloat about how much better his animals looked. So Jesus clapped his hands, and the bird he made came alive, ate the other animals, and then flew away chirping. In another story some other boys once hid from him. Upon finding them Jesus turn them into lambs and told them to come to the good shepherd. It is not surprising that none of these stories made it into anyone's canon of the Bible. They have no spiritual purpose. They are inconsistent with what we know about Jesus. They were not written by any of the apostles. But even more importantly, they make the mistake of filling in blanks in the story - blanks that were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

When the Bible skips parts of the story it is telling us don't get distracted by that. Move on. Read ahead. But when we do that we can get equally distracted by the blank spaces in Jesus' adult life. After a brief story about Jesus in the temple as a twelve year old, we then have an eighteen year blank spot where we are told nothing about Jesus. Even if we concentrate on three years of his ministry we find these blank spots. If we add up all the events recorded in the gospels, they don't come close to accounting for three years. That means that Jesus had a lot of ordinary time, when nothing too dramatic was happening, at least, nothing worth writing down.

Still we wonder about Jesus ordinary days. Did he and the disciples ever have a day when they did nothing but a little laundry and maybe a late night dinner with friends? Yes. That is exactly the kinds of thing he did. The Bible speaks as loudly by its silence as it does by what it writes down. It proclaims the ordinary is just that - ordinary. Jesus had plenty of those days as a child and as an adult. In fact, he spent the vast majority of his days doing ordinary things, just like us.

Now, it is hard to believe that an ordinary day with Jesus seemed ordinary. If you knew that you were going to spend a day with Jesus, it wouldn't seem like a ordinary day to you. It would seem pretty special. Even if nothing happened worth writing down you would treasure every moment, just because you were with Jesus. Of course, after the Savior has entered the world that is exactly what you do have. Another day with Jesus. But because we consider our lives so ordinary we don't think there is anything too special about just walking through life with a Savior. That is because ordinary has a way of blinding us to the mystery that lies behind it.

Again, that is why we need rituals so much. That is why Christmas was so important. It gave us a window into deep reality. It helped us see a holy mystery wrapped in the birth of an ordinary

looking child to ordinary parents. Things are never again just what they seem. Not now. Not after God has become flesh and dwelt among us.

Christ may have arrived as tenderly as a newborn child, but he will grow strong, "filled with wisdom and grace." Which means that as you carry this newborn hope with you as you return to your normal life in Galilee where you live and work and conduct your ordinary routines, you are not on your own! Don't ever believe you are. That is not your story. Not anymore. Not after what you saw at Christmas. The new born hope in you will grow strong filled with wisdom and grace.

The French theologian Simone Weil, wrote that there are two great forces in the world - gravity and grace. Gravity causes one body to attract others, so that it constantly pulls others into its power. Human souls, she said, have this same gravitational force, trying to pull more and more of the universe into itself. We seek to constantly expand, acquire, and swell in significance. That is the story told over and over again through the rituals of our society. But grace, she wrote, is the universe's greatest miracle because it defies gravity. Grace seeks not to acquire but to give, not to make the powerful more powerful but to make the weak strong.

In Jesus Christ, that is what is at work in your life. And the best news is that even during the long blank spaces when it seems like it is just ordinary time, the grace will grow strong.

Give us the faith, O God Emmanuel, to see that the power of salvation is growing strong in us, even when we cannot see it. Amen.