

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas, January 4, 2009

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On this, the eleventh day of Christmas, we find ourselves in a place similar to the Sunday after Easter. The world has largely forgotten the feast, but we have opportunity to reflect more deeply on the meaning of Christmas.

Our gospel (Matthew 2:19f.) tells us about the return of the Holy Family from Egypt, where they had gone to escape the wrath of Herod. God had warned Joseph about this in a dream—Joseph had a gift for dreams just like the most famous Old Testament Joseph. Now, God gave Joseph another dream letting him know it was safe to return.

However, finding that Herod's son Archelaus was now ruler over the region of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, Joseph thought it best to return to Nazareth. Archelaus, mindful of his father's brutal decree, might wonder why there was a boy of Jesus' age living in that region.

Matthew says that the return to Nazareth fulfilled that which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene." This has always been a difficult passage, as there is no quote from a prophet that says exactly that. Matthew says that it was spoken by "the prophets"—plural—suggesting a general reference rather than a specific quote.

This may refer to several Old Testament passages that imply the Messiah is not going to be an important guy from the big city; Nazareth was a sort of back-water town. Some have also pointed out that the word *Nazareth* is related to the Hebrew word for branch, and may refer to Isaiah 11:1: "There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (KJV).

There is much speculation about the life of Jesus from the time of the flight to Egypt until the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, around age thirty. The Bible gives us exactly one story—the story of the Holy Family going to Jerusalem for Passover when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:41f.). It is from this period that we get various "Gnostic" gospels and other traditions of dubious merit.

If we take the Bible at face value, we get a sense that the life of Jesus was, in some strange way, ordinary. Of course, being the Son of God made him, by his very nature, extraordinary and different from all other people. However, it seems that he did all the things that normal people normally do.

We don't get the sense that Jesus was the wonder baby, who began to walk and talk the minute the shepherds left. Rather, we are given to believe that Jesus took his first steps somewhere in that ten to fourteen month period like other babies. We get the sense that he breast fed in the normal way, that he soiled his diapers and went through the ordinary stages of growth.

But, wasn't he different in some evident way? Wasn't there some aura surrounding him that made all who saw him fall down and worship? It doesn't appear that it was like that. There was, to be sure, an absence of that self-centered orientation that results from the Fall. But, whatever holiness looked like in the ordinary events of life, it did not draw much attention to Jesus.

The best evidence we have is the testimony of the people of Nazareth. When Jesus began to teach in a way that presumed authority, they refused to believe that he was anything special. They said, “Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas?” (Matthew 13:55 KJV). Jesus had grown up among them but had not distinguished himself in any way that made the people of his city take particular note of him. In other words, he was God in genuinely human form.

This is a meditation on the sacramental perspective on life. Sacramental vision sees God in ordinary things. For the same God who was present in the ordinary stages of Jesus' life is also present in the ordinary events of our lives, in ordinary people, in what looks like normal bread and wine.

There is a tendency for people to think that God is present only when something unusual happens. However, the tendency to look for God only in things that are obviously miraculous causes us to miss God in the normal ways he is present most of the time.

The great church father St. Augustine once observed that the greatest miracle is the creation itself and the power of God that upholds and sustains the entire creation each day. The ordinary is miraculous, if we have eyes to see.

The progress of the life of Jesus from infancy to the cross is also a meditation on providence. For so much could have gone wrong. What if the Holy Family had not escaped to Egypt in time? What about the dangers of travel and of life in a foreign country? What about all the enemies who conspired against him from Herod to Judas?

Somehow God ordered the events of Jesus' apparently vulnerable life so as to bring Jesus to the cross at just the right moment, in the fullness of time. God's almighty power is shown in the way that he controls things that are seemingly out of control, in the creative way that he continues to bring his divine order out of the chaos of fallen humanity.

In the same way, God exercises his sovereign control over the chaotic events of our lives. In spite of the temptations, dangers and contingencies we face daily, God is with us and is able to bring *our* lives to the redemptive conclusion he has planned for us.

Christ is born at Christmas, and Christ is born in us through baptism and faith. His presence in us sanctifies ordinary life and gives us the promise that, as children of God, we, like him, are destined for Easter.

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