

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Wednesday, December 24, 2014
Christmas Eve**

NO ORDINARY BIRTH

Luke 2:1-20

If you were to conduct a poll of Americans and ask them, “What is the most important event in the history of television?” you would get a wide variety of answers. Some would say the news coverage of the Kennedy assassination or the moon landing. Some might say the coverage of the resignation of Richard Nixon or the events of 9/11. Some wouldn’t think in terms of news at all but would think in terms of entertainment and they might mention the mini-series back in the ‘70s called *Roots*, about the history of slavery and about black Americans in America. Some might mention the mini-series that was done not too long after that on the Holocaust. But I know what the most important event in the history of television was. It took place on December 9, 1965. And I was there. It was the first time CBS broadcast *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Now you laugh and admittedly, in the wider scheme of things it’s probably the case that most people wouldn’t name that. But I have a very particular reason for doing so. Charlie Brown planted a seed in me that night. I was seven years old and saw it that first night and when I did I was exposed to things I had never seen or heard before. I loved the music, loved the characters, loved the fact that Charlie Brown seemed to be so much like me. But most of all I loved the part where Charlie Brown asks, “Can anyone tell me what Christmas is all about?” And Linus takes the stage at the school and the spotlight shines on him and having told Charlie Brown that he could tell him, he says, “And lo, the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid. And the angel said, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.’” And even at seven years old, not having a clue what he was talking about, his recitation of that story brought tears to my eyes.

And then, as wonderful as that was, at the end of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, do you remember what happened? The Peanuts kids all line up at the Christmas tree, standing next to Snoopy’s dog house and they shout, “Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown.” And then what do they do? They do something that absolutely horrified television executives, almost as much as Linus’s recitation. They broke into *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. That is still one of my favorite Christmas carols. It may be the most perfect hymn ever written. A perfect blend of unforgettable music with some of the most serious and joyful Christian theology anyone has ever heard. And at seven, I listened to that song and I loved the music of it and for years afterward (of course, they rebroadcast that every year for many, many years) I would hum that song and I would think about those words. And the older I got the more they were implanted in me. So while, in the larger scheme of things, it may not actually be that the most important event in the history of television was not the first broadcast of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, it was for me because it

planted a seed in me, a seed that has led me to be here this evening, not only telling this story but actually knowing what it's about and knowing what it means.

It's a story that begins with a birth, seemingly an ordinary birth but actually one extraordinary. It begins with Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem. They were going there to be registered in order to pay taxes. It doesn't get any more ordinary than that. They were there for a census. The Romans wanted to know who it was that resided within their empire so they could tax them all. And the precision of Luke's timing in mentioning that registration is a give-away that this is not meant to be some kind of myth or some kind of pretty detail around which we can build a winter holiday. The precision with which he mentions this event is meant to make clear that these are historical events. They happened at a particular time and they happened in a particular place, and a place that no one would ever have thought that stuff so important could have happened in. Because it was Joseph who was head of the household, it was to the town of his lineage that they went. And they were there for a time. The story isn't clear about how long they were there, but they didn't arrive there the same night she gave birth. They had been there for a while and she gave birth and when she gave birth they put Jesus in a manger. You know what a manger is, right? That's one of those things that baffled me for a long, long time. I had no idea what a manger is. I know what a *manager* is. He runs a baseball team. But what's a manger? A manger is a trough. It's used for feeding animals. They eat out of it. And so even though there are no animals actually mentioned in this story it's reasonable to suppose that there might have been some about. It has been speculated that the reference to there being no room in the inn was a way of saying that they had to go to a cave or to a stable and that that's where she gave birth. It may simply be that they went to a house – you'll remember that Matthew described them being in a house about a year later when the wise men arrived – it may be that they went to a house and there were animals that were kept in the house. I know that doesn't sound sanitary. This is the first century, folks. They didn't know from germs. They would frequently house animals, particularly if it was evening, in their homes in order to make sure that no one could steal them. Whatever the case is, she went and gave birth, she laid the child in a feeding trough. But the picture here is not one of squalor or despair. Nor are they homeless. This didn't happen out on the street. They had shelter for the night. They were simply dealing with a difficult situation the best that they could. And in that regard, it's like lots of other births that we've heard of. I'm sure some of you have heard of people who have been born in less than fully congenial conditions. Not in a hospital, but at home, or in a car, or a bus, or somewhere that you happened to be and you couldn't really get where you were supposed to. That's the kind of situation they found themselves in. Ordinary. Most of us have known people who have found themselves in that kind of position.

Well then, we have other characters introduced. First, the shepherds. Angels appear to the shepherds as they're watching their flocks in a field at night. The fact that it's at night suggests that in fact it wasn't at the beginning of winter. It was more likely early fall or early spring. If you've ever been in Israel around Christmas or even early December you know it gets awfully chilly at night. Probably not somewhere where shepherds would've been watching over their flocks if it really were December 25th. Nevertheless, the dating

is not what's important. What's important is that the shepherds were out there and something completely unexpected happened. They heard an angel. And the angel appeared to them and we're told that the first thing the angel said was, "Fear not." An appropriate thing to say. If an angel appeared to me, which none ever has other than my daughter, I would be scared out of my wits, I'm sure. And probably the shepherds' first response was to be afraid. But the angel says, "Don't be afraid. I've come here to bring you good news. I'm here to tell you something wonderful. I'm here to tell you about a baby that has been born not far at all from here." And if that's all he had said the shepherds probably would have said, "Well, that's good. That's wonderful. Guess what? Births happen here every day. What's the big deal?" That's the ordinariness of what's going on here. But of course the angel didn't simply say, "A child has been born to you." He does say instead, "To you, this day, is born in the city of David (another important reference making clear this isn't just any place, but rather this is the place chosen by God for this particular purpose and prophesied centuries ago to be that place in the prophecy of Micah chapter 5) a Savior."

Now the shepherds might have said, "We don't need a Savior. We're doing just fine here. We've got our jobs, we've got our flocks, we make a living. Life is fairly ordinary. Pretty boring, perhaps, but we're doing all right. We don't need anything like that." They, in fact, greeted that news with the same wonder with which we are called to greet it, because the One who was born that night was not *going* to be a Savior. He *was* a Savior. He was the Savior of humanity, born that night in Bethlehem. The Child who was announced that night by the angels was One who had come, God in the flesh, to deliver humanity, to deliver the shepherds, to deliver you and I from evil, from sin, from the powers of darkness. A Savior was sent into the world that night. One who would deliver us from the bondage in which we all live. One who would set us free to be the people whom God created us to be, people made in His image, people whose lives in every respect reflect His character.

A Savior had been sent. A Savior who was identified further as Christ the Lord. Christ, meaning "anointed, chosen." This was not a matter of God looking down and saying, "Oh, that one looks good. He's cute. I happen to know he's not going to make a sound tonight. He's adorable and he is well-behaved, because we all know that newborn infants never cry, just like *Away in a Manger* says. That one will do." No. He was chosen, He was specifically sent into the world. This one Child sent into the world. Chosen by God. Anointed and anointed to be God incarnate. *Kyrios*. Christ the Lord is another way of saying "the anointed One from God." Or "the anointed One who is God." *Kyrios*, being the most common way of referring to God by Jews who wouldn't use His name. So the One who was born and lain in a manger was One who rules over all creation and over everything and over every person. Because while yes, this is an ordinary birth, this is no ordinary baby. This is the King of all creation. Not one who became king later on at His baptism or His transfiguration or at the cross or at His resurrection. This is One who is, from His very birth, King over all.

The angels praised God for that and the shepherds can't contain themselves. They have to go see. So they left the field. They left their flocks in order to see the good news that

had happened. And they found Him. I don't know what they did while they were there. All we're told is that they came with haste and they found Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in a manger. But they were impressed enough by what they had seen and what they had been told by the angel that after seeing Him they went and told people and we are told that people who heard them wondered at those things. Wondered. By which Luke means they didn't scoff. But they didn't necessarily believe it right off, either. They wondered, "What is it exactly that has happened here tonight? To these scruffy people, shepherds, lower on the totem pole than just about anybody on the social scale. These are not people who would've been invited to Pilate's palace. These people have news for us and it's amazing news. We're going to have to think about this." And that's exactly what Mary did. Mary, who knew the truth, who knew that what the shepherds were told by the angel was true, because she had heard it herself, first from another angel named Gabriel and then from her own cousin Elizabeth. She kept all these things. She kept this story. She pondered it in her heart until, I suppose, later on after Jesus was revealed to the world as the Anointed One and the Lord, she would have told His followers, "Let me tell you what happened in the beginning."

An amazing thing happened on December 9, 1965. A 2,000-year-old story was exposed to a seven-year-old boy for the first time. I kept what I heard in my heart and pondered it for years afterwards. Eleven years later it bore the fruit of another birth, a new birth, the birth of a child of God. That's the power of this story. That's the power that we celebrate here this evening.