

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, December 23, 2012**

THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY

Matthew 1:18-25

I'd like to begin by telling you a little bit about my day yesterday. I began by waking up. It took a little while to shake the sleep off. Then I had breakfast. After that I exercised. (No, that's not a joke!) I exercised and took a shower. Then I got dressed and went up to my office and did some praying and some reading of Scripture as well as further study for my sermon. Did you know there actually are no angels named Harold in this story? I grew up not knowing that. Anyway, I finished my sermon and went down and spent some time with Marianne. We had shrimp and latkes for dinner and yes, I know that's weird. Shrimp and Jewish potato pancakes. It was good. Then we settled down and watched a documentary about the Great Barrier Reef. We then got into bed and I read and Marianne did crossword puzzles, our evening routine before turning out the light, and then went to sleep. That's really fascinating, isn't it? You always wanted to know what a preacher did every day of the week other than Sunday, didn't you?

It sounds really boring, even to me as I'm telling it. But I want you to look at it in a different way. When I woke up I was refreshed. When I had breakfast I was nourished. When I exercised I had a heart attack. No, I was built up (sort of). When I took a shower I was refreshed again. When I prayed and read Scripture I was inspired. When I wrote the remainder of my sermon I was edified. When I had dinner I was nourished again. When I spent some time with Marianne I had the best part of the day. The documentary on the Great Barrier Reef was both beautiful and interesting. What I read just before going to bed was relaxing. All in all it was a pretty ordinary day, but it was a pretty good day, too. And there were actually some amazing things – like finding out there were no angels named Harold – that happened in the course of that day because the amazing thing is that regardless of how ordinary any given day or event in our lives are, no matter how ordinary the stuff that we do day to day is, there are still some remarkable things God can do with it. And that brings us to a story.

This is a story that starts out about as ordinary as you could possibly imagine. In Matthew, chapter 1 we first have a genealogy of Jesus, which everyone skips because we all know that's boring and inconsequential. So we go right to verse 18. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. I want to tell you a story. This is what happened a while back. This is how it went down. There are no flashing lights. There is no Hallelujah Chorus. There is nothing, especially after reading the genealogy, that sets you up to expect that anything spectacular is going to happen. I want you to think about the very first time you read this or, alternatively, if you can't remember when that was, think of looking at this as if you had never seen this book before. It's completely new to you. So you open up Matthew and you see a record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ and you think, "Oh, boy, this is going to be slow going." So you read through all these names and they don't mean anything to you. "Thus there were fourteen generations," and you think, that's sleep-inducing.

Then you get to how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. Maybe you prick up your ears a little bit but mostly you think it sounds ordinary. Then you read a little bit further. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. But before they came together she was found to be with child. Gee, I've never heard of that happening before. We live in a time, unfortunately, when that's all too common. People get pregnant before they get married. And in this particular instance there was another problem. We'll skip that "through the Holy Spirit" for a minute. That's just editorial comment by Matthew. Instead we go to verse 19 where we're told that because her husband Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Let's read between the lines just a little bit. Remember, you've never read this before and you're thinking, "I saw that on ABC last week." This sounds kind of soapy. You read between the lines just a little bit and you realize that we have a girl here, we don't know how old she is based on what Matthew says, and her name is Mary, which is about as ordinary as it gets. Her husband's name is Joseph and that's also pretty ordinary. They're supposed to get married but she turns up pregnant and he decides not to go through with it. What do you suppose the chances are that he's the father? Pretty slim, right? So once again we're looking at soap opera here. Girl's pregnant, somebody else is involved and it looks just like the life of the neighbors across the hall in our apartment building, or it looks just like the teenagers in our local high school or it looks like any of hundreds of thousands of instances just like this that happen every day across America.

But there's something different here. First of all, what's different is the setting. In those days, engagement was the equivalent of marriage. It was not identical, but it was close enough so that if you wanted to get out of an engagement you had to divorce the other person. Typically, man had to divorce woman. Joseph was, according to Matthew, a righteous man. That means a couple of things. One is that he pretty much had to divorce Mary because if he didn't the assumption would be on the part of the rest of the community that he must have done something that he shouldn't have done with her before they actually got married. Engagement might have been the legal equivalent of marriage but it was not, in fact, the equivalent. Sexual relations were held off till after the marriage ceremony. So, that being the case, for him to marry her was his way of saying the child was his and he couldn't really be considered righteous anymore. But the thing is, he was also a compassionate man. This is obvious because he doesn't think in terms of his own righteousness. What might well have been the case with lots of men in those days was that he would have dragged her out into the public square and he would have let the whole community know that he was divorcing this woman because she was unfaithful and he was spotless. So she would be subject to what Matthew calls public disgrace and then some. As a matter of fact she might even have been stoned, being the legal equivalent of an adulteress. It didn't actually happen all that much in the first century in Palestine, but it was possible. So he decided he would divorce her but he would do it quietly. The way he would do that is that he would call two witnesses to himself and Mary and the four of them in a very private legal occasion would finalize the divorce. He would give her a handbill in writing that said they were divorced and it would be witnessed by those two people. It could all be dealt with very quietly.

Well, so far, so ordinary. But after he had considered this, we move to the second part of the story. This is the part where God intervenes and it's no longer just your ordinary tale of human beings trying to figure out how to deal with messy situations. Verse 20, "After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream." Has an angel ever appeared to any of you in any form – in a dream, while you were awake, at breakfast? Anybody here ever seen an angel? If only based on that unscientific survey of the people in this room, I think we can probably conclude that this is a very unusual occasion. An angel appeared to him in a dream. Now in those days, and still today in the Middle East, dreams were considered a way that God used to communicate to His people. So, while it's true that this would have been very unusual, it would not have been unheard of. Certainly if Joseph was a man who was steeped in the Old Testament and in parts of the Talmud perhaps that had been written by that time, he would know that God coming and speaking to people by an angel in a dream happened every now and then. He would not have found this happening in a dream all that odd. The fact of the matter is that if an angel is going to come to you and speak to you, it's better in a dream than when you're wide awake in the middle of the day. If nothing else, a somewhat less terrifying experience. So an angel came to him and he had a message for him.

This is where things become truly extraordinary because what he told Joseph was that God was in the pregnancy. He said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife." Do not worry about what the community would say and certainly do not worry about what God was going to have to say. Joseph's righteousness was not in question here so the angel told him not to be afraid to take Mary home as his wife because what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit. This is where Joseph first hears this. He doesn't hear it from reading Matthew 1. What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. That's another way of saying that this is God's action. This is not Joseph, certainly, but it's not another man, either. This is not an ordinary child. This is not an ordinary birth. She is pregnant, not because of unfaithfulness to Joseph but because of faithfulness to God. That is something that Luke in his version of the story brings out much more clearly.

The angel goes on and says, "She will give birth to a Son and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." His name in Hebrew was to be Yeshua. In English that becomes Joshua. So if any of you have or know children named Joshua, they are named after Jesus, in a manner of speaking. Yeshua means "The Lord saves." He is named that because that's what He would do in His life. Names, you know, in those days meant a lot. People did not give children names that they thought sounded good. They certainly didn't name them after celebrities. Personally, I think Child Protective Services needs to be brought in whenever that happens. Instead, they gave them names that meant something. They gave them names that said something about who they were or who their parents hoped they would be. In this particular instance it's God Himself who gives this child a name that is descriptive of what He will do in His life. The Lord saves. That's not exactly an ordinary message. If an angel had come to me before our daughter Rebecca was born or say he came and told me that my wife was pregnant and was going to have a girl, I would have said, "Wow! That's wonderful. That's terrific. That's a blessed thing for God to do." And if he had gone on

and said, “And we’re going to save the world through her,” I’d have said, “You’re what? You’ve got to be kidding!” That changes things drastically.

Joseph discovers that his wife has not been unfaithful, and he’s going to have a child that’s going to be accounted his and yes, he’s going to have a son. This would have been wonderful news and then he finds out that his son is going to be extraordinary. Through Him the Lord will save. And to be sure that those who are reading this for the first time, especially if they were among the Jewish readership that comprised most of Matthew’s earliest readers, just to make sure that they understood that this really was God who was involved here, he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, a very old prophecy that goes back some 700 years. It comes from the seventh chapter, verse 14 of Isaiah as found in the Greek Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said to the prophet, ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son and they will call Him Immanuel, which means *God with us*.’” And his Jewish readers would’ve thought, “Wow! This really isn’t just another birth. This is a birth in fulfillment of a centuries’ old prophecy.” That’s different. That’s a different kind of child. I should note here, as we’re going through this that some people have asked why they called Him Jesus if the angel said they would call Him Immanuel. The prophecy doesn’t say they will give Him the *name* Immanuel. They would *call* Him that. So in the same way that people get nicknames that might be descriptive of them, in the same way He would be called Immanuel because there was something else extraordinary about this child. He was not just going to be the one who would save God’s people. He would in fact be God with His people. In this child, in some way, shape or form – and I don’t pretend to suggest here that Joseph understood the doctrine of the incarnation because of what the angel told him in the dream – God would be with His people in this child.

Once again, it’s not the sort of thing that just any of us would think about their children. Now I know there are a lot of Jewish mothers who think that Isaiah 7:14, leaving out the virgin part, was written about their boy. Half of them are in my family, so I know this is true. That’s the reason, folks, why it is for a Jewish mother that young lady is never good enough for her son because, you know, he’s God and no one’s good enough for God! So this is genuinely extraordinary. Then the amazing thing is that this story reverts back to the ordinary. We get a centuries’ old prophecy, we get the declaration that God would save through this child, we get the declaration God would be with His people through this child, and then, Matthew says, when Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home with him as his wife, but he had no union with her until she gave birth to a Son and they gave Him the name Jesus.

So after the dream, everything went back to normal. He didn’t divorce her. He went ahead with the marriage. The child was born. He didn’t have sexual relations with Mary until after the child was born so that there would be no question about paternity. He knew he was not the father. He knew that God, in some miraculous way, was. He didn’t want there to be any question about this whatsoever, so he waited until after Jesus was born to lay with her. And he gave Him the name the angel had given to him. A really fairly ordinary Jewish name. There are a lot of Jewish men named Joshua. In Israel there are people named Yeshua, and they’re not Christian. It’s a name with a long pedigree.

But the important thing is, it's a name that meant something and it's a name specifically given by God to this particular child in order to say what He would do in His life.

So, a pregnancy, a marriage, questions, settlement, wedding, birth. This is the ordinary stuff that human life is made up of. And the amazing thing, in fact one of the most amazing things about the God whom we worship is that consistently throughout the history of His dealings with His people and the world, He uses what is ordinary to do extraordinary things. Whether it's picking Abraham up out of his home and sending him halfway across the Middle East as the father of a new nation, or picking a child whose life is in danger out of a river and making him His law-giver, or picking a teenage boy and making him a king over his people, or choosing somebody who hates the one whom He had sent into the world for the salvation of His people to be His greatest evangelist. Over and over and over again God uses the ordinary in extraordinary ways.

Now I want you to go home today and look in the mirror and, as you do, I want you to be honest with yourselves. Is there anything extraordinary about you? I'm sure you're all wonderful people. I know that for a fact, because you pay my salary. No, I know a lot of you, most of you are wonderful people. But are you really that different from the run of humanity? I know it took me a long time and a lot of pounding on the head to finally get it through my head that I was not God incarnate, that, in fact, I was ordinary, that I was not going to change the world, that I was really just one among seven billion. There's still nothing unusual about me. Nothing extraordinary about most of us. And when you look in the mirror, realize this: Today, tomorrow, Tuesday, next week, next year, sometime God may well use you in extraordinary ways to change the lives of people around you. You probably won't even know what's going on when it happens, any more than I think Joseph and Mary really understood what was going on in the birth of their first son. It might be your children. It might be your parents. It might be somebody else's children. It might be a co-worker. It might be someone that you meet at Union Station or on a bus or in a restaurant and have a five-minute conversation with. You won't even necessarily know that anything has changed, but God will have used you in a way that could turn the world upside-down. Thanks be to Him for using even us that way.