

Favored One?

(Luke 1:26-35, 38 NRSV) In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said

to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God... ³⁸Then Mary said, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

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(ROMANS 16:25-27 NRSV) Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

How many of you end a personal letter with, "Give my love to the kids, and to God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen"? It seems perfectly normal for a book in the Bible to end with a doxology, but when we remember that before Romans was holy scripture, it was a personal letter, it may seem strange.

Just an ordinary letter to some friends; expressions of concern for their well-being ("How ya' doin'?"); advice on a mutual concern; some closing remarks and, then, this doxology.

But it didn't stay "ordinary." The people in the church in Rome were anxious to know when Paul would arrive there. This man whose reputation had spread through the church—through the secular world, too, for that matter—had announced plans to visit Rome; but he was delayed, and they knew there were threats against his life. Every week, when the church gathered, the people asked, "Has anybody heard from Paul?" "How's he doing?" "When is he coming?"

Then the letter arrived, and word spread quickly: "There's a letter from Paul" And on Sunday morning the church was packed. A hush fell over the room as the scroll was opened. Heads nodded sagely as the beautifully-constructed theological passages were read; smiles were exchanged when personal references were made. And then, once again, Paul said, "I'm coming. I've got to go back to Jerusalem, but then I'm coming to you."

Copies were made and circulated. Soon the theological passages began to show up in sermons in other congregations in Italy. Some passages even became part of the worship liturgy—this ordinary letter to some friends.

And, years later, this ordinary letter was included in the New Testament. An ordinary personal letter; now a part of sacred scripture. IN THE HANDS OF GOD, THE ORDINARY BECOMES EXTRAORDINARY.

Take, for example, birth. There's nothing more ordinary than birth. I dare say everyone here has experienced it. Most females will give birth at some point in their lives; and most males will sire offspring some time in their lives. Ordinary.

But, in another sense, birth is always extraordinary, too. In a dirty shack—beer cans and cigarette butts on the floor, cockroaches rummaging through last night's leftovers still on the table—birth can be an extraordinary *problem*: another mouth to feed; another child to shield from an abusive father.

In a suburban apartment complex—rock-and-roll blasting from the stereo system by the pool, sports cars in the numbered parking spaces—birth can be an extraordinary *intrusion* and *inconvenience* in a life of carefree self-indulgence.

But under different circumstances—in a stable relationship of love and mutual commitment, as God intended—birth is even more than extraordinary; it's a sacrament: *life is given*.

Where there's love and stability—a baby is wanted, and parents are ready—a woman who bears a child becomes, literally, bread of life for that child. Through her broken body, and her shed blood, she gives life; she and her child are linked in an unbreakable communion as close and holy as Christ's own Eucharist. When birth takes place within the context God intended, the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Of course, there was *never* anything ordinary about the birth foretold in the Gospel reading today. For most women the announcement comes from her doctor; and most of them already suspect it, anyway. In the text from Luke, it's an angel who breaks the news to Mary; and it comes as a complete shock.

And listen to the content of the news from the angel: ***“He shall be great; and shall be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor, David; and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever.”*** Nothing ordinary about that!

And the extraordinary just keeps on happening in connection with this birth. When he was born angels sang, and the very stars announced his birth. International kings came and worshipped him.

But all this we know. What we may forget is that, in the midst of all the extraordinary trappings, the *birth* of Jesus was quite ordinary. What made it ex-

traordinary was not angelic choirs and brilliant heavenly lights; nor the visit of international royalty. What made it extraordinary was that in the Babe of Bethlehem, God became ordinary. THE WORD BECAME FLESH! He who was equal with God took on the form of a human servant.

I grow weary of hearing people talk about humanity as if it were some disease—some disability that burdens and pulls us down. It seems extraordinary when a human rises to unprecedented accomplishment: a professional football player leads the league in rushing yardage four years in a row. Then he has an “off-year”—plays hurt—and they say, “Well, I guess he’s just human, after all.”

What was he when he was setting records and leading the league? If our human condition is but the dregs in the bottom of the cup; if being human is what we are when we fail and when we’re weak, what are we when we soar to heights of extraordinary accomplishment?

If you really want extraordinary, find a rich man who gives it all to the poor—becomes poor, like them—then stands with them and works to better their life. That’s extraordinary!

If you really want extraordinary, find a God who becomes human and stands with humanity in order to save humanity from its own self-destruction. Find a Word that becomes flesh.

Maybe humanity, itself, isn’t “ordinary.” To be human is to be created in the Image of God: so, we can’t use our humanity to excuse our failure. It was as a human that Jesus turned water into wine, healed the cripple, restored hearing to the deaf, gave sight to the blind and life to the dead. It was as a human that Jesus gave us the beatitudes and the Lord’s prayer. And it was a human Jesus that told his human disciples, “...*anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these...*” (JOHN 14:10-15 NIV) It’s not our humanity that holds us back!

Indeed, in our humanity, we have an extraordinary capacity no other creature has: MORAL CHOICE. And it is in the exercise of Choice that the ordinary becomes extraordinary—humanity takes on the nature of the divine.

It began with his mother. Confronted with extraordinary news of impending birth, she had a choice. And here was her response: “*I am the Lord’s servant.*” *May it be to me as you have said.*” (LUKE 1:38 NIV)

It continued with Jesus: “*And being found in human form, he was obedient unto death, even death on the cross.*” (PHILIPPIANS 2:8) It is in the words, “*Not my will, but Thine, be done,*”—it is in the choice of obedience—that ordinary humanity bears the extraordinary marks of divinity.

There probably was nothing extraordinary about your birth. I’m relatively

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sure there was nothing extraordinary about mine. But in the choice to live in obedience to the Will of God—the choice the Bible calls “being born again”—we move beyond the ordinary, and become *truly—extraordinarily—human*.

And if we live at that level for long enough, it is possible to become so sensitized to seeing the extraordinary among the ordinary, that closing our personal letters with a doxology is just an ordinary occurrence.

“To God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen!”