

## **A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE**

### **December 25, 2016**

Around this time one hundred years ago, James Joyce was in the middle of writing his 700 page beloved literary masterpiece *Ulysses*. A few things to qualify, 1) this didn't start out as a book but a series of essays, 18 of them in total that centered around the same characters in Dublin. 2) This book wasn't immediately beloved as it was confronted with lawsuits and censorship for vulgar discussions around bodily functions and sexuality. 3) Not everyone agreed then or now that it was a masterpiece.

As it turns out, *Ulysses* is about one day, June 16, 1904 in Dublin, Ireland. For 700 long pages, two main characters, mainly Leopold Bloom, walk through their life. It has been described as a story about Bloom's humdrum wanderings and minor adventures on a summer day in Dublin. Did I mention it was 700 pages long? Not only that, many people say *Ulysses* is hard to follow so much so that there are endless supplies of reader guides. Besides being long, crude and hard to follow, the biggest gripe about *Ulysses* is that nothing really happens. It's boring. It's ordinary. Before *Seinfeld* was a show about nothing, *Ulysses* was a book about nothing, just a man in an unfulfilling marriage marching around Dublin running errands. Did I mention it was 700 pages long?

Needless to say, *Ulysses* is a divisive book. When it originally came out, two literary contemporaries had completely differing responses to this work. T.S. Eliot loved it so much that he recommended it to Virginia Woolf. After reading two hundred pages, Woolf wrote in her diary:

*Oh what a bore about Joyce! And what I suspect is that Joyce is one of those undelivered geniuses, whom one can't neglect, or silence their groans, but must help them out, at considerable pains to oneself.*

Bottom line, some loved it, some hated it. Some wanted to ban it, others wanted to save it. Some people thought it was a miracle, others thought it was mundane. A story with

occasional flourishes, but more often than not, it was routine. Regular. Some might say boring, unlike modern mystery novels with a whodunit, or a romance novel with two lovers struggling to find each other, or a Tom Clancy book about intrigue and foreign affairs, or even a non-fiction or self-help book that has a stated goal that it will help you achieve or understand. With *Ulysses*, we just get a journey. One that is often boring without a major event or blow up. Just life unfolding.

I think if we are honest today, some of us long for Tom Clancy, but our lives are more Leopold Bloom. Some of us want a romance novel, but it's more like a protracted novel. The great angst for us today is that Christmas is about to be over with all of the parties, all of the decorations, the presents and the food. November to December is an exciting run-up of busyness and planning, fun and festivity. Then comes December 26. There is garbage to be taken out. Presents to be returned and leftovers to be eaten. Before you know it, it's back to work, back to 9 to 5 living. I wonder if *Ulysses* doesn't bother people so much because maybe it hits too close to home. Maybe it's too much like real life.

It's easy to get locked in to the routine. The mundane. The boring. A quote I love is when a keen person noted, "The problem with life is that it's just so daily." Whatever stage in life you are in, I think you can agree. For one who has left college and started a new career, it is finding out that 9 to 5 living includes bills, getting up early, dealing with bosses and then you do it all over. For young parents, it's coming home or being home and dealing with the same fights, the same meal preparation and the same bedtime routine every single day. For those empty nesters or retirees, it's realizing that this time you always looked forward to can still be quotidian. Golf becomes just a game. Free time can become boring.

Today I want to wish you a very merry mundane Christmas. I want to show you how to be merry in the mundane, to find joy in the daily. We can go back to that amazing day over 2,000 years ago, but maybe, just maybe, it was more mundane than amazing.

*Luke 2:1-5*

Caesar Augustus called for a census. Was this so he could place signs around the Roman Empire – Jerusalem Population: 80,000? Bethlehem Population: 6,000? No, the Romans took censuses in order to collect taxes. What is more daily, boring and routine than taxes? In fact, you know the saying famously attributed to Benjamin Franklin, “Nothing can be said to be certain in this life, except death and taxes.” Augustus Caesar actually reformed and maximized the tax system of the Roman Empire. Prior to being the sole emperor, there was a triumvirate of leaders including Augustus, Mark Anthony and Lepidus. With three leaders, taxation was intermittent and arbitrary. Augustus, the emperor, made taxation direct and regular.

So this was April 15 and Mary and Joseph were taking a road trip to pay taxes. Mary was pregnant with Jesus, and as we find out was late in her pregnancy. As all mothers in this room know, pregnancy is beautiful and a gift from God. In the early days, it is exciting as you dream and tell your friends, but in the last month or so, it is daily. Waking up with the same aches and pains. Waking up in order to waddle around. Waking up and wishing you would deliver sooner rather than later.

Taxes, late term pregnancy and travel. Travel is what we often distract ourselves with and get excited about, but probably not when you are ready to give birth and traveling somewhere so you can pay taxes. It might be fun at first, but this 40-mile journey would not be easy. They might have had something to ride, but Joseph was not wealthy and it so it is quite possible they walked the whole path, one foot in front of the other. Mile one was fun. Mile seven was tiresome. Mile 28 was boring. Mile 40 was exhausting.

When we look at the birth narrative of Jesus, we often jump ahead to the varnished image in our minds, a peaceful image of two young people. Maybe Mary on a donkey’s back. It looks like a postcard. Something like this:

<http://biblepictures.net/journey-to-bethlehem/journey-to-bethlehem-007.jpg>

When in all reality, it was one foot in front of the other. Thinking in the back of their minds, “When will we get there?” “When will this baby arrive?” “How much will we owe in taxes?” I don’t think they had child credits yet. It was mundane. Tedious. Daily. Let’s keep reading.

*Luke 2:6-7*

This is the glorious moment. Jesus is born. This is what Christmas is all about and why it is so merry, but it’s still mundane. We still suffer from hindsight postcard syndrome when it comes to this moment. There were still contractions. There were still hours of labor. This all happened in a barn or a stable. Jesus wasn’t born painlessly via a miraculous delivery. It took work. It wasn’t at Stanford hospital. There was the smell of barnyard animals and Jesus being placed in a trough because they didn’t have anywhere else to place him. This was not a Facebook moment.

Many sociologists have pointed out that Facebook is making people less happy because they are stuck in the mundane as they scroll through and look at people on vacation. Or read about how someone got a new promotion or see pictures of newly married couples. As people are inundated with all of their friends living exciting, globetrotting fun lives while they stare at a cold plate of lasagna before having to bathe their rowdy kids, they get depressed. But I am sure you know that Facebook moments are just that, carefully curated points in time that show a moment. What they don’t show is the credit card bill that paid for that vacation, or the shouting and screaming that happened to get three kids to all smile for a family picture, or the angst of a bride wondering if this is the man she should truly marry.

In the same way, we have turned this manger scene into a Facebook moment. Picturesque with Jesus in a Pottery Barn manger, the star in the sky overhead shining down like a spotlight and some camels and sheep looking on lovingly. When in reality, Mary is exhausted from natural childbirth and Joseph is worried about whether he has to include Jesus on the census now and thus be taxed for another person in his household. Meanwhile

the animals are milling about and probably sniffing around the manger wondering why a baby is in their feeding trough.

In hindsight, you can see the beauty of it all, but in this moment, it had to be hard. It felt like work. It felt like life. Not a postcard. Not a Facebook moment. More *Ulysess* than Gospel. Let's keep reading.

*Luke 2:8-20*

We have talked about the shepherds before but it is worth repeating. These guys are the very definition of quotidian. Can you imagine anything more mundane than watching sheep by yourself out in the middle of nowhere? This was once a noble profession, but as the Roman Empire congealed and people moved from nomadic to agrarian-based lives, shepherding became a lowly position, an entry-level job or a job for low-skilled workers and people on the fringe.

They are relegated to a lifetime of sitting and watching the dumbest animals on the planet every single day. Saving them from predators again. Picking them out of holes they have fallen into again. Finding sheep that have wandered off again. It doesn't get more daily than that. That is why shepherds are usually described as drunks and unreliable, occasional thieves because they have to self-medicate and come up with a scheme to get over how mundane their lives have become.

Today they get a moment of glory. A supernatural event in the sky. Angels announcing the birth of a savior. Telling them to go find a baby in a manger, and wonder of wonders, they go and what was promised is right there in front of them. It's a miracle. A true miracle, all the more stark because their whole lives are pretty mundane.

Here is the epiphany, that was the moment, but those guys had to go back to the mundane. They saw the Lamb of God, and had to go back to watching lambs fall in holes and wander

off. They had to face the same conflict you face every Monday when the alarm goes off. They had a moment of glory, but they came crashing back to earth.

The most analogous example I could think of in this regard was the story of lunar syndrome. With over 40 years of hindsight, some of the 12 men who have walked on the moon have had a hard time coming back to earth. They had their peak experience in their 30's and don't know what to do after that. Many of them lost their marriages and many struggled with addictions. They have seen the face of God and they have had a hard time recovering.

How do you have a merry mundane Christmas? How do you have a merry mundane life? Here's what I have realized, almost everything we could consider mundane, we once considered miracles. Do you remember your first job interview for your career? All of the preparation and competition for this one job, the job you wanted in the place you wanted to live? Getting that job would be a miracle. Having that job would be an amazing gift from God. And joy of joys, you got it. However, over time your miracle became mundane. For those of you who are happily married, remember dreaming and praying about sharing your life with someone. Remember how it seemed like such a miracle that someone would love you for who you are, provide emotional and sexual intimacy, someone who would share a life for you. And joy of joys, that miracle came true. But somewhere along the way the miracle became mundane. Remember hoping and praying for kids, and when you saw their tiny feet and smelled their hair for the first time, but those miracles become mundane.

The strange thing is that routines make things common. Constancy makes things common. If we aren't careful, common becomes boring and mundane. The sad truth is when we are rowing through a mundane life, we are wishing for something new and exciting, but when that happens, we end up usually longing for things to go back to normal.

I was reading a study from a few years ago that said divorces spike in January because of all of the fights in December. During the Christmas season, troubled marriages find themselves fighting four times a day with close to a quarter of those people leaving the house for an

extended amount of time. The great irony is that with all of the parties, preparation, décor and presents comes stress, financial pain and general discombobulation. All of the new and different often leads to more stress and pain. What we don't realize is how miraculous the mundane is. We take for granted the things that are most constant.

Casey and I often find ourselves tired and quite honestly burned out by being the waiters, bathers, ushers, drivers, referees, nurses, carriers, calmers and playmates of our children. You get to the end of the day with some time to yourselves until the early hours roll around again and you hear feet stomping down the hallway. Conversely, every time we tell people about our kids or they see us with our kids, they say, "Cherish this time. Enjoy it." And we say, "Why don't you take them and you enjoy it." No, we don't say that. We say, "We are trying." Some of you say this because these hooligans are no longer in your house and you realize what a miracle it was.

When it comes to the Christian life, it's easy to miss the miracle of it all. It can become mundane to go to church weekly. It can become mundane to hear stories about amazing grace, a messiah in a manger, a carpenter on a cross. It can become mundane to have Christian friends that you talk and pray with. You can forget what a miracle it is.

When you zoom out on the Biblical story of Jesus, there are some gaping holes. We have the birth narrative. Then a brief story about when he was 12 and then stories for about 3 years of his ministry. It's easy to look at that and say, "Oh I wonder about all the stuff he did when he was 10. I wonder about all of the miracles he was up to at age 22." But I imagine age 10 had a lot of mundane. Sitting in church. Going to grandma's house. Skinning knees and having family meals. I bet 22 was a lot of time hunched over a table, sanding the edges and making sure the nails were straight. Paying taxes and having meals with friends. Going to visit Mary and going to church. I think there was plenty of mundane, but the reminder for you today is that the mundane is often rife with miracles. The Christmas story has both, stars and shepherds, angels and taxes, prophecy and a manger.

The liturgical year includes the seasons of faith for worshippers. You have Advent and Epiphany. You have Lent and Easter. But the longest period in the liturgical calendar is called Ordinary time. I don't know if it were up to Hollywood or Washington DC that they would produce anything called Ordinary times, but there is something divine there. There is something miraculous in things so mundane. To appreciate the small things in the consistency of life. To appreciate the minor miracle of a hug. To cherish the miracle of drawing in breath. To watch the miracle of kids playing in the park.

The name *Ulysses* is the Latin rendering of Odysseus the lead character in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. That day on June 16, 1904, for Leopold Bloom was utterly mundane and yet chock full of miracles; to draw breath and romp through this world. To this day, many people read *Ulysses* and they don't get it. They think something more should be happening. More fights, more fireworks, more drama, but life isn't always like that. In this Christmas season, I want you to have a merry mundane Christmas. I want you to slow down and see what is right in front of you. I want you thank God for the gift of Jesus Christ and the chance to be on this divine odyssey.