

Mark 9:33-37
As a Child: The Divine in the Ordinary

Main idea: Christmas reminds us that our ordinary lives are packed FULL of meaning. By knowing Jesus, we can know God and be part of His purpose for us and all of history.

One of my favorite stops while on a road trip vacation with my family earlier this year was just a brief stop at a place called the Crystal Shrine Grotto.

[Video of the Crystal Shrine Grotto]



The Crystal Shrine Grotto is a small man-made cave in a cemetery in Memphis, Tennessee. In the cave were several scenes from the life of Jesus. There was Zacchaeus up in the tree. There was Jesus's crucifixion. There was Jesus questioning the teachers of the law when he was just 12 years old. And, of course, there was the birth of Jesus. But the funny thing about the nativity in the Crystal Shrine Grotto was that the baby Jesus in the manger didn't at all match the art style of the rest of the scene. Someone had obviously brought a babydoll that they had in their home to represent Jesus and placed the doll in the manger!

Now, we have no idea if they did that because the original scene simply didn't include the baby Jesus in the manger, because some people think doing so would be a violation of the second commandment,¹ or if someone had at some point stolen the baby Jesus from the scene as a prank or as a good luck charm, which actually happens quite often with nativity scenes around the world every year. But either way, someone had apparently gone out of their way to be sure that there was in fact a baby Jesus in the manger, because they noticed that the baby Jesus in this nativity was missing.

As I was thinking about that, I realized that Christmas and even much of our daily lives today is often the same.² Christmas is often commercialized and hyped up for many secular reasons, and we can very easily not even notice that Jesus is missing from many of our daily activities. We can get so caught up with all the ordinary, busy things that happen at Christmastime, or even just as a part of our daily lives, that we might even get bored with the routines of life and the season, and not feel as though life is very exciting or meaningful. And even if we can't determine what it is, we can sometimes begin to feel as though something is missing from it all.³

Many of us, especially during the holidays, can also feel a bit hopeless. As we reflect on the years gone by, we can get depressed as we miss people we love, or as we think about broken relationships, and at times, we may find ourselves questioning the significance of life with the mindset that asks, "Is there really a meaning to any of it at all?"

¹ I do not think it is a violation of the second commandment, no more than it is to draw a stick figure or a cross to represent Jesus in a gospel presentation. The issue isn't the symbol, but rather our intention and devotion to the symbol. We are to worship Jesus, not symbols of Him.

² Revelation 2:4

³ Or, rather, Someone.

But as we read God's word, we find that Christmas reminds us that life is full of meaning.⁴ Because Jesus was born, we're reminded that God is with us, even during our darkest times, and we can have a relationship with Him, full of hope and meaning, as we ourselves even begin to engage in the mission of God.⁵

So I want to look briefly at a moment in Jesus's ministry that gives us a glimpse of God's purpose for all of us, and then we'll look at how that is only possible because of the birth of Jesus.

Mark 9:33-37.

They came to Capernaum. When [Jesus] was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, because on the way they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest. Sitting down, he called the Twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last and servant of all." He took a child, had him stand among them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but him who sent me." (Mark 9:33-37)

Father, help us today to reflect both on Christmas and the meaning of Christmas. Transform our hearts so that we would do as Jesus did: loving one another just as You love us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

I mentioned a couple weeks ago that I wanted to preach from the Gospel of Mark this morning because I've never preached from Mark at Christmastime. I've preached Christmas sermons from the other gospel accounts of Matthew, Luke, and John, but never from Mark, because the Gospel of Mark simply doesn't include the story of the birth of Jesus. And yet, Mark does include the life and meaning of the birth of Jesus.

So I preached last week on how Jesus came as a servant.⁶ Apparently, Jesus's disciples were occasionally argued about who was the greatest disciple among them, and they fought over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and Jesus always redirected them to think not about how they could be first, but about how they could be last.⁷

So, in the same way, on this occasion, Jesus took a child, wrapped him in his arms, and said in verse 37: "Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but him who sent me."

It would be like if you could talk with the CEO of some major corporation, and he boasted about all the ways his company is changing the world, and all the technology that they've created that makes life easier, and if you were to say to him, "Yeah, but how many kids have you given a high-5 to in the last year? That's the real measure of success."

Now, why is that? I've read this story many times over the years, and it's a nice saying, but to be honest, I've often dismissed it as a cliche proverb about being humble servant. But really stop to think about how profound of a thing it is that Jesus just said.

Jesus was saying that the mission of God is not merely to do the great big spiritual things that we often think about in terms of our faith. I don't want to diminish things like sharing your faith, or doing missions work, or

⁴ Jesus is the Word—the Meaning (John 1:1). He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (John 14:6)

⁵ Matthew 1:23, Ephesians 2:8-10

⁶ Specifically, to die on the cross for our sins (Mark 10:45)

⁷ Matthew 18:1-5, Luke 9:46-48, Luke 22:24-37

teaching a Sunday School class. These are all very important, huge, good things, and I praise God for all of you have sacrificed your time and energy to serve God and the church over the years in doing these things.

But the mission of God is also giving a hug to a child, letting them know that they're loved and welcome. It's giving a cup of cold water to someone who's thirsty.⁸ It's packing a shoebox with toys and school supplies to send to a child that you'll never even meet. It's doing very ordinary things, and in doing so, doing something very extraordinary.

We have a bin of zip-locked bags in the foyer, in front of the front door. Those are bags that we encourage you to take and give out to the homeless that you might sometimes see standing on street corners in the cities. They contain things like socks, crackers, peanut butter, instant coffee, and a bottle of water. The youth put those together this summer, and together we've given out about 30 bags so far. Praise God!

A few of you have told me, "I never see any homeless people." That's okay! Just keep one in your car until you do. You'll never know when you might need it.

Not long after the youth put these bags together, I went bowling with my family, but when we got there, I realized that I was wearing sandals, and didn't have any socks. Then I remembered that we had these homeless bags in the van, so I took a pair of socks out to wear so I could bowl! I felt like I was stealing from a homeless person, it was great! Anyway, my point is, you'll never know when you can use them.

I think the only thing perishable in these bags are the crackers, so after a while, go ahead and eat those, it's okay. You're not stealing from homeless people. Then just keep everything else in your car even for years if you need to, and the next time you pass through a city, you might be able to give it out. And you'll be so excited, and they'll be so grateful, and you'll glorify God.

It's like John Wilson sings in his song Dream Small:

It's a mama singin' songs about the Lord
It's a daddy spendin' family time, the world says he cannot afford
These simple moment change the world

It's visiting the widow down the street
Or dancing' on a Friday with your friend with special needs
These simple moments change the world

Of course, there's nothin' wrong with bigger dreams
Just don't miss the minutes on your ways to bigger things, no
'Cause these simple moment change the world

Jesus says that when we do such things, like welcome a little child in His name, we welcome Him. Isn't that interesting? And He says that when we welcome Him, we also welcome He who sent Him, talking about God the Father. Isn't that interesting? How could loving and welcoming a child be anything like loving and welcoming Jesus?

On the surface, we might say these things are unrelated, until we remember, of course, that Jesus came as a little child, and the only way we can be right with God is to welcome Him into our lives.

⁸ Matthew 10:42

Luke 2.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered. This first registration took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:1-7)

You see, Jesus Himself came as a child, even as a little baby. Nearly all of the world missed it. It seemed so ordinary. And whether there was no room in the inn or no guest room in their extended family's home as many people understand the situation today, the fact remains that the birth of Jesus wasn't received for what it was: the Son of God was born, and that truth changes everything.⁹

If the same God who made all things and sustains all things can be born into the world that He Himself made, this completely changes our understanding of how the universe works.¹⁰ It's not a closed system, operating solely on the principles of what we call science. God is able to invade space and time. People today like to say that nothing is spiritual, and that everything operates according to biology, but if God became a man, then truly everything is spiritual.¹¹

In the beginning, God created us male and female, and made us in His image, in the image of God.¹² But because they sinned, and we all sin, the image of God in us has become very difficult to see.¹³ Instead of seeing something extraordinary when we look at one another, like vessels prepared for mercy, we see vessels prepared for wrath, because all mankind by nature are children of wrath.¹⁴

And yet, a little over 2,000 years ago, the natural world was invaded by the supernatural. The Divine One entered into the ordinary. And because God is merciful, when we receive Jesus, we also become something more than ordinary. John 1.

But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born, not of natural descent, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

This is the meaning of Christmas. Christmas isn't about the hustle and bustle of shopping, or gift giving, or even family celebrations, although all of these things can certainly help us to celebrate. Christmas is about how God became a man so that men can be born of God.¹⁵

I think it's kind of funny, if not plain wrong, that pastors sometimes get the title, "Reverend." Now, I totally get that it's a title of respect, but in the Bible, only God is called reverend. It says in Psalm 111:9:

⁹ John 1:14, 8:32

¹⁰ Genesis 1:1, John 1:1-5

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:16

¹² Genesis 1:26-27

¹³ Romans 5:12

¹⁴ Romans 9:22-26, Ephesians 2:3

¹⁵ John 3:3, 3:16

He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name. (Psalm 111:9, KJV)

Most versions translate this word “awesome.” It means that He’s worthy of reverence and awe, and even fear.¹⁶ Basically, God is worthy of all praise.

But if we’re honest, we’d all have to admit that we haven’t given God all praise. For much of our lives, we’ve lived according to our own plans, not God’s plans for us.¹⁷ The Bible calls that sin. God is good, and He’s plans are good, so anytime we deviate from God’s plans, that’s not good.¹⁸ And we’ve all done that, so it’s clear that we’ve all sinned.¹⁹

Even worse, the Bible says that the penalty for sin is death.²⁰ Not merely physical death, although that is part of it.²¹ Sin leads to spiritual death, separation from experiencing God’s goodness. And it’s not even so much that God stops showing us goodness, because the steadfast love of the Lord never comes to an end.²² It’s just that when we’ve hardened our hearts to God, we experience God’s goodness like wrath, because it burns like hell.²³

But that’s exactly why Jesus came. He lived the perfect life that we’ve all failed to live, and then died on the cross for our sins, so that by grace through faith in Him, we could be saved from our sins, saved from hell, and go to be with God in paradise after this life.²⁴ Isaiah says it like this:

We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)

And so, when Jesus died on the cross, He forgave all our sin, and made us holy.²⁵ So it’s kind of silly to call a pastor “Reverend,” because we’re all holy. Everyone who calls on Jesus as Savior has been sanctified, set apart by God, cleansed, so that we would begin to worship God from the heart, not to make up for our past sins, but rejoicing in God’s goodness toward us.²⁶

You see, because Jesus was born among us, no child is ordinary.²⁷ No manger is mundane. God is filling all with Himself, and He’s going to make all things new.²⁸

In the age to come, there will be no more sin, or death, or brokenness.²⁹ We will all be fully whole, and fully fulfilled, doing the works of God, loving our neighbor, and glorifying God by loving Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.³⁰

¹⁶ Strong’s #H3372

¹⁷ Proverbs 14:12

¹⁸ James 4:17

¹⁹ Romans 3:23

²⁰ Romans 6:23

²¹ Genesis 2:16-17

²² Lamentation 3:22-23

²³ Hebrews 12:29

²⁴ 1 Peter 3:18

²⁵ Psalm 51:7

²⁶ Ephesians 1:1-4

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:28, Revelation 21:5

²⁹ Revelation 21:1-4

³⁰ The Greatest Commandments are not merely a command, but a promise (Matthew 22:37-40)

And if we're going to do that then, we're invited to begin doing that even today as we trust in Jesus.

Now, Jesus was not saying that doing these sorts of things, like loving and welcoming a child, is what's needed for salvation, but it is certainly an illustration of it. It's Jesus who saves you when you trust in Him.³¹ And when we receive Jesus as Savior, we will certainly go on to do ordinary, mundane things like welcoming children, giving cups of cold water to the thirsty, and more,³² but these things aren't the ordinary, mundane things we often assume them to be. They are the work of God through us, showing love to our neighbor, pointing them to Jesus, the Savior of the world.³³

And it all begins by receiving a certain child, the one born in the manger, who grew up and died for your sins and mine, that we might become children of God.³⁴

Christmas reminds us that our ordinary lives are packed FULL of meaning. By knowing Jesus, we can know God and find that we're known by God.³⁵

By knowing Jesus, we're forgiven of all of our sins, and the image of God in us is restored.³⁶

By knowing Jesus, we're given a new meaning in life, and we find that how we live is part of His purpose for us and for all of history.³⁷

This Christmas, I want you to be sure that you know Jesus.³⁸ Christmas is more than the shopping, more than the family gatherings, and even more than the feelings of loneliness that we can so often have. It's God Himself entering into our darkness in order to shine His light, and give us eternal life.³⁹

This Christmas, find your hope and life in Him. When you know Jesus as your Savior, the Holy Spirit comes to live in you, and all the small ordinary things you do take on a special meaning.⁴⁰ Whatever small acts of kindness you participate in this Christmas season, or throughout the year, if you've been transformed by our supernatural Savior who came to this natural broken world, your simple acts of kindness are not "random" acts of kindness, but worshipful acts of kindness that honor our Savior, who humbled Himself to serve you, giving His life for you, that you might find your life and purpose in Him.⁴¹

May your Christmas this year be filled with many purposeful acts of worship in serving others, and may you find comfort if you're going through a hard-time in knowing that the Son of God left heaven to heal our broken world, and He understands your hurt this season.⁴²

Put your hope in Him. Even when life isn't perfect, and you seem to experience the same pains every year because of years gone by, you can find hope, comfort, and even joy in Jesus.⁴³

³¹ John 3:16

³² Ephesians 2:10

³³ 1 John 4:14

³⁴ Luke 2:10-12, John 1:12, 3:16

³⁵ Galatians 4:9

³⁶ 2 Corinthians 3:18, Colossians 3:10

³⁷ Proverbs 19:21, Jeremiah 29:11, Romans 8:28, 12:2

³⁸ John 17:3, 1 John 5:20

³⁹ John 1:4-5, 8:12

⁴⁰ John 14:17, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

⁴¹ Philippians 2:5-8

⁴² Hebrews 4:15

⁴³ Proverbs 18:24, 1 Peter 1:8-9