

# Luke 2

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Preacher: Chris Roberts

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Let's turn back to Luke chapter 2, which we heard read earlier in the service. It's on page 857 of the Church Bibles. Do you know this year I'm actually quite looking forward to Christmas. I think the older you get maybe the more willing you are to sort of put up with the chintz and embrace the cheer.

I might even get a Christmas jumper this year. But the thing is, what happens in a week or two when all of the fun is over, when all of the festivities finish for another year? What happens when the decorations have to come down? When the thrill of inviting people to carol services and seeing friends and family and the partying is over?

The problem with having the best Christmas ever, whatever that is, is that the high never lasts, does it? January is coming.

Ordinary life is far, far less twinkly. But Luke tells us this morning that the good news of a saviour born at Christmas is for the ordinary lives that we live.

[ 1 : 1 5 ] We're in the third of our little mini-series looking at three announcements from angels at the birth of Jesus and the people's lives, the people who respond to those announcements.

And we're with the shepherds this morning. And I want us to see how their story and their response help us in the ordinary things of life.

Luke shows us that the news they hear from the angels, firstly, is for ordinary people. The good news of Christmas is for ordinary people.

So far we've seen the angels announced to Zechariah, the priest, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. And so the difference between them and these shepherds is that for the first time the angels announced to people outside of the family circle.

I've not noticed that until this week. Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary, they are all relatives, aren't they, to Jesus Christ. But these shepherds have no family connections whatsoever.

[ 2 : 2 5 ] They turn up at the maternity wing of the inn. And they are the random guys that gatecrash the intimate family get-together. That everyone assumes that somebody else is invited.

They are the outsiders, really. They're not priests. They're not relatives. They're not important people. You probably know that shepherds were pretty low on the social ladder at the time. It's no coincidence that Luke introduces them by beginning this chapter with a reference to the most powerful man in the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus.

But the shepherds are about as different as you can get from him. Shepherds of the day probably would have been self-employed, often homeless peasants. And don't think of those cute pastoral scenes with middle-class hipsters chilling by the fire, cuddling lambs.

These guys are hardened, thick-skinned, down-to-earth working men, sheep men. And yet it's not Caesar who gets the news, is it?

[ 3 : 3 6 ] It's the ordinary people. It's the shepherds. It's the disconnected, isolated outsiders. By the end of this section, the shepherds praise God in verse 20, but after that, we never hear of them again.

They disappear into obscurity in Luke. They're not key characters in Luke's gospel. They have a kind of cameo appearance at the beginning, but then that's it.

They don't get a long song recorded like Mary or Zechariah do. But Luke's point is that they are exactly the kind of people that this news is for.

It's the ordinary people. It's not Caesar who is esteemed by the angels, is it, in this chapter, but the shepherds. Only they get to see the angels appear in full force.

Only the peasants get the royal treatment. And it's exactly what the angel says to them, isn't it?

That this is good news of great joy for all the people.

[ 4 : 45 ] At first, in the beginning, at Luke, God revealed himself to Zechariah in the temple, which is what we expect, isn't it?

The temple was the place where God would meet with his exclusive people, the Israelites, through priests. But now his revelation has burst out of the temple, and he's revealing himself to outsiders on a farm.

Outside of a temple, to ordinary people. I wonder how many people in this room used to say, I'm not really a church kind of person.

I don't do God. As if there is a kind of person that God is not interested in. The kind of person who is not religious, or who is religious.

But Luke tells us that that's rubbish, doesn't it? He just tells us that this good news is for ordinary people. Who never thought they had anything to do with God in the first place.

[ 5 : 53 ] This good news is for ordinary people. Secondly, this good news is for ordinary life. It's for ordinary life. You know, what struck me afresh about the shepherd's story this year is that with these huge displays of glory that they see, there is a bit of an anti-climax.

Arguably, none of the other people who receive messages from the angels get such a glorious display of angelic power. We're told that a multitude of the heavenly hosts are there praising God. They get this huge display of power and of glory. But the passage ends with maybe what feels like a bit of an anti-climax.

Because at the end of the high, and of the experience, the shepherds don't get to carry on seeing the glory. And remain in a state of spiritual euphoria.

We know that because Luke includes some little details. Look at verse 15. What happens at the end of this display? The angels went away from them. Back into heaven.

[ 7 : 08 ] And then, look at verse 20. There's a really important word in verse 20. The shepherds returned. Glorifying and praising God for all they'd heard and seen.

You might sense that, say, there's a bit of a sense of anti-climax. Where the visions of glory close and the angels go back to heaven.

And the shepherds have to return. Back to earth, really. The glory has gone and they've got to go home. But amazingly, they embrace that.

They do it glorifying and praising God. They understand that this good news that they hear is not supposed to remove them from the ordinary things of life.

But to sustain them in the ordinary things. They are going back home to exult in monotony. As they go back to their day jobs.

[ 8 : 11 ] Many, many people would have loved to have seen what they saw. Many people longed for extraordinary signs in the ministry of Jesus. And he did give many, didn't he?

And many people longed for those kind of signs today. But the shepherds understand that it was more glorious. Not that God delivers us from the ordinary.

But he gives us a message and a saviour to preserve us in the ordinary. Who gives us a reason to praise and glorify God in the ordinary.

Just think about what the shepherds have to return to. They've just seen all of this. They've met this baby who's wrapped in cloths.

Who is confirmed as the Christ. As God's chosen king over the world. The Lord. But then the highs of that night's experience can't last.

[ 9 : 11 ] Because the sheep still need feeding. The ewes still need milking. They've still got to be shepherds. And they've got to return.

They've still got the strains of long, hard physical work ahead of them. And meeting the angels and the Lord Jesus doesn't change that. They've still got to go to bed and get up at the crack of dawn.

They've still got to live with each other. And forgive each other. They've still got to care for their elderly parents. They've still got to cope with all of life, with all of its problems.

They've still got to put up with the same old, same old. Same old men of the field. Same old patch of dirt. Same old animal smell.

Same old night shifts. When everyone else is asleep, they still have to keep watch for night after night after night. We imagine maybe they could have got so caught up with the emotion of it all that they missed the point.

[ 10 : 14 ] But they're not distracted by the razzmatazz, are they, of the glory of the messengers. By the quality of these riveting, heavenly preachers.

But these down-to-earth men see how the message counts for ordinary life. And note that their reaction wasn't to dwell on the glory of the angels. They never actually talk about that, do they? But they get on and go to Bethlehem. To get to the nitty-gritty of where this Lord and Saviour actually was. And afterwards they go back to their day jobs. Just think, they could have monopolised on the experience. They could have been celebrities. The men who met the angels. They could have gone on tour. Selling merch. Telling their story. Writing biographies. Writing blogs. But they didn't major on the means of the message.

[ 11 : 17 ] On the experience. But on the content of the message itself. I guess we have a different temptation, don't we? We could be tempted to major on the quality of the messengers.

And complain about the lack of it. Especially this morning. The same issue, isn't it? But the flip side. One of the problems that we have. Is that the good news of Christmas is ignorable. It doesn't come to us through the deafening singing of an angelic army. It comes to us in a means that we can ignore.

Should we choose to. It comes through Luke's words. Written on a page in a Bible. It comes through preachers. You're not likely to come to this church.

And get a euphoric experience. It's certainly not like the one that they had. So this message could be ignorable. And you could dismiss it for that reason. But it comes for ordinary people.

[ 12 : 26 ] In ordinary ways. For ordinary life. For the same old, same old. And God gives us more. Than a euphoric experience.

Something that will evaporate. Like the snow of a magical white Christmas. He gives us something that lasts long. Into the monotony of February. Because actually.

Whilst they are ordinary guys. Back to the same old ordinary lives. That they lead. They are not the same people anymore. Are they?

It is a message for ordinary people. And it's a message for ordinary life. But he is the saviour of the ordinary. He is the saviour of the ordinary.

It always shocks us. Doesn't it? What do you think should be the sign. Of the arrival of God into the world? What should be the sign of that?

[ 13 : 30 ] Of the king of God's kingdom. Infiltrating the world. One writer says. Maybe to mark the arrival. God would do something fitting.

Like creating a planet. Or maybe God should. Create a second son. And hold it between his thumb and his forefinger.

As a sign that he was coming. Surely that would be a sign worthy of it. Something out of the ordinary. Well look at verse 12.

This will be a sign to you. A baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. Lying in a manger. So ordinary isn't it?

It's so ordinary. That actually it's extraordinary. There won't be a halo on his head. Just find him where the animals are fed.

[ 14 : 31 ] And compared to the glory. And the razzmatazz of the messengers of the king. The king himself is very ordinary.

What you notice in the passage. Is the huge kind of come down. Isn't it? For the shepherds. In the contrast with the glory of the servants of the king. And the king himself.

I think it helps to forget our preconceptions. Of what angels are like. Forget little cherubs playing on harps. We read don't we.

That the heavenly host appears. That word heavenly host. It means heavenly armies. If this were a scene in a movie. It would be like the Lord of the Rings.

This is kind of battle for middle earth sort of stuff. With a multitude of God's supernatural warriors. Arrayed for battle en masse.

[ 15 : 29 ] Singing glory to God in the highest. That's why the shepherds don't say. Oh this is so pretty isn't it? No they are so terrified. Anyone who gives their child the same name as one of the angels.

And expects a passive quiet little cherub. Is in for a shot. Isn't that right Gabriel? They are impressive. Intimidating.

Or inspiring beings. They are extraordinary aren't they? And yet the one they serve. Is so ordinary. The heavens erupt with praise for the saviour of the ordinary.

Who comes into an ordinary world. In 1961 Yuri Gagarin was the first man in space. Khrushchev was the premier of the Soviet Union at the time.

And he famously announced that Gagarin went into space. And the cosmonaut discovered that there was no God there. Clyde Staples Lewis.

[16:36] C.S. Lewis. He responded in an article called The Seeing Eye. And he said if God was there. We wouldn't discover him by going higher into the air. As if he relates to someone.

Like someone on the top floor. Relates to someone on the bottom floor. Rather he relates to us more like Shakespeare relates to Hamlet. Because Shakespeare is the creator of Hamlet. And the world that he lives in. And the only way that Hamlet can know Shakespeare. His creator. Is if Shakespeare writes himself into the play.

Only if the author reveals his own character in the story itself. And the only way that the extraordinary God.

Who created the angels. Who created the universe. Can be known by creatures. Is if he writes himself into the ordinary.

[17:41] And the one who fills the universe. Simultaneously limits himself to an ordinary human body. He writes himself into the drama of history.

And of ordinary human life. And into an ordinary world. To rescue ordinary people. And so he is so ordinary. It makes him extraordinary.

There is nothing too ordinary for God to enter into. For him to redeem. For him to work his grace into. Do you know I think our problem is that we feel the demands of trying to be something that we're not.

We feel the pressure of trying to be extraordinary. We want to be everywhere. Doing everything. All of the time. To be unlimited. We want to sort of play out the Christmas story.

But in reverse. God comes down to us. And he contracts himself. To a human being. But we sinfully want to go up to heaven. And expand ourselves.

[18:49] To be like God. We feel the limits of our bodies all of the time. We feel our failures all of the time. And we strive and we strain to be superhuman.

We have this fantasy don't we of a few days. The perfect Christmas dinner. With children sat obediently round the table. With family adoring you for the quality of your gravy.

With perfect presence. Perfect. It's the image we want for ourselves. It's the image that we want to project. When do you ever read a Facebook page.

Or a blog page. Or one of those family annual Christmas letters. With pictures of a kid saying actually. The truth is. Our Johnny is just very ordinary. He's had a very ordinary year at school.

And he's a very very ordinary boy. No we don't. We're attracted to the radical. And the extraordinary. To the ultimate. To the extreme.

[19:52] But with that. We're unsettled with our limits. And our ordinary gifts aren't we. We're worried about that. And we're anxious about that. We've become less able to deal with the ordinary.

Always looking for the next thrill. Always wanting to unbox something new. To break the monotony. One Christian writer. Rod Dreher.

He writes. Do you know what my biggest problem is? My biggest problem is. Everydayness. He says.

It's easy to think what I do in wartime. Or how I cope if a hurricane hit my house. It's easy to imagine. What I'd need to do if I won the lottery.

Or if I could buy that thing I've always wanted. But it's a lot more difficult for me to figure out how I'm going to get through today. Without despair.

[20:51] But do you see. With the shepherds. God has put the ordinary back on the agenda. Because all of God's extraordinary works.

All of the amazing miracles that we've already seen in Luke. Have been done through very ordinary means. Jesus. Jesus.

The God of the universe. Was born in a very ordinary way. He grew for the full nine month term. Didn't he? And it all looked pretty ordinary.

For outsiders looking in it. It would have looked no different. He assumed humanity from Mary in an ordinary way. The delivery we assume was pretty ordinary too.

It was so ordinary actually. That Mary had to cope with putting her first born son in a manger. In a feeding trough. It was that ordinary. And Jesus grows normally.

[ 21 : 50 ] We know. Luke tells us later. He learned in the ordinary way. Mary had the normal experience of bringing up a child. She and Joseph provide a normal home. They teach him.

He learns and he gains wisdom. They teach him the scriptures. He would have had a normal Galilean accent. Wouldn't he?

He would have learned normal Israeli culture. And customs from his parents. He would have had a personality that would have been formed in ordinary ways.

He was a real ordinary human being. Do you see the extraordinary things. That God was doing. He was doing through ordinary means.

Redeeming the ordinary. At Christmas God didn't sort of bypass the ordinary. The human body of Jesus isn't created out of nothing.

[ 22 : 49 ] Ex nihilo. But out of Mary. Ex Maria. Ex Maria. So it is a miracle of the Holy Spirit. Like she heard from the angel. But he uses the ordinary means of a woman's womb.

And we know that Mary is with Jesus until the end of his life. There is this normal lifelong relationship between a mother and a son. God infiltrates human existence.

To use normal events and normal people in ordinary situations to bring about extraordinary results. So we don't rise to his level of power.

Do we? But he descends. And works through normal things. We feel the need all the time to be bigger and better than we are.

To be extraordinary. But we can't. But God has entered the ordinary. So that by yourself. You don't have to be. We see a God who saves the ordinary.

[ 23 : 54 ] The first evangelists. After the birth of Jesus. Aren't prophets. They're not fully trained theologians. With PhDs. Or priests.

Or important people. They are the peasants. His shepherds. Who tell people. They're the first to tell anyone else. I'm probably going to get his name wrong.

Tell me afterwards. But Czeslaw Milosz. Was a Polish American poet. In the 1980s. I was reading a bit about him this week. And near the end of his career.

He reflected on the limitations of his ability. To write work. And to reach a global audience. Under the restrictions of communism.

Milosz was exiled from communist Poland. Poland. Eventually. And so he started writing little Polish poems. While living in France and America.

[ 24 : 50 ] And he said. If I'm to nourish the hope of writing with a free hand. With joy. And not under pressure. Then I must proceed. By keeping only a few Polish readers in mind.

Milosz went. He went local. He went ordinary. It became his quiet little occupation. While in exile. To write to a handful of readers.

That was all. He was an old man. By the end. Scribbling little poems. On scraps of paper. And he was pretty obscure. He was pretty ordinary. But in 1980.

Milosz was discovered. And he was awarded. The Nobel Prize in literature. He wanted to have an international impact. And ironically.

It happened when he embraced. The local. And the ordinary. Sometimes we think. Don't we. I'll pray to God. Send me wherever you want me. I'll go anywhere.

[ 25 : 50 ] I'll travel across the seven seas. Wherever you want me. I'll be a missionary. But for most of us. God replies. Okay. I'll send you. To where you are.

It's been said before. That since we get little. Out of the ordinary. We assume. That there's no value in it. But the shepherd's story.

Shows. Extraordinary things. Are not without. Ordinary means. And big differences. Come from small people. In small places. Extraordinary.

Implications. Come from the ordinary things. Of God. Becoming a little baby. Of shepherds. And of ordinary fishermen.

And of apostles. And of crosses. And of little you. And little me. As far as the story goes.

[ 26 : 50 ] They disappear. They're lost in a sea. Of all the other ordinary people. But the fact that we're talking about them now. Two thousand years later. Proves the point. They went back to their ordinary lives.

But God did extraordinary things. In and with them. So. God has put ordinary back on the table. For your life.

And for this church. He does not remove us. He does not remove us from normality. But uses and sustains us in it. And his kingdom will grow.

One ordinary sermon at a time. One Bible reading at a time. One conversation. One meal after another. One ordinary cup of tea at a time.

One meal after another. One meal after another. So like the shepherds. Let us exalt in monotony. Let us return to our homes.

[ 27 : 50 ] Let us return to our normal lives. In January and February and beyond. Glorifying this God of the ordinary. Because he is the saviour of ordinary people.

With ordinary lives. And he is the saviour of the ordinary. Let's pray together. Let us pray together.