

Do you know what it is like to feel, well, average?

I certainly do. For most of life that is exactly how I have felt. In fact, the description I like to give of myself is that I am just a boy from the prairie. I am the son of a truck driver. I am average. Are you? It becomes another way of saying; I really don't think there is anything special about me.

Now, this isn't to say that I don't like myself. I do. But it really means that I feel like I am just average.

When I grew up, I idolized people I thought were special. People like sports heroes. People like famous individuals throughout history. I was always able to say, they were famous, and therefore, they were special. Not average like me. Do you know what it is like to feel average?

Our Gospel lesson for today is about the original Average Joe, Joseph of Nazareth. Now Joseph has a good construction job. He is in love with a beautiful teenager named Mary and they are going to get married, and have, in fact publicly declared their intention to do so.

He's an average guy, but he's a good guy, and you've got to wonder why he's typically ignored in the retelling of the Christmas story. Even the donkey Mary rides on during their journey to Bethlehem gets more press than Joe. Of course, he didn't help his cause by failing to get advance reservations in Bethlehem, and could do no better for a night's lodging for himself and his pregnant wife than a smelly stable out back.

And when it comes to Christian art, Joseph, when he appears at all, is often depicted as a very old man - apparently too old to be tempted by the lovely young Mary. It wasn't until the late 1600's that we begin to see pictures of Joseph as a young man. Even so, pictures of Joseph holding the baby Jesus are even more rare. In the vast canvas of religious art, pictures of just Jesus and Joseph are tragically scarce.

So, of course the star is Mary. In the Roman Catholic tradition, which has always revered Mary as a Saint, she's the Mother of God. In the Motherhood Hall of Fame, you just can't do any better than that.

In the Christmas story, Mary gets all the attention. No woman in the history of publishing has been on the cover of magazines more than Mary,

whether it is Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report. Joseph must have been crazy happy that she'd even give him the time of day. He's just an ordinary guy with modest prospects in love with his girl. **And then his world falls apart, and only then do we realize that Joe is not average at all, or if he is, we should all be so average as he.**

The birth of Jesus called the Christ, was a scandalous event on many levels, not the least of which is the relationship between Joseph and Mary. A lesser man might have gone on Jerry Springer to expose this woman for the two-timing trash she was, or at the very least, destroyed her reputation in the community, perhaps even exposing her to severe punishment.

But Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace. This could not have been easy for Joseph. Pregnancy is not easy to explain away. In fact, it was impossible for Mary to explain this development and only divine intervention in the form a night visit by an angel caused Joseph to reconsider.

So the baby is born. "What's his name?"

"His name is Jesus."

"Why Jesus?"

"Because he will save his people from their sins."

"He doesn't look like you."

"Well, no, he not mine."

"Oh . . . not yours eh?"

"No, like I said, he's not mine."

"Do you know who the father is?"

"God"

"God?"

"Yeah, it was a virgin birth."

"Oh! A Virrrrrrrgin birth. Yup, yup, yup. I hear there's a lot of those Virrrrrgin births going around these days."

Do you see Joseph's problem?

But the scripture reveals this average Joe to be righteous, considerate, and obedient, even at the moment of the greatest disappointment and heartache of his life. God was with him long before he met Mary, before Jesus was born, before any angelic visitation. He had learned how to be righteous, how to be considerate, how to be obedient and faithful. No

wonder, then, that Mary picked out her man, Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth. *No wonder that God singled out Joseph for this extraordinary experience. Joseph was an extraordinary man. He was beyond average, even as he dealt with disappointment.*

**Many of us too have been touched by great disappointment this year.** We have struggled with illness. We have worried about the economy. We have worried about our finances. We may have a loved one serving overseas for the first, second or third time. We may have lost a loved one, or experienced a crushing professional setback, or we're working through a rocky personal relationship. It can make it hard to concentrate on celebrating Christmas. So what do you do?

I think we can take comfort in this story of how God comes to an ordinary person, and reminds him of his value. God comes to an ordinary person and offers a promise, the gift of this birth is a sign that I am with you.

God's promise is not only to Joseph, but to all of us that we will not be left alone, no matter how dark the day looks. God's promise is that we will not be abandoned, no matter how scary the circumstances we face. God is with us.

Do you know the legend of the Cherokee Indian youth's rite of passage?

His father takes him into the forest, blindfolds him and leaves him alone. The youth is required to sit on a stump the whole night and not remove the blindfold until the rays of the morning sun shine through it. He cannot cry out for help to anyone. Once he survives the night, he is a MAN. He cannot tell the other boys of this experience, because each lad must come into manhood on his own.

The boy is naturally terrified. He can hear all kinds of noises. Wild beasts must surely be all around him. Maybe even some human might do him harm. The wind blew the grass and earth, and shook him on the stump, but he sat stoically, never removing the blindfold. It would be the only way he could become a man!

Finally, after a horrific night the sun appeared and he removed his blindfold. It was then that he discovered his father sitting on the stump next to him. He had been at watch the entire night, protecting his son from harm.

We, too, are never alone. Even when we don't know it, our God is watching over us, sitting on the stump beside us. When trouble comes, all we have to do is reach out to God.

On this night we celebrate the birth of God with us. We celebrate the birth of the one who has come to save us by being with us.

His birth demands a response from us, a response of faith, courage and obedience. God has picked you, like he picked Joseph and Mary, because God knows that you can go beyond average.

May God help us live lives that are faithful.

Amen