

Psalm 19:1-11; Deuteronomy 4:29, 31
Mark 9:30-37

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE BORING

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. *Galatians 6:9*

The message is about Ordinary Time, the longest season of the church year between Pentecost—anywhere in May (it's a movable feast, like Easter)—and Advent, from the end of November. If you suspect a note of ambiguity in the sermon title, you're on the right track. "It's Supposed to Be Boring" might have a question mark, an exclamation point, or be a matter of fact statement. All apply to Ordinary Time.

In the cycle of birth, death and resurrection throughout the church year, ordinary time is that long slog of thirty-odd weeks (it varies with the date of Easter) when nothing outstandingly spectacular seems to happen: no high festivals, no angel choirs gliding earthward, no slaughtering of the innocents, no anointing dove descending at the waters of baptism, no stone rolled back of its own accord, no resurrected Jesus passing through walls as easily as light through gossamer. Of course, nothing can be said to be "ordinary" in the life of Jesus among his myriad teachings and miracle stories. There's nothing pedestrian about walking on water—pardon the pun.

Where the season becomes ordinary is in the commonplace, the daily stuff where life is lived. But more importantly, as we'll lead up to, where the Christian life is lived. It's the office, the kitchen sink, the ferrying of children, the walk from the subway station, the clacking, rocking Septa carriage, the lunch counter, emails, meetings, paying bills, waiting in the physicians office. For Jesus the ordinary was rejection, distrust (of him), letting accusation trickle off him like water off goose down—but not without the pain, being heard but seldom understood even by those closest to him, and being resolved toward the hideous outcome of it all, until the gift of God could flow.

The ordinary can be that sometimes smothering daily sameness that we just have to grind through. It's the difference between life on the front page and life as a barely noticeable pulse that's tucked away on page 16.

Listen to what Rowan Williams, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, says in his Book, *Where God Happens*, speaking of a job that he hardly considers a promotion.

I have signed the fifteenth letter of the morning and made the fourth uncomfortable phone call. I have emerged from a meeting about next year's budget, and am getting ready for a session with our investment advisors after lunch. After which I have to go and take an afternoon's school assembly. Probably in the evening, I'll have to institute a new parish priest somewhere. . . . "Was it all for this?" The only thing I find that helps is to let myself be drawn into the present moment . . . putting my hands on the arms of the chair and feeling the fabric. And breathing, saying, "Well, here I am. This is what I must do next. All I can say is, 'God is in this moment.'"

Jason Byassee writes how the Archbishop's beloved desert fathers of the fourth-century constantly reminded each other that God is found best in simplicity and even solitude—two features not easily encountered in Megalopolis. "Stay in your cell," they counseled, "and your cell will teach you everything. Or as Pooh of Pooh Corner pondered, "If you stood on the bottom rail of the bridge, and leant over, and watched the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you would suddenly know all that there is to be known."

The ordinary can be transforming. "The ordinary . . . is the very stuff of faith," writes Byassee, where faith is formed. Turning up, Sunday after Sunday with the same people, doing the same stuff, singing mostly familiar hymns, and going home to do the workday week, like church, much as you did it last week, yet allowing all of this to transpire through the misty realm of faith. Yet this steadfast contact with the familiar isn't insignificant. It builds up the deposit of faith.

For millions of years the River Nile in Egypt overflowed its banks and with each annual flood left a film of red-brown alluvial silt. Ancient farmers called this the "gift of the Nile" because each sedimentary layer, barely perceptible in itself, added fresh nutrients to the soil and gave a good prospect of a good harvest. People naturally showed their gratitude in annual thanksgiving. But since the early 1960s, when the great Aswan Dam was constructed in Upper Egypt, the annual Gift of the Nile stopped, and chemical pesticides have injured the river's ecology and water tables. It pays not to meddle with nature's ordinary time. The predictable is not a bad thing. But the Christian needs to go a step further.

So the next step is transforming the ordinary into something sacred. Kathleen Norris, one of the most attentive Christian minds writing today, has a book of lectures called *Quotidian Mysteries* (quotidian means 'ordinary days, commonplace'). In it she recalls the first time she went to a Catholic mass with her soon-to-be husband. She had been raised Protestant, and in a chapter called "Laundry, Liturgy, and Women's Work" remembers watching the Catholic service intently. Toward the end she watched in fascination as the priest standing with his

back to the congregation, took a linen cloth and scoured the chalice and platen to a polished clean. She gasped to her husband, “Look . . . look at that! The priest is cleaning up! He’s doing the dishes!” When I read that, I vividly recalled the Anglican priest, with whom I served as a twelve year-old altar boy, performing that same vivid ritual. Homage was being paid to the fact that when even the most splendid feast is over, and voices around the table fled to memory, and the people dined and wined, someone has to ferry the soiled dishes away into ordinary time to scrape and wash and dry and sort and put them away, and take out the trash. If such menial tasks can become a sacred task—like Isak Dinesen’s *Babette*, after the feast—then anything can.

One of the most sought after saints of Christendom was a monk of deep humility known simply as Brother Lawrence. A Carmelite monk in the 16th century, he was sought out by monarchs and nobility for the wisdom of his counsel. He wrote a book, or rather his followers later compiled a book of his spiritual writings called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, which became a classic. What is most astonishing is that no matter who called on him to benefit from his wisdom, they all found him in the same place--in the kitchen, washing dishes. It was a task to which he dedicated himself for sixty years, believing that if one cannot find God in the menial and commonplace, one cannot find God anywhere.

To we who might prefer that the fruits of religious truth be served in neatly consumable packages or sound bites, asking us to wade patiently through ordinary time may be an unwelcome chore.

What Simone Weil taught is that finding God is not [about] sentimentality or warm religious feelings, or asking God for stuff, but about attending to the depth of things.... education is not primarily about making good grades or passing standardized tests but about learning to pay attention. It is especially important then that students work hard at subjects they dislike, “because all of them develop that faculty of attention which, directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer.”

Jacob Byassee, “Why Christian Journalism is Boring.”

These are far from being ordinary times. The social problems our world faces are best characterized, I believe, as economic struggles between the many who have increasingly less and the few who have increasingly more. More insidiously, regional aberrations like a virus in Hong Kong, or a polar ice-cap disappearing, or a refinery in Texas being hit by a hurricane, or a housing market crisis, have startling repercussions half a world away. Life feels increasingly pummeled by dark, unfathomable forces. What’s a body to do? What’s a Christian to do?

This past Monday, a group of half a dozen Presbyterian clergy got together for our monthly lunch at a retired pastor's home in West Chester. We got to talking about three very conservative churches in our presbytery, Upper Octorara, near Parkesburg, Forks of the Brandywine, and Great Valley, who had recently chosen to leave the denomination over theological differences. Jim Moyer, my friend and colleague at Covenant Church in Malvern, was particularly saddened by Upper Octorara's departure because he'd grown up there, and though theologically much more moderate he felt strong emotional ties to the church and its people. Jim recalled how, back in the early 1980s, a man he knew well in the congregation told him he was going to start a prayer group to pray just for one thing, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. Privately, Jim admitted, he thought the guy was nuts. Anyway, every week on a certain day, from 5-7 a.m. men of the church would gather, sometimes two sometimes twenty, and for years they prayed for that wall to come down. Jim would go himself on occasion, drawn especially by their spiritual discipline and commitment to prayer. And of course, in 1989, it did come down.

Now, you must make up your own mind about such things. But should a note of skepticism creep in, remember what we said about the way faithfulness and gratitude to the beyondness in life—to God who, when welcomed without hindrance, flows like the gift of the Nile and blesses.

Nothing is beyond the capacity of God to transform. A request simply to draw closer to Christ may be met with an unexplained sense of a luminous presence while dicing carrots at the kitchen sink, or descending in a crowded elevator. A difficult conversation anticipated with an invitation for guidance can transform something seemingly intractable. An aging parent's needs resolved by a chance encounter and a conversation. Asking God's help for the amendment of some personal fault find it dissolving away like stains from a cherished garment. Prayer, contemplation and gratitude in Christ transforms the small things that once were irritants or inconsequential—and our world becomes increasingly populated with little pockets of the sublime. William Blake's lines come to mind:

“To see a World in a grain of sand,
And Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.”

This capacity to make things new is simply born of the habit of a lovely companionship. It is not the province of the few saints, but a doorway to the living present that's as close as your own thoughts. Amen.