

CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY, 2021

One of my favorite radio stations did a segment a while back that featured some computer nerds who created a software program that could determine the most boring day in history. They took factors like world events & political intrigue, natural disasters, human-made disasters, significant economic upturns or downturns, sports results, significant deaths---basically, whatever makes the headlines, going back as far as they possibly can using reliable historical records. They input all their data and the computer determines what days in history were the most boring day ever. I assume they can also determine which days were the most exciting, but these nerds went for boring. Which I think is really cool.

I don't remember which date in history was number one, but I do remember that one of the dates that was in the top 10 was a date in 1809, and they said that 1809 was actually a fairly boring *year* altogether. That year stuck in my head only because I do remember something that happened in 1809 that *was* significant (which I'll tell you in a moment, thanks to a great history teacher I had).

But as we look at the *headlines*—those things that would qualify as significant headline type news events—1809 **was** a boring year by most counts. Nothing of great significance happened that year except that all eyes were on

Napoleon as he swept across Europe in his quest to conquer the continent. In 1809 he was in Austria. Big yawn. Unless you were living in Austria at that time.

But if we take a closer look, in hindsight, 1809 was anything but a boring year, for a completely different reason. Because although there weren't major *headlines* being made, babies were being born.

In 1809 William Gladstone was born—4-time Prime Minister of Britain whose influential career as a statesman spanned 60 years; his influence is still felt today in England. Alfred Tennyson was also born that year—one of the most beloved poets of the Victorian era. Oliver Wendell Holmes was born in 1809, as was Edgar Allen Poe, and composer Felix Mendelssohn. In 1809 a physician named Darwin and his wife called their newborn son Charles, and boy born that year, who became blind at age 2, grew up to create a system of reading and writing for visually impaired people: Louis Braille. And in a rugged old log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky, an illiterate wandering laborer couple welcomed their second child, Abraham Lincoln (and that's what I remember from my history teacher).

So, 1809 was a *significant* year—and those were just some of the babies born that year. Much more happened that didn't make the headlines. But who

cared? The destiny of the world, in most peoples' eyes, was being shaped on the battlefields of northern Europe. Or was it?

Only a handful of history buffs today could name any of the campaigns or battles of Napoleon's Europe, but who can measure the impact of those other lives, of those born that year? What seemed to be insignificant or boring in 1809 (to a computer software program at least) actually turned out to be the birth of an era, a generation of brilliant leaders, writers, scientists, artists and thinkers.

Now, go back 18 centuries before that and all of the headlines that the Roman Empire was making as *they* attempted to conquer the world. At that time there *was* political intrigue, racial tension, violence (in the name of keeping peace), increasing poverty and a culture that was in deep transition (much like ours is today). Yet underneath the crushing grip of Rome and all of the spectacle it provided, and the cultural upheaval and corruption, a baby was born. Quietly, out of the way, without fanfare—except for a choir of angels singing to some shepherds in a field. That's pretty cool fanfare, but it was a really small audience!

As the saying goes, the doors of history often swing on small hinges. It's not always the big things, the headlines, the spectacular things, but often the small things, the out of the way things that have the deepest impact over time.

Because that's how God works, and that's how God comes to us and works his grace into our lives and into the world. In small, sometimes quiet, seemingly insignificant ways. Like the candles that start with one flicker, but grow brighter and brighter as the light is spread. This is how Jesus came into the world, and it is how he comes into our lives and how he works in the world.

Phillips Brooks (Massachusetts pastor who wrote O Little Town of Bethlehem) got it right in verse 3: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so (in the same way), God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." That's it!

Quietly, gently, Jesus enters the world—vulnerably, as a child. The invitation to us—and the challenge, in our noisy world—is to attempt to listen, to watch, and pay attention. To see where Jesus may come to us, not in the big and flashy, but in the small and quiet.

Jesus didn't come to make headlines or make history or to start a new religion. He came to meet people in the small, the quiet, the ordinary places of their lives. He came to bring salvation—or as I like to call it, his saving health and wholeness—spiritually, yes, but also emotionally, relationally, socially. He came to bring all of that, not with great flash and fanfare, but with quiet love, and a

gentle presence that requires us to find him, not always in the big things but usually in the little things.

We talked about 1809, but how about 2021? Was 2021 a boring year? We may as well include 2020 since the last two years have pretty much run together. Between the pandemic and politics alone, and the repercussions and effects of those, the last two years have been anything but boring! And there were many other events that made headlines the last couple years as we look back.

While these are significant, what will truly matter and make a difference over time, are the small things that God *began* this year in your life, and in the world. Things that happened quietly and away from the larger events. The seeds of hope that were planted, the kindness of a loved one—or the kindness of a stranger. The kindness that *we showed* to a loved one or to a stranger.

We probably won't make headlines, but with God's love working through us, God's light shining through us, what we do will make a difference. May your 2022 be a year but of hope birthed, and promises fulfilled, as God meets you in the quiet and perhaps unexpected places. Please pray with me:

Loving God, as you came to earth in the stillness of night, enter our lives this night. Overcome darkness with the light of Christ's presence, that we may clearly see the way to walk, and the hope to hang onto. With singing angels let us

rejoice in your love and saving help. Through Jesus Christ, whose birth we
celebrate. Amen.