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Scripture Reading: Matthew 4:18-22 (from the New International Version)

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Sermon: The Ordinary and Extraordinary

Have you ever considered the possibility that the life Jesus modeled was a mixture of the ordinary and extraordinary? Have you ever thought of your life as a Christian as a mixture of the ordinary and extraordinary?

It might sound odd, if not sacrilegious, to call Jesus and his life ordinary. But in some ways, it was.

Jesus' father was a carpenter not a king. Jesus mother was a peasant woman, not a queen. Jesus was born in a stable, not a castle or royal court. Barnyard animals greeted his arrival, not world leaders. When he went looking for disciples, (as we read this morning) he found four blue-collar fishermen, not phi beta kappa graduate students. All that is pretty ordinary, maybe even below ordinary.

But then there was that star in the East, the one that led the wise men to the manger. (As far as I know, there was no star over the Cleveland Hospital in which I was born and the only one who showed up the next day was Aunt Minnie.) There was also the prophesy of his birth, the arrival of the shepherds, wise men, the lavish gifts, and then attempts by Herod, the most powerful person in the region at that time, to kill this baby Jesus. None of that is in the least bit ordinary.

From the very beginning then, Jesus' life was an interesting mixture of the ordinary and extraordinary.

This continued. Jesus apparently had a fairly normal childhood and early adulthood. We know he amazed the scribes in the temple when he was a youth, but apart from that we don't know much about him. It is likely he helped his father in his woodworking profession, studied, hung out with his siblings and cousins, and perhaps reflected on what he would do with his life. It took him a while.

He was 30 years old when he started his ministry. At that time life expectancy for those who survived childhood is estimated to have been in the 40's. Jesus was well past middle age, without money, without much of a reputation, without the endorsement of any of the powerful Jewish religious leaders of the time.

In order to kick start his ministry he reasoned as any ordinary person would. He could not do the work of revealing God's will and providing a path to salvation alone. He would need assistants, good assistants, qualified assistants.

Where did he go to find them? To an unlikely place, the seashore—not to the university, not to seats of power, not to the neighborhoods where the wealthy and

influential people lived. He went to a working class place . . . the Sea of Galilee. His first four disciples—Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John—were all fishermen and sons of fishermen. We don't know for sure, but they may not even have been particularly good fishermen.

The Bible tells us they were minding their own business, when one day this Jesus fellow comes strolling by and tells them to drop their fishing nets and follow him. They do so. Now that's a little unusual, but lots of people change their jobs, and fishing was not a particularly lucrative profession. Maybe they could do better with Jesus.

The Bible tells us that's exactly what they were thinking, but not in any ordinary sense of trading a poor-paying job for a better one. We know this because prior to the Sea of Galilee episode, Simon Peter and Andrew had been spending time with John the Baptist. John was predicting that the arrival of the Messiah was imminent. Then this charismatic Jesus shows up and asks if they would like to cast their nets for human souls rather than fish.

All four of these first disciples had extraordinary hopes. Like John the Baptist, they were anticipating the arrival of the Messiah. They were tingling with excitement over the possibility of a Savior ushering in a new age, of promising a Kingdom in which there would be no Roman oppression.

As you know, these 4 ordinary fishermen went on to have remarkable careers as apostles traveling throughout the Mediterranean region. Peter became the rock on which Jesus would build his church and served as the first bishop of Rome. Three of them—Peter, Andrew, and James—would be martyred for their faith. Four

ordinary people, living extraordinary lives. Four ordinary people with extraordinary hopes and dreams, individuals who had an extraordinary impact on people's lives—including, our own today as we remember those four famous fishermen who left their nets to follow Jesus.

So today we know the names of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. But have you ever heard of Elizabeth Ann Everest? She was born in 1832 in Chatham, in Kent of the United Kingdom. She was a Christian and quietly lived her faith in obscurity. She never married and spend her life as a housemaid and nanny. She died in 1895.

In 1875 she came into the employ of a well-to-do British family. The two boys in this family had a difficult and impoverished childhood. Their mother, it was said, was distant, and their father was demanding and overly critical. In effect, the boys were raised by their loving nanny, Ms. Everest.

One day when the older boy was 8, and when he and his nanny had gone out for a walk, they came upon a snake. The boy grabbed a stick and wanted to kill it. Ms. Everest told the youngster to leave the snake alone and “let it go on its way.” Many other life lessons followed. This young boy watched his nanny pray. He listened to her reading the scripture.

Their relationship grew close. Years later, the boy (now a young man) contracted pneumonia and lay close to death. He asked to see his dear nanny, but the doctors forbade it saying “[the young man's] excitement at seeing her would be so great that it might do harm and worsen his condition.” They were kept apart until he began to recover.

As the boy matured it came time for Ms. Everest to leave the employ of this family, but the relationship between the young man and his nanny remained close. Her letters to him were addressed to “my precious darling.” When he wrote her, he always signed off by sending 100,000 kisses.

A few years later Elizabeth Everest’s health declined. Receiving a telegram about her dire illness, the young man, now a public figure, boarded a train to London and rushed to her bedside. He was with her when she passed at 2:15 a.m. on the morning of July 3, 1895. He arranged for her funeral, endowed the care of her gravesite with a local florist, paid for her headstone, and chose the epitaph written on it: “If there be any who rejoice that I live . . . [it is] to that dear and excellent woman their gratitude is due.” Signed Sir Winston Churchill.

A Churchill historian would later write, “I think it only fair that we all pay a huge debt of gratitude to [Ms] Elizabeth Everest, whose love and affection for the boy in her care undoubtedly made him the man that he was, and ultimately changed the course of history for the better.” (Katherine Barnett, curator of the Churchill Papers)

Elizabeth Ann Everest lived a very ordinary life as a nanny but one that had extraordinary effects. She was not successful or gifted in any worldly sense. She was neither brilliant nor unusually talented. But, she was a person of faith. She was extraordinarily loving.

Elizabeth’s story is the story of our faith. Over and over again, Jesus turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. There is no person too insignificant, no event too

inconsequential, no day in our lives too routine, that we cannot find and be touched by the extraordinary. That is our fantastic hope, and that is Jesus' fantastic promise. Amen