

Weekly Encouragement

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Meaning in the Mundane

By Rev. Peter Eng

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"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ... And Joseph also went up from Galilee ... to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem" (Luke 2: 1-4)

We don't exactly look forward to obeying government requirements. Who likes to submit annual tax returns with the exception of the tax preparer who gets paid for the job? Who likes to pay fines for parking or moving violations? Who likes to have his life disrupted with jury duty? And in a dictatorship, who loves to attend loyalty rallies for some supposedly beloved leader, so he can wallow in hubris?

There is hardly anything more mundane or disruptive than paying taxes or fulfilling some government requirement. Yet, it was in performing such a mundane task that Joseph and Mary fulfilled prophecy. Joseph and Mary did not travel to Bethlehem so Jesus could be

born in Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy. They did so in obedience to the decree of Augustus. This was tedium—but worse. Joseph was probably a self-employed carpenter who exchanged time and labor for income. This trip was a loss of income. Mary was heavy with child and this was about the worst time for her to travel.

Were they conscious of the prophecy in [Micah 5:2](#) that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? If they were, the text does not tell us. Luke simply states that they were acting in compliance with a governmental decree to register in one's ancestral hometown.

We are not sure what this decree was about. Ostensibly, this was for taxation. It is also possible that this was a special census that the Jewish historian Josephus records for us, recounting that those under the reign of Herod had to register to demonstrate loyalty to Caesar; but the Pharisees refused to do so. In exchange for not registering, a special tax levied on them (Josephus, Antiquities, 17.2.4). So in this case, those who registered were not taxed, but the ones who did not register were taxed. For our purposes, regardless of whether it was a registration in order to be taxed, or a registration in order not to be taxed, the point that it was a tiresome task holds true.

Our lives are filled with mundane activities: crawling out of bed in the morning, going to school or to work, fulfilling our obligations, etc. These are all mundane. The abundant life in Christ can be found outside of the mundane or within the mundane. In societies such as America, Europe, or Singapore, it is more likely that a Christian spends his time doing the same things that non-Christians do: making a living, going to school, raising a family, putting food on

the table, paying the bills, staying healthy or alive, etc.

Your week ahead may be filled with a mundane routine that does not seem to have meaning. So why do you do it? Most people are motivated by only two things: the avoidance of pain and the acquisition of pleasure. To accomplish this, we bind ourselves to the necessary but mundane activities of life.

In the case of Mary and Joseph, they might have suddenly realized that the decree of Augustus would bring them to Bethlehem around the time when Jesus would be born. That would have given meaning to the mundane. But the task itself was not meaningful. God was about to make their mundane meaningful.

When we surrender our life to God, he brings meaning to the mundane. Ordinary actions, motivated by non-spiritual reasons take on new meaning. The prerequisite is our surrendered life.

The surrendered life takes on new meaning even in the midst of the mundane. It usually starts with something simple. The Holy Spirit of God may prompt us to become kinder to those in need; or to shed our laziness; or to be more honest in how we deal with others; or to exercise greater integrity in business; to be more patient with the faults of others, or to take on some undesirable task we have put off time and again. When these are done as acts of obedience joy enters our life—even in the midst of the mundane and the disruptive.

You must not limit yourself to my list. You have a life that may be beyond my imagination, but it is clearly within God’s plan. You will be able to see how God can work through the mundane or disruptive aspects of your life better than I can. I would venture to say that in some instances, the mundane comes from stability. Your stability is opportunity.

In the case of Mary and Joseph, their trip to Jerusalem—an uncomfortable trip—was also disruptive. For one event to be both mundane and disruptive seem like an oxymoron, but you and I know there are many of these in life. Do disruptions or detours bother you? I know they do me.

Disruptions are the stops in life. We ask God to guide our steps, but rarely thank him for our stops. The same God who directs our steps directs our stops. Don’t get impatient; the stops have purpose and meaning. Detours are tiresome. They mean more work and more time to get to the same place. We can feel frustrated when God sends us on a detour, or we can be thankful that the detour removes us from harm’s way.

The wonderful thing about being a Christian, a child of God, is that when we surrender our life to God, one day at a time, one aspect at a time, he creates a new life for us. He guides our steps and our stops. Our struggle is not without meaning. Our ease is not without reason. Our delay is not simply another person’s incompetence (or our own), it has purpose.

The next time you have to deal with the mundane, especially one that disrupts your life, think of Mary and Joseph making that mundane and disruptive trip to Bethlehem. God is more interested in your life than you can imagine. You can do the mundane as joyless compliance; or you see God-given opportunity. You can be frustrated over disruptions, or you can be thankful that took you away from harm. You can be impatient over the stops in your life, or you can rest in them.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.