

WHAT IS IT?

Cherish the Commonplace

Exodus 16: 1-4, 11-17, 35; Num 11:31; John 6:26-35, 58

The Ordinary is Often More Than It Seems

In the classic film, IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE, there is an early scene in which young George Bailey tells his girlfriend Mary of the extraordinary life he is sure to have: "Mary, I know what I'm going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the year after that. I'm going to leave this little town far behind, and I'm going to see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Coliseum. Then... I'll go to college and see what they know, and then I'm going to build things. I'm going to build air fields. I'm going to build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I'll build bridges a mile long."

Many of us can resonate with those aspirations, can't we? We start out our lives dreaming of doing exemplary, exceptional, extra-ordinary things. We are conditioned by our culture to think of success in terms of the big, the bold, the beautiful and the brash. God forbid we should get stuck in the world of the commonplace. We want to escape the commonplace, to transcend the commonplace or transform the commonplace. And, thus, we go about trying to design our lives.

But for George Bailey, as for many of us, God's design process works differently. It turns out that George doesn't really know what he's going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year after that. Stuff happens in George's life. It turns out that what he does tomorrow will bear a lot of similarity with what he did today. George's life is going to be made up of a lot of ordinary things. He's going to hold a job, and raise a family, and mow the lawn, and deal with crises, and manage money and friends. He's going to watch a bunch of other people doing the big, brash, bold things, while he does the commonplace ones. The very averageness of his life will often leave George feeling like a failure, like real life has just passed him by. And it isn't until he gains the eyes of heaven, that George will come to see that the ordinary is often more than it seems.

The Things We Value In the End

I invite you to hold onto that Big Idea as I offer you three little ideas to color it in, and the FIRST one is this: The commonplace is what we all value in the end. It's fine and good to dream and dare for dazzling things, but it is the ordinary stuff of life that will seem priceless in the end. I love how this gets illustrated in this final story from the life of Moses that we're studying today. Listen to what Exodus 16 says: **The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the**

fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt... you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exo 16:1-3).

Now, I love this story partly because it sounds like some family vacations I've been on. "Dad, WHY did you bring us here? This is KILLING us!" But if you look closely at what's being said here, another level of meaning opens up. Two and a half months ago, the Israelites were slaves. I mean they did not have any of the things that you and I would consider a desirable life. They did not have opportunity to go to the college of their choice or do the jobs they felt gifted for. They did not have the freedom to express their will or pursue their dreams. They did not live in big houses or drive nice cars. They mainly made bricks or did chores or followed orders in sweltering conditions.

But now they are nostalgic for Egypt. Why? Because, **"There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted"** (Exo 16:3). There, despite all the tough stuff that went with our lives in Egypt, we enjoyed these simple common goods. There we had full plates, the chance to sit around with our people, enjoy a little rest from our labors. The Israelites had cried out to God to be released from their unjust bondage – as they should have – but, now that they had this release, it was the commonplace meals they remembered most in the end.

I see that a lot. I see that with busy young professionals nostalgic for when they lived in one room with the simple community of close friends, beer and pizza. I see that in parents whose kids have flown the nest, going misty-eyed through the photographs of kids in Halloween costumes. I see that in older people remembering when they could walk without pain. Whether you're rich or poor, black, yellow, or white, it's what theologians call the "common graces" that we value most in the end. The ability to breathe, to remember, or sing... The touch of a hand on our shoulder or the sun on our face... The simple predictability of being able to get up under our own power in the morning, to turn the faucet and have clean water come out, to do some kind of work. These are just some of the everyday, commonplace gifts, whose value we don't fully know till they're gone or the pains of the wilderness blind us to them.

The Scriptures report that **The Lord said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.'** That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" [lit. 'Manna?'] For they did not know what it

was.” I’ve always assumed it was some version of donuts! It’s why we serve them generously here. But **“Moses said to them, “It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat.”** (Exo 16:11-15)

Now, I want to be sure we all get this. Later in this same passage, we’re told that God provided this morning Manna delivery every morning for forty years, till they reached the border of the Promised Land (Exo 16:35). In the account we’re given of these events in the Book of Numbers, we’re told that there was at least one occasion when God provided quail meat that covered the earth three feet deep a day’s walk in every direction (Num 11:31). Mark Batterson did the math on this and figured that this amounted to about 105 million birds, a veritable “Quailmegeddon!”

The point is that God showered Israel with staggering volumes of grace over many, many years. How long do you suppose before that grace became so commonplace that they mainly focused on what they didn’t have or took the Giver for granted? Life will come to feel like a wilderness for all of us at times. But if you have the eyes to see, you’re going to notice that you still have a lot of commonplace gifts designed to encourage and sustain you as you walk through the hard passages. So, **WHAT IS IT that you’ve been given in the way of commonplace grace?** Do you value it now as you will one day in the future? Is it designing the heart of gratitude, hope, and generosity in you, as God means it to?

The Place Where Character is Revealed & Refined

You know, there’s a second role that commonplace things play in God’s design of us that I want to invite you to think about today. The commonplace is also where character is revealed and refined. We are increasingly conditioned by a culture given to celebrity and social media to think that the most important moments of our lives are those which are captured on camera or lived out in front of a lot of people. That’s particularly dangerous, because we can get to thinking that what we do in private or in obscure moments or little exchanges just doesn’t matter that much.

My friend, Reggie McNeal, tells the story of choosing a contractor for his home because five years earlier the same man had helped Reggie’s wife, Cathy, carry groceries up three flights of stairs in the apartment complex where they lived. When the McNeal’s approached him about being their home builder, he didn’t remember them at all. Why? Because doing simple acts of unrequired service for others had become commonplace to the man. But the McNeal’s never forgot him. They believed that the kind of character exhibited in that ordinary encounter on a staircase, was actually a very big deal. He was someone worthy of a much larger trust.

When Moses made that little decision he did to come to the aid of those seven

women being harassed by some shepherds... when he was out working out in the desert of Midian by himself, learning how to tend sheep, or read the terrain, or respond to the weather conditions... he could not see how all of that was testing and tempering him to become the shepherd of an entire nation. The great leader Moses wasn't made in the moment he faced Pharaoh or stood at the head of a Million Man March. Moses could do those things BECAUSE he was designed bit by bit over decades through the commonplace choices and challenges of every day life. And what God did in Moses he sought to do in the whole nation of Israel too. He gave them specific instructions on how to steward the manna they collected. **"The Israelites did as they were told"** (Exo 16:17). Their obedience in this small matter prepared them to follow God faithfully in the much larger challenges that awaited them across the Jordan River.

There are no insignificant acts of obedience. Every commonplace moment reveals or refines who you are. It puts down the concrete piers of character that serve as the foundation on which you ultimately build your identity, your family, your influence and life. So, **WHAT IS IT you will face this week that will express or expand your character?** Will I be scrupulously honest in this transaction? Will I express humble contrition when I've been wrong? Will I forgive this person? Will I take a courageous step in the face of my fears or addictions? Will I persevere in keeping my word when it's gotten pretty tough to do so? Will I show compassion or hospitality here where the cameras aren't watching? Will I turn off this so I can tune into that? Will I treat this wilderness period I'm in not as a dead-end or detour, but as a pathway of preparation essential to the land of promise ahead?

If we will not lay ourselves down on the "altar of the commonplace," we will not rise up to the extra-ordinary life for which we've been made. God gives us the chance to participate in designing our lives daily. Let's cooperate with him in this.

A Pointer to the Far-From-Common

The commonplace is what we'll value in the end, so why not value it more highly now? The commonplace is where character is revealed and refined, so why not seize the opportunities it offers now? And FINALLY, please understand that the commonplace is often a pointer to the far-from-common kingdom of God.

"I am writing this chapter while on a trip away from home," says Reggie McNeal at the end of his marvelous book, A WORK OF HEART. "The last twenty-four hours have been uneventful..." Ordinary. Commonplace. "Yet I have seen God, especially as I have reflected back over time. A son squealed with delight when his dad jumped in the hotel pool to play with him (heaven means that pain passes, but laughter is eternal). Two lovers hugged as they walked together on

a scenic path, lost to everything but each other for the moment... A group of friends enjoyed dinner together in a restaurant... [others] celebrated the birth of a new baby (relationships lie at the center of the universe). A tiny bird snatched a morsel of food left behind as garbage on the parking lot (his eye is on the sparrow). Dinner was good (I thanked God for making turkeys). "I miss you, Dad," my daughter said over the phone (one day we will not have to leave to go home). From my mountain view, I could see the lights of the city come up as the sun went down (there is a city whose builder and maker is God)." In the same way, **WHAT IS IT in the experiences of your life this week that will point you to the glory of God?**

As we end this series, let me just observe that you and I have a viewpoint that even Moses himself didn't have. We can see now that the manna God provided in the desert, wasn't just a common grace. It was a pointer to a much larger, amazing grace. The Bible says that following his miraculous feeding of the 5000, Jesus was chased after by people who saw him as a fast food provider, a prophet like Moses. But Jesus told them that they were underestimating what he could do for them. **Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on the bread I will give them will live forever.**" (John 6:58) **"Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."** (John 6:34) **"Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life."** (John 6:35). I am the extraordinary source of life to which the manna simply pointed.

At the end of the day, all our yearnings for a greater life find their fulfillment in Jesus. God is using many instruments to design us and draw us to Him. He wants nothing less than to fill us with His life. But day by day, you and I must choose to cooperate with the Designer's work by consciously welcoming his work. If you have a heart to do that, please join me in prayer...

Great God, we thank you that in your infinite love and mercy you are taking care to give shape and meaning to our lives. As we seek to cooperate with that, help us to reflect on the culture in which you have set us and the calling you have given us. Give us courage to embrace the lessons conflict teaches us. Give us a passion to pursue the communion your offer to us. Spur our commitment to build the community so essential to our flourishing and that of others. And as we go forth today, give us eyes for all the ways you are waiting to meet us in the commonplace. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

To Ponder As You Go

WHAT IS IT ("MANNA")...

you've been given in the way of commonplace grace?
you will face that can express or expand your character?
you will see that points you to the glory of God?

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Reggie McNeal, *A Work of Heart: Understanding How God Shapes Spiritual Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011) p.304