There is something about this church that is absolutely, stunningly beautiful in this time of year. Isn’t it beautiful? It seems that everything works together to tell the Christmas message. What is the most important thing to you this Christmas? Aren’t the gifts great? We hope to start a tradition this year that every year when you come to this church on Christmas Eve every child will be given a present. Now we gave you a real present, something you can unwrap and keep your whole life and say that it reminds you of when you were here at FPC and were in the Christmas story yourself. I remember when I was your age and I went to Ponte Sant’Angelo church in Rome, Italy and every Christmas Eve we received a new member of the manger scene.

 But the verses that Rachel read to us this evening about the birth of Jesus is actually the greatest present we could ever receive, and that is the present of Jesus our Savior. What a gift. Are you excited for tomorrow? I can’t wait. How many of you are going to rush out to Target to get some last minute things? Don’t lie to me now, I know, I’ve got three daughters, been there done that.

 I’ll never forget my daughters when they were younger so excited about tomorrow. I go into their rooms each evening and kiss them and say their prayers, even up to now except Naomi who lives like a mile away from us. But I’ll never forget them three weeks away from Christmas she could hardly sleep. I just can’t wait for Santa to come.

 Adults, that is the excitement and the anticipation that we ought to feel as we anticipate the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Were you sitting on the edge of your seat the four weeks of Advent not being able to wait for the coming of our Savior? You see these kids here, you’ll never see them more excited because they know that you know who is coming. That should be our sense every year as we approach Advent.

 The verse that Rachel read to us as the angel are absolutely crucial to understanding why we ought to be so excited. A few years back we saw the modern Grinch who stole Christmas with Jim Carrey as the Grinch. It was a bit too scary for me. But there was one line at the end where one of the little people after all the presents were stolen said: I’m glad the Grinch took the presents, because it made us realize what’s important at Christmas isn’t the presents, but it’s who you have around you. I would tweak it just a bit to say it isn’t the presents that is important, but rather who you have within you.

 Christmas isn’t about the presents, or having a day off, or even being with family, or even the Cowboys verses the Eagles, it is about God’s prophecies in Isaiah being revealed to us in the Gospels. Christmas is about the grace of God that has appeared bringing salvation to all. It is about Jesus and having him in us.

 But what stands out in the Christmas story is how simple it all really is. There really is nothing complicate to it. A baby lying in a manger. Jesus is born, God came to earth in a very ordinary, human way.

It isn’t until the angels and the shepherds and the kings appear that the birth of Jesus takes on some extraordinary qualities. Oh yeah, the whole virgin birth, the encounter with Elizabeth, the angel visiting before the birth. You know, the more I think about it, God was present and involved in every aspect of this ordinary birth, which makes it extraordinary. These details of Luke allow the Emmanuel aspect, the God with us approach to be rooted in practicality, in ordinariness. God chose to be with us in the mire and muck and mess of our lives, in the ordinariness because that is where we are.

 Look who he chose to proclaim that message. The shepherds who after seeing the baby go out glorifying and praising God. But in the time of Jesus, shepherds were at the bottom of the social food chain. They were poor and not only were they poor but they were also outcasts. They were filthy because they lived out in the fields with their sheep. Look at vs. 8, living in the fields, making their home in the fields. Their feet and their legs were covered with manure and grime. Imagine every night sleeping outside with your cows and pigs.

They were also mistrusted. They were considered thieves, and in fact many of them were. Did you know that the only group that was lower on the first century social ladder than shepherds were? Lepers. You can’t get more ordinary, more common, more human than shepherds in Jesus’ day.

But it is the ordinary, low-class, outcasts of the world that God chooses to first give the message of life. Look at vs. 10, the angels come and deliver the good news to all of humanity to these ordinary people, people like you and me. In verse 11 the angel state to you shepherds, I have a personal message for you. How often have you heard this passage? Probably a dozen times about the angels in Christmas pageants etc.

But do we ever hear it personally as the shepherds did as if the angel said: to you-say some names- is born a Savior, because he loves you. It is a story and a message that was not meant just to give us an emotional rise, but to change our lives.

When we were in Florida we had a pre-school and one year for the Christmas pageant all of the kids came up and placed the figures for the nativity scene around the stall that was set up at the front of the church. The first child came up and put Jesus right in the center. Then the person came with Mary, then Joseph and so it. We had over 30 kids and I was amazed that every single figure, including each of the animals, the kids on their own initiative and without any coaching from their teachers or me, has the figures facing Jesus. By the end, every single face was turned to Christ. That is the true meaning of this simple Christmas message, that every face should be turned to Christ.

 But it is also an extraordinary gift to hundreds of us here this evening. Because there are hundreds here who consider themselves insignificant and inadequate and unworthy and shameful. Hundreds who consider themselves extraordinarily…, well, ordinary. Extraordinarily human. May I say to you that you are precious and remarkable in the sight of God?

I want to cry out in these moments from the mountaintops “God loves you. He thinks you are remarkable. You are precious to him. And if you will let him, he will use you in ways that you could never, ever imagine.

May I also say to you that if you are struggling with your sense of inadequacy and ordinariness, you are not alone. If you are struggling with depression, if you are struggling with a major decision that will affect you and your spouse and your kids and God just isn’t answering your prayers, if you are struggling with a new environment, any of your struggles that you face this evening maybe away from family and Christmas for you means something different this year. Believe it or not, you are surrounded this morning by people who are struggling with the very same feelings. In fact you are listening to a person who struggles with those very same feelings.

For my entire ministry, I have battled from time to time with a sense of inadequacy and utter unworthiness. Did you know that? I often, often step into this pulpit nearly paralyzed with self-doubt and insecurity and fear. You may find it hard to believe, Mr. Self-confident, self-assured bordering on cockiness. But ask those who know we best. There are times when those feelings have been debilitating, and only by the grace of God, am I able to stand before you tonight.

Maybe that’s why I love Luke’s Christmas. Because it takes ordinary terrified human beings and by the power of the Holy Spirit calls them and equips them for extraordinary service.