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Sermon Title: "Mary & Joseph, The Minions, and
The People Next Door"
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Part I - Mary & Joseph

Alida and I try extra hard to get to the hospital as soon as a baby is born, usually the day after. It creates a bond between us and the baby that lasts forever. A mom finishes six, eight, 10 hours of labor, Mom and Dad have already had one or two sleepless nights, and we walk in. Pain meds are wearing off, feeding time is always. Grandparents and siblings are milling about. They're trying to figure out transportation home, meal preparation. Is the baby's room ready? And what about the dog? The miracle of birth is completed. The nine months from their "Annunciation" at a doctor's office to their very own Bethlehem have ended; various neighboring shepherd types and a few wise people have shared their wonder and even brought gifts.

Now what . . . the day after? Well, for Mary and Joseph, they had details to take care of, to attend to, so they made their way to the great Temple of Jerusalem. But more than anything, they needed to wrap their heads around all that had happened to them. There could be no doubt that the child and their lives were very, very, very special. Angels, star, shepherds, Wise Men, gifts, miracle—all proof that their world was central to God.

But we also believe every child is special, every birth is a miracle, every life is central to God's plan. Indeed, the central truth of Christmas is that God becomes all of us.

The day after, for Mary and Joseph, was a day for getting used to being parents of a miracle. Let me take something very mundane and make it perfect. Think about this. Everyone here tonight was born. It is our most common human trait. You were born. And I guarantee you this: every single person here tonight began the day after as a miracle. Someone took you in their arms, looked deep into your eyes, and saw God with us right then and there, in you. Birth mother, grandmother, nurse, adoptive mother, someone looking on, someone watching over you, some Wise Man or Woman knew God was at work in you. And on that day

after, right up to today, you have been growing into that miracle. You are God's ongoing Christmas story.

Part II – The Minions

Oftentimes a good story requires a bad guy, a foil. My kids and grandkids went to see the new "Star Wars: the Rise of Skywalker" movie Friday night, and the first thing they talked about was the new villain. Every war movie, every Marvel superhero, every cop show requires a bad guy.

In the Christmas story, that would be King Herod . . . and his minions. I don't much like comedy or cartoons other than "Ratatouille" and "Nemo." But I love, love, love "The Minions," those little yellow whatchamacallits in search of evil villains to blindly follow.

In the Christmas story, King Herod is the evil villain, and everybody who surrounds him in his palace are his minions—advisors, storm troopers, sycophants. We have this happy Christmas story full of wonder and miracle and angels and stars and camels and shepherds and gifts and a baby.

But right after, the bad guy, Herod, and his minions are out there trying to ruin the day. There's always someone trying to wreck the party, right? Some boor. Some loudmouth. Some bully. Someone who needs all the attention, sucks the air out of the room with their arrogance, conceit, whatever. And the minions are there to be the enablers, the back-slappers, the rubber-stampers, the co-dependents. Minions are the lapdogs of evil, the "Yes, sir . . . whatever you say, sir . . . of course, sir!" folks. Our lives are full of people who try to take the joy out of everything.

Do you realize Election Day is Tuesday, November 3? Sometime around 10 PM, we'll know who the next president is. You'll go to bed, wake up Wednesday, November 4, turn on the morning news shows, and I promise you they'll give you a list of who's planning on running in the *next* election. There won't be a moment's rest. No one will chill.

The New England Patriots won another Super Bowl last winter, and the next day, *the next day*, the naysayers were predicting doom and gloom for this year's Patriots. Nobody seems to want to enjoy the moment. Even now, the haters are hating on the Patriots. Some fans even booed Tom Brady during a game. (Some of you are getting ready to text me some mean emojis right now.) But right now, they are the Super Bowl champions, they are 11-3, they are in first place. But at every parade, there is someone who wants to rain on it, even while the sun is still shining.

I had a friend who worked in midtown Manhattan, on Madison Avenue. He always said to me, "David, do you know how many people in New York City exist for the single purpose of making our lives miserable?" It can feel that way.

That was King Herod and his minions. My Bible says so sweetly, "For God so loved the world that God sent his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." That profound theological statement gets accomplished by the sweetest story of faith: a loving, believing mom and dad, humble shepherds and Wise Magi, angels and a tiny little baby. C'mon! Can't everybody enjoy that? Nope.

The minions have work to do. They've got to mock Christmas faith. They've got to squelch joy. They've got to undermine peace and good will. They've got to take down the angels. They've got to clear out the homeless from their stable. They've got to make fun of wisdom and knowledge. They've got to serve their villain on their throne, at any cost. They've got to destroy innocence at its roots. They sought out the infant Jesus to snuff out every ounce of love he represented, every sign of hope, every smidgen that came to be that first Christmas.

If they were here tonight, they'd stomp to the front of our little Church, they'd go to our Advent wreath, and one by one, they'd spit on the four candles of Advent. And then they'd extinguish the "Christ Candle" in the middle. The minions. Don't be one of them.

Neighbors – The People Next Door

Last, what of the neighbors, the bystanders, the onlookers? A very pregnant lady shows up in a very crowded inn, looking for a room. She gives birth out back in a stable, then shepherds show up, loudly praising God with unbelievable stories of angels and good news and salvation.

If you look at ancient religious art, you'll find halos hovering over the heads of the Holy Family, circles of bright yellow light like radiant crowns. My guess is the neighbors in Bethlehem that first Christmas, if we asked them about what they saw and felt, they'd tell us there was an "aura" about the manger, something special, something different. They knew something was going on. The day after would've been a time for trying to put it all together, to make sense of it all, to understand, take it in . . . put it to use.

That's the key lesson for us. When you learn something, discount something, when you first figure something out, when something important all of a sudden starts to come together, a light comes on, you get it! Hallelujah! Then put it to use.

Do you remember when you first got your driver's license, or your kids did? I do. My son got his learner's permit and all of a sudden he wanted to be with me all the time, 24/7 . . . as long as he could drive!

I remember when I got my license. I got the license in the morning; my father bought me a 1955 Volkswagen in the afternoon. A 1955 Volkswagen, with 25 horsepower. Today, lawn mowers have bigger engines, but I didn't care. That evening I drove to Connecticut, where my roommate lived. I'd never been to Connecticut, never driven a stick shift, but I had my license and was raring to go.

The day after, let's say tomorrow, that's a good time to be raring to go. You've got your Christmas faith. You know the story. You've got enough belief in you to be here tonight. You've got your license . . . to be Christlike.

Tomorrow, put it to use.

Let's conclude with "Joy to the World," No. 143 in your Hymnal:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.*

*Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.*