

The God Of The Mundane

Reflections on Ordinary Life
for Ordinary People

by Matthew B. Redmond

FOR BETHANY

We work our fingers down to dust

And we wait for Kingdom Come

With the radio on

~ Gaslight Anthem

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Introduction

“I’m 40, I have a Master’s degree, and now I’m having to learn how to be a bank teller.”

Me

When I wrote *The God of the Mundane*, it was the work of a pastor. I felt like I had seen something encouraging — liberating — for those who were in my charge and beyond. And I heard as much from those who had read the initial blog posts.

The goal was to comfort Christians where they were — to help people believe the mundane stuff matters.

And I had two people in mind as I wrote. Others moved in and out of my mind and were a huge help, but these two held my hand the whole way. They were ideals, working like muses.

The first is a stay-at-home mom. She does the same chores everyday. She fixes meals not always appreciated. She changes diapers, does laundry, dusts, does homework, sweeps and heals sick kids, world without end. And then she goes to church and hears sermons, or is recommended books that make her sick with worry that she is not doing enough. She is no one in particular, and every stay-at-home mom I know. I didn’t choose her to be in the forefront of my mind because she is to be idolized. It would be more truthful to say this picture of a mom chose me.

So, she was with me the whole way.

But there was another. A man, stuck. Stuck in a job that feels small — a job making him feel small. He is not embarrassed of his job so much as just miserable. On Monday, he can

barely stay awake because he's been awake since 3:45 dreading the day ahead. Sometimes he is so full of anger at his plight.

He believes the gospel but has no idea what that means for him in this dead-end job. He also reads books and hears sermons. And they make his work feel even smaller.

Actually, if we want to be specific about it, he is a banker. When I wrote this book, I didn't know what bankers did, so all I could picture is a guy working in the drive-thru trying to balance his drawer. It sounded miserable to me. It was a picture of unimaginable frustration.

And I wanted this guy to believe in the God of the mundane. I wanted this guy to see that this is the work of those who have the Spirit in full. I was desperate to make him see it is not only the work of missionaries and ministers that matters. I wanted him to believe his work is inherently spiritual and good. Even if he hates it each and every moment.

But I'm not a pastor anymore. And this morning, my boss made it clear I would be training to do something that drives fear right through me like arrows. Though hired to ride a desk, I will be trained to be a bank teller when needed.

This is but the latest wave in a never-ending rhythmic tide of disappointment. And it feels like the belly of a whale sometimes.

At other times I can barely hold it together. I'm forty years old and often want to cry like a schoolgirl because I am miserable with my job. And I'm not very good at it.

Did you know you have to be able to count to be a banker?

You laugh, but I was the last one to learn long division in fourth grade and I still have not caught up.

Is it Providence that makes me need the very thing I labored for others to see? Whatever you call it, I'm having to hang onto my own words. If I over-analyze myself here, it feels like arrogance. But it's really very humbling, swallowing the medicine you wanted to convince everyone was good for them.

It don't go down so easy.

Listen, I wrote the book but that is no indication of this being easy for me to accept. There are so many days I feel abandoned and cast off. It's hard most days for me to think of my work as inherently good, and as significant in the Kingdom as the work I did as a pastor.

But even though I secretly harbor a deep enjoyment of

painting my job as filled with horror daily, there are moments of radiant light.

For every customer who tells me I am not good at what I do and I should go back to doing what I did before — that really happened — there is an Alyssa.

Alyssa, 20 years old, came in one afternoon, not long before closing. She had a negative balance and looked like her world was ending. Because it was. She had a check to deposit, but much of the funds were going to be eaten up by the negative balance.

She whispered, “I suck at life.”

In an effort to stall while trying to think of a solution she reluctantly told me she needed to be able to pay the co-pay before her cancer treatment. Earlier in the year she had been given the diagnosis.

Before she was done telling me the details, we were both in tears. I ceased being a banker and instead I was talking with a young person again like I did so often as a pastor. Stalling worked: I came up with a solution and she left with promises of prayer and her money.

I called to check back in on her after she told me she would be done. She was not able to talk yet but called me back the next day. She sounded even sadder. They had found tumors now in her lymph nodes and chest.

Silence. The kind of silence that has the weight of the world fixed squarely upon its shoulders.

She then told me how she would have to quit her job. She had already given up a cheerleading scholarship...the way she told me this, it had the tone of a death-knell. She knew she was basically getting terrible news. I promised to pray for her and check in again soon.

Three days later she came in with another paycheck. She made a beeline to my office. “I don’t need anything today, I could’ve gone thru the drive-thru but I wanted to tell you that the tumors are benign!”

And so we both teared up again. That was just over a week ago. I’m having more good days at work now since.

I’ve stared down into the faux-wood grain of my desk and cursed the moment I ever sat down behind it. I’ve had so many days where I was on the verge of emotionally losing control, I had to leave my desk and go look at myself in the mirror and let my gray hairs remind me I am a grown man. My tie was a

noose and my nametag felt like a guilty verdict.

But since that day, I've seen my desk as now a place where holy things can happen. It's often felt like an altar — a place of sacrifice — but working with Alyssa confirmed it. My tie felt like a clerical collar. My name tag, a sign of favor.

The more I've thought about Alyssa and her story, the more I've realized how much I would not have wanted to be anywhere else.

Look, I've pretty much lived on Monster.com and other sites over the past six months. I've talked to people about other jobs. I've interviewed and the only reason I'm still where I am is that no one really wants a pastor who smells like he's been in the belly of a whale. Or I'm not qualified.

Whichever.

But it all feels like Providence now. Banks are supposed to be cold halls of greed and indifference. And I can see why: it's all about numbers. But I was able to cut across the expectations with words.

And as I've looked back, there have been more stories like Alyssa's. There is the mother whose son was stealing from her account to buy drugs between stints in prison. So I'm still counseling parents about their kids.

And I was able to instill some hope into some newlyweds who had too much dreadful expectation heaped on them since exchanging vows. No one had told them the good news of marriage till I did.

I've sat in front of a man whose wife had just asked for a divorce the day before.

Once I asked a mom and son why they had come into the branch today only to find out Dad/ex-husband had just killed himself the day before.

I didn't handle all these situations perfectly. And sometimes I may have failed to represent Christ as some might want me to. So, I'm not bragging on myself.

I'm bragging on the mundane and the God thereof.

I'm 40, I have a Master's degree, and now I'm having to learn how to be a bank teller. In other words, I've found myself right smack dab in the middle of the very experience I wanted to speak into. And after almost a year of having to drink deeply of the draught I once only prescribed, I believe more than ever there is a God of the mundane.

CHAPTER ONE

The Question of the Mundane

“We often let the big ideas, the majestic vistas of salvation, the grand visions of God’s work in the world, and the great opportunities for making an impact in the name of Jesus distract us from taking with gospel seriousness the unglamorous ordinary.”

Eugene Peterson,
*Practice Resurrection: A Conversation
on Growing Up in Christ*

“My life is so damn mundane.”

One of 10,000 voices on Twitter

A young mother spends yet another morning scraping last night’s mac and cheese off the linoleum. A barista rises at 4 a.m. and slogs into work so everyone else can get coffee on their way. Behind a uniform desk, a well-starved banker sits and analyzes numbers. Underneath a luxury SUV, a mechanic reaches for greasy tools while Springsteen plays in the background. A room full of 3rd graders challenges the wit, patience, and energy of a young teacher. A father has a lightsaber battle with his son. Comfortably dressed, a librarian rises and points to the section where books on how to pass the GED are correctly shelved. Outside of an empty house, a real estate agent is waiting for an eager family. A nurse delivers medicine to sometimes-thankful patients. A graphic designer stares at a screen dreaming for the sake of others. A mother gets up to change another diaper.

And I wonder:

Is there a God of the mundane?

As I look around the landscape of evangelicalism, the world I find myself in, the mundane escapes notice. The ordinary is given lip-service, but overlooked like the garnish on a steak dinner. What the evangelical church really wants is something as large as God Himself, whether personality or performance, workers or windfalls.

The call is to do something big. I've sat on the edge of my front-row seat and heard the call thundered from pulpits. And I've been the one thundering:

“Change the world,” I can hear myself crying out. “Change your world. Change the world of someone. Anyone. Sell everything. Sell anything. Give it away. Do something crazy. Be radical. Make people stand up and notice. Take a risk. Jesus moved from heaven to earth and gave up his life and yet you — you just go about your daily life.”

All too easily I can hear myself burdening the room with words, phrases, and ideas I've heard elsewhere:

“Your days should be blood-earnestly marked by an urgent, nerve-twisting love for people you have never known,” I might say. “And if you truly loved them you would join the missions team’s trip at the expense of your vacation to know them. If you loved God, you would do it. And if you really believed-BELIEVED, you would go and stay. You should want to go. It should be hard to stay where you are in the comfort of where you are.”

My own voice, like a lance, slashes through the darkness in every soul before me:

“You worship,” I berate them. “And then what do you do? You rest. You huddle in your house with your spouse and kids. You eat. You drink. You make love. Go to your kid’s games. Go out with friends. You have clean sheets, clean stainless-steel refrigerators and clean water. You change nothing while millions die in poverty. Each week is a brick used to build the house of a wasted ordinary existence.”



I've heard all of it flail in my own head and lash against my ribs, leaving sourness in my stomach no medicine can aid. Worse: similar words, if not these very ones, I turned into whips with which to waken the consciences of those sitting before me. It never felt right but it preached well.

No lie. I used to preach and teach like this. And if I didn't use the exact words and draw the precise conclusions, I let the listener fill them in like some twisted religious Mad-Lib.

But then I began to ask questions. The inconvenient ones.

Really? Is this the normal Christian life? Is God sitting around waiting for each and every believer to do something monumental? Is this the warp and woof of the New Testament? Are the lifestyles of the Apostles the standard for the persons in the pew? Are the first-century believers the standard?

Is this our God?

In the economy of God, do only the times when we are doing something life-changing have any spiritual cache with Him?

Does He look over the mundane work of the housewife only to see the missions trip she may go on?

So, I wondered. I wondered about the great majority I have known and know. The great majority living fairly ordinary lives.

Is there a God, for instance, for those who are not changing anything but diapers? Is there a God for those who simply love their spouse and pour out rarely-appreciated affection on their children day after day? Is there a God for the mom who spends what feels like God-forsaken days changing diapers and slicing up hot dogs? Is there a God for the men who hammer out a day's work in obscurity for the love of his wife and kids? Is there a God for just and kind employers? Generous homemakers? Day-laborers who would look at a missions trip to Romania like it was an unimaginable vacation?

Is there a God for the middle-class mom staving off cancer, struggling to raise teenagers and simply hoping both Mom and Dad keep their job? Is there a God for the broken home with a full bank account but an empty bed? Is there a God for grown children tending to the health of their aged parents?

Is there a God, who delights in the ordinary existence of the unknown faithful doing unknown work? Is there a God of grace for those who live out their faith everywhere but do not

want to move anywhere?

Is there a God for those who have bigger homes than me? More money than me? Nicer cars than me? Better health than me?

Is there a God for the mundane parts of life, the small moments? Is there a God of kind smiles, good tips and good mornings? Is there a God of goodbye hugs and parting kisses? What about firm, truthful handshakes and grasps of frail fingers in sanitized hospital rooms?

Does God care about the forgotten mundane moments between the sensational, those never remembered? Or are those spiritually vacuous moments for which there is no God?

Is there a God of the mundane?

Does this God I worship care about mundane people and moments?

I'm not crazy. I know there are others asking the same question. But it felt like the lonely question we ask into the night sky where no one will answer. And when we can finally ask it, the comfort is not in the answer so much as wishing we could hear others asking the same question. If misery loves company, a company of wondering would have been nice.

But I kept looking into that night sky. It began looking less empty with all its stars and planets and blank blackness. And the question, hanging there, caught in the beauty of the firmament, yearned for an answer echoing throughout the constellatory.



Perhaps I should give full disclosure. None of these thoughts are of the disinterested sort. I need to answer the question for myself. I've already answered the question before it: can I while away my days in obscurity? And so answering in the affirmative and consigning myself to a mundane existence, I now ask: is there now a God of grace for me and my work — in the days that turn into weeks, into months and years, never distinguished but in the need for a new calendar?

Should I want something bigger? Will God be for me then?

Is God for my wife, whose days are full of conversations with children, repeated trips to the store, dirty diapers, floors that have to be swept and clothes to be washed constantly? Is there a God for her when one of our three children is sick,

confused and full of tears pouring out of wide-eyed sockets and mixing with her own? Is there a God for her as she slowly moves away from youth and into a frame she can hardly believe is her own?

Should she want more? Will He only be her God if she does something “big?”

As I write this, I’m a pastor. And the question looms large. It hangs in the air where I study and over the pulpit. The question stretches out into the pew where it steals away into suburban homes and places of work and various schools. It breaks into bedrooms and boardrooms.

Is there a God for the mundane parts of our lives? For our mundane lives? Is there a God who makes sense of the life lived between the seismic and extraordinary? Between the missions trips? In between the joy and the pain? Is there a God for the meantime in a culture drunk on the weekend’s promises?

I think there is.

CHAPTER TWO

The Answer of the Mundane

*The most extraordinary thing in the world is an ordinary man
and an ordinary woman and their ordinary children.*

G.K. Chesterton

My goal is not to call anyone “mundane.” I just assume you’ve done it yourself.

I write all this under the assumption that everyone at some point stops what they are doing, frustrated. They put their face in the palms of tired hands. Or they look up. And they ask, “does this matter?”

Does my work and life and all its parts matter at all? To God? To anyone?

It happens after reading a magazine article about a celebrity. It happens after years of doing the same thing day after day after day. And it could be happening right now because you just got back from lunch with a friend whose life is exciting, comparatively speaking.

Or it happens after a sermon.



My hope is for you to read, on every page of this little book, that there is a God of the mundane.

Yes: there is a God for those who are not changing anything but diapers. There is a God for those who simply love their spouse and pour out unappreciated affection on their children, day after day. There is a God for the mom who spends her days scraping the trampled mac and cheese off the kitchen floor. There is a God for the man who hammers out a day’s

work in obscurity for his wife and kids. There is a God for the just and kind employers. There is a God for generous home-makers, generous with prayers and dollars and time. There is a God for day-laborers looking at a missions trip to the far corners of the world like an unimaginable vacation.

There is a God for the middle-class people staving off cancer, struggling to raise teenagers, and simply hoping against hope they keep their jobs. There is a God for the broken home with a full bank account but an empty bed. There is a God for those children tending to the health of their aged parents.

There is a God delighting in the ordinary existence of the unknown faithful doing unknown work. There is a God of grace for those who live out their faith everywhere but do not want to move anywhere.

And there is even a God for those who have bigger homes, more money, nicer cars and better health than me.

And yes, there is a God of the mundane parts of life, the small moments. There is a God of kind smiles, good tips, and good mornings. There is a God of goodbye hugs and parting kisses. A God of firm handshakes. A God of grasping, frail fingers in hospital rooms.

There is a God of all the forgettable moments between the sensational, never remembered. These are not spiritually vacuous moments for which there is no God.

There is a God for those pastors who while away in mundane work: for those whose days turn into weeks, months, years, only distinguished by the need for a new calendar. There is a God for the mundane moments of ministry.

There is a God for those like my wife, whose days are full of trying conversations with children, repeated trips to the store for clean diapers, floors that have to be swept and clothes needing to be washed, world without end. There is a God when our children are sick, confused and full of tears over a lost sock. There is a God for wives, for women as they move away from youth and into a frame they can hardly believe is their own.

There is a God for those with mundane lives. There is a God who can make sense of the life lived between the seismic and the extraordinary, between the joy and the pain. Yes. There is a God for the mean times in a culture drunk on the

weekend's promises.



This is an encouraging answer.

Encouraging because most of us live very mundane lives. Encouraging because so much of our life is full of the mundane.



We wake up in the morning. Shower. Dress in last year's fashions. Eat the same breakfast we did the day before. Kiss our significant other. Kiss the kids. Go to work or stay home for the work that never ends. We have supper. Watch some TV. Do it again.

Though we enjoy vacations and short seasons of excitement, we for the most part have ordinary days. And expect to for the rest of them.

We will not be famous. We will not be stars in our culture's glittering nights. And though many of us have drunk deeply of a celebrity-saturated world, we live a life apart. Oh, we want to be famous, known and revered. But that is not the reality. The reality is no one will write books about us. And outside of our families, we will be forgotten.

This sounds terrible but only because fame — which was never ours — has obscured our view of what really is. And what is that? That we are part of that not so exclusive group of men and women throughout history known as “everyone else.”

Christians are not immune to the problem of being mundane and seeing it as a problem. We have breathed in the same fumes as the rest. Our hearts burn for our deeds to be noticed and celebrated. We want to do something big and have it thrust into cyberspace for all to read. Those who follow the Man of no reputation pine for one,¹ résumés ready.

There are dark and dusty corners of our heart that will fight tooth-and-nail against ever being known to exist.

1 Phillipians 2:6-7 (ESV): *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.* King James Version uses the words *made himself of no reputation.*

The reason is easy to see. We think the small, mundane, ordinary things we do each and every day are worth nothing before God because they are worth nothing before the gods of this world.



But even the famous cannot escape. And they will try just like us. They will leverage all their money and talent and influence to burst the bonds of the mundane. But they are also bound, and bound tight, as we are.

We may envy their lifestyle. But if we were to look closely we would see much that could only be called mundane. And while we are trying to escape the mundane, many of the famous desire more of it.



It is encouraging that there is a God of the mundane, because lives are just that — mundane. This is good news for those who have tired of trying to live fantastically. And this is spectacular news for those who have been tempted to think their lives escape the notice of God because they are decidedly not spectacular.

It is encouraging because the mundane is reality. We may flirt with greatness, but the fact is — for the Christian and non-Christian — ordinary is the divine order of the day for the vast majority of us. Kids, bills, coupons, cable, home repair, gas in the tank, church attendance, inexpensive pleasures, discount shopping and family reunions are what we are made of.

Sure, there are explosive interruptions — wondrous and terrible — which are inevitable. Indeed, how many of the stories we love are tales of the ordinary man or woman whose life is changed by extraordinary events and nothing is the same again. Prince Charming rides in. A goddess steps out of the wood. All is terrifically unhinged.

But for the most part, all is mundane. Ordinary. Thankfully, there is a God behind it all.

Acknowledgements

Without the support, encouragement, and love of my wife, Bethany, this book would never have been written. In so many ways, this book is for her.

This book started taking shape a few months into a year of immersing myself in the writings of Eugene Peterson. He unwittingly mentored me through much of these writings. I will forever be thankful.

Thanks to all of my family but special thanks to my parents who always bought me books. Book-lovers themselves, my mom will read this whole book to my dad. And that will make it all worth it.

This book was written in the context of a circle of friends. They deserve more thanks than I can give — the Damerons, Edwards, all the Heads, the Mackles, the Gleasons, the Blaisings, the Tappans, and many more.

In 5th grade, after I talked bad about poetry, Mrs. Derieux dragged me out in the hall and gave me a good talking to, a book by Shel Silverstein, and a lifelong love of words.

If there's a soundtrack to this little book, it's Springsteen's "Darkness On the Edge of Town." An album about the harsh realities of adult life, I listed to it over and over while writing and editing these essays.

Thanks to my friends at Kalos Press for the chance.

Thanks to God for all the echoes and stars.

About Matthew B. Redmond

Matt Redmond was born in Birmingham, AL. He attended Southeastern Bible College and Covenant Theological Seminary, and has served in pastoral ministry in four different congregations. Matt currently works in the banking industry.

Matt and his wife Bethany have three children: Emma, Knox, and Dylan. Matt's writing has been published by the Gospel Coalition and other publications. He also writes a blog: Echoes and Stars.

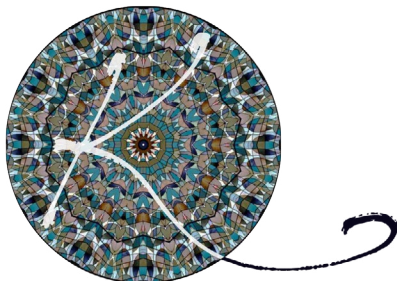
Matt began writing *The God Of The Mundane* because he realized that contemporary portrayals of the God of the Bible left little room for a God who was concerned about ordinary things. Building on his conviction that the biblical God was an everyday God, Matt's reflections on this topic coalesced into a nascent collection of essays.

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The God of the Mundane

Published by:

Kalos Press, an imprint of Doulos Resources; PHONE: (901) 201-4612;
WEBSITE: www.doulosresources.org.

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Published 2012

Printed in the United States of America by Ingram, Inc.

ISBNs:

978-1-937063-96-2 (trade paperback edition)

978-1-937063-95-5 (electronic/digital editions)

Library of Congress Catalogue Number: 2012954084

Cover design by J.E. Eubanks, Jr.