Lots of famous people come from small towns. Of the 19 presidents since 1900, only four of them were raised in big cities. The other 15 were born in small towns. Bill Clinton is from Hope, Arkansas, Jimmy Carter from Plains, Georgia and Calvin Coolidge from Plymouth, Vermont.

Most American presidents originate from small towns. Abraham Lincoln was born in a one room log cabin three miles outside the tiny town of Hodgenville, Kentucky on Sinking Spring Farm.

Small towns produce more top-tier athletes than big cities; a whole lot more as a matter of fact! Nearly 50 percent of professional football players and 45 percent of pro golfers originate from towns smaller than 50,000. Maybe small town athletes benefit from being big fish in small ponds or profit from the value placed on sports in small-towns (think: Hoosiers).

Luke tells us that Mary comes from a small town. Certainly Nazareth qualifies as a small town. No more than 500 people lived in Nazareth in Mary’s day. There’s not a single reference to this obscure village in the entire Old Testament or any rabbinic writing until the third century.

When Philip tells his friend Nathaniel, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph,” Nathaniel asks with biting irony, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (1:45-46). Jerusalem perhaps, but not Nazareth!

Luke identifies Mary to be a virgin, meaning she is young and unmarried. We do not know her age but most scholars peg her to be about 15.

Mary and her fiancé must be dirt poor. When later they marry and take their baby to the temple for dedication, they don’t have the resources sufficient to buy a lamb to be used in the sacrifice (Luke 2:24). Instead, the law makes provision for poor people to offer a pair of turtledoves as an appropriate substitute.
We read, in verse 27, that Mary is “pledged to be married to Joseph.” Engagement back then was more binding than it is today. The only way to dissolve an engagement in those days was by means of divorce.

We don’t know much about Joseph. We’re told, in verse 27, that he’s a direct descendent of King David. We learn elsewhere that he’s a carpenter by trade (Matthew 13:55).

Let’s see if I understand our story line correctly. A 15-year-old peasant girl married to a poor Jewish boy from some hillbilly town. The only thing that stands out about this couple is their ordinariness!

Yet, the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to a son named Jesus. “His name will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:31-33).

I get the sense Mary wants to believe Gabriel’s pronouncement, but you can’t blame her if she’s still hung up on the mechanics of how it will happen. How can this be, since I’m a virgin?” (1:34). The angel essentially says God will make it happen. The whole thing comes down to this: “Nothing is impossible with God” (1:37).

We come face-to-face with what we call in Christian parlance “the virgin birth.” How is it possible for a woman to give birth without benefit of a human father? It certainly doesn’t pass scientific muster. The only explanation offered by Luke is what the angel says to Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

Impossible is a complex English word. It combines the root word “possible” with the negative prefix “im” meaning “not.” So literally, this verse reads, “Nothing is not possible.” In English grammar, double negatives cancel each other out and create a positive. So, if “nothing is not possible,” then everything is possible with God.
This “nothing is impossible” theme carries straight through to the end of Jesus’ life. When Jesus’ disciples inquire why they can’t drive a demon out of someone, Jesus answers, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20-21).

There’s something in us that wants to believe that “nothing is impossible with God,” yet we have become too cynical and jaded to believe it to be so. We conjecture that God hasn’t always come through for us. Witness the untimely death of someone close to us or health complications or a struggle with infertility. We prayed earnestly for something but our prayers seem to lie on the floor unanswered.

Can we believe again? Can we trust God to do the impossible?

You’ve got to hand it to Mary. She is willing to participate in this divine plan: “Let it be to me according to your word” (1:38). I’m yours, God. I’m at your disposal.

This is no small concession on Mary’s part. If you don’t think tongues are wagging when the news gets out that Mary is pregnant and Joseph is not the father, you don’t know small towns. I was born in a small town. Everybody knows everyone else’s business in a small town.

Year-after-year, when I return to this improbable story, I am intrigued by its unconventional approach. Everybody is so ordinary. I’ve already established Mary and Joseph are nobody special. Neither are the shepherds or the magi, for that matter.

Jesus’ original band of 12 disciples are nothing to write home about either. You couldn’t find a more unremarkable collection of followers. It almost seems as though Jesus goes out of his way to pick unspectacular people.

Ordinary people predominate in Scripture. Moses stutters, Sarah and Abraham are old, Timothy is young, David has an affair, Peter has a temper, Martha frets, Thomas doubts and Jonah runs away from God.
There are no movers or shakers in this story. There are no high rollers or beautiful people in the mix. There are no people born with silver spoons in their mouths. Everybody is so ordinary! Maybe this tells us something important about God.

It’s well-documented in church history that most of the early converts to Jesus are ordinary, everyday people. Paul himself says so in his letter to the Corinthians, “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many of you were influential, not many were of noble birth. But God chooses the weak things of this world to shame the strong and the lowly things of this world to silence the mighty so that we would know that the power belongs to God and not to us” (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

The third in a series of Hobbit movies will be in the theaters later this month. This trilogy of movies is based on J.R.R. Tolkien’s book The Hobbit. The main protagonist in the story, Bilbo Baggins, is hardly hero material. He lacks traditional male heroic qualities of physical strength and bravery. Instead, Bilbo is a hobbit, small in stature and ignorant in the ways of the world. Initially, he is thrust into a role that is too large for him. Yet, as the story unfolds, he grows into a heroic figure.

Tolkien’s stories are rich in Christian symbolism. This is hardly surprising, since Tolkien was a committed Christian. He belongs to a literary society called The Inklings, featuring another Christian author of considerable renown, C.S. Lewis. The wizard Gandolf represents, in the book, the Christ figure while Bilbo personifies Jesus’ disciples.

Perhaps you take issue with my comment that we are ordinary people. There are plenty of important people who live and work in this powerful city. You would rather I remind you that you are somebody special.

Let me take you back to David McCullough’s commencement address to Wellesley High School graduates in 2012. He had the audacity to tell these graduates they were nobody special. He said it not only once, but nine times in 12 minutes.

“Do not get the idea that you are somebody special because you’re not. No fewer than 3.2 million seniors are graduating from 37,000 high
schools. That’s 37,000 valedictorians…37,000 class presidents…92,000 harmonizing altos…340,000 swaggering jocks…2,185,967 pairs of Uggs….Contrary to what your U9 soccer trophy suggests…you’re nobody special. You’re not exceptional.” It should not surprise you that his speech went viral and has been watched by millions.

I get his point. We have coddled younger generations of Americans with an exaggerated sense of self-importance and entitlement.

It’s not the exceptional abilities these early disciples bring to the table that turns the world upside down for Jesus Christ. All manner of ordinary people are enlisted for his great cause. God doesn’t ask for our great ability; God asks for our availability. The whole Bible testifies that ordinary people are engaged in God’s extraordinary mission.