

We are in a series for Advent, that actually began a couple weeks ago even though Advent starts today, that is about understanding the news of Jesus' birth in light of our culture where "fake news" is all around us. Is the Christmas event also fake news? Some would say so, and discredit the birth of Jesus, as well as his life, his death, and his resurrection. The Biblical authors tell us it's very good news that is trustworthy, and that we ought to share it. In fact, in the birth narratives, there's a lot of sharing of news going on: Mary shares the news, Angels share the news, the shepherds share the news...even the stars share the news which brings the three wise guys to Bethlehem a bit later on. So there is lots of sharing around the birth of Jesus, and then throughout his life as well.

And we live in a world of sharing news. **Social media has made it possible for anyone to share anything and everything.** Some people do exactly that, have no filter on what they share, and put stuff out there that we'd probably all rather not even know. So, we live in a social media world. Sharing news did not get invented with the Internet, however. Even if the ways of doing it were different just 10 years ago, let alone 100 or 1,000 years ago, people shared news: the birth of a baby, the death of a loved one, results of a game, news about wars, news about kings and queens/politics, and so forth.

So this idea of having shareable news goes back a long ways, to the dawn of humankind, really. And one of the most shareable events ever was the birth of Jesus. It's still being shared around the world, 2,000 years later. Think about that! But does that mean it's real news? So, there are two questions to ask: **First, how can we discern if the birth of Jesus – and the rest of his life – is real news? Second, what do we do with this news of who Jesus is, if it's real news?**

Let's start with the first question. How can we discern if the birth of Jesus – and the rest of his life – is real news? Is that news we can count on, or is it fake news? This first question is one of my favorite topics to dig into and discuss, and so we've talked about this some before. So this is review for

some, and perhaps new for others. Regardless, I hope and pray our faith is enriched.

So, Luke is the name of the author of what we read this morning. He writes near the start of his account of the life of Jesus, **“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”** (Luke 1:1-4).

Luke lets us know right up front that he's investigated carefully, so his friend Theophilus can be certain of what he has been taught and believes.ⁱ The name Theophilus means “friend of God” and was not an uncommon Greek name. Exactly who this Theophilus is, is not known for sure. The Greek word for “most excellent” is “karatistos” (Kara-TEE-stos) and means “noble, most excellent (as it’s often translated here) or mightiest or strongest.” Luke is the only Biblical author to use the word, though the other occurrences are in Acts. There they are used in regards to the governing officials, Festus and Felix, when Paul was testifying before them about his life and faith. So one of the scholarly thoughts about who Theophilus is, is that he was someone in a governmental position...or if not, certainly someone who was well-respected in his community.ⁱⁱ Another theory is this might have been a Jewish religious leader; in fact, there were two Jewish High Priests during this time with the name – one was priest from 37-41 A.D., and the other in 65-66 A.D.

So first off, Luke claims to have done a careful investigation. **By his own words, he's done his research carefully, and it's reasonable to deduce he's telling the truth.** Right off the bat, we're forced to say, “either he's lying,” which puts everything he writes in jeopardy, or “he's telling the truth about his research and his writing.” All the gospels, of course, are written as true and factual accounts of Jesus’ life, so there’s a lot at stake here.

Besides writing this gospel account, we also know that Luke wrote the book

of Acts, which is the 5th book in the New Testament. The very first words there are, **“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven...”** (Acts 1:1-2). So Acts is like part 2 of The Gospel According to Luke. Based on the events recorded in Acts coupled with information from other historical sources, we know that it was written in A.D. 62 or so, and so we know the gospel of Luke was written prior to A.D. 62.

If we allow for a couple of years in between the two documents, then we can safely say that the gospel account was written around A.D. 60 – maybe even earlier, but let's play it safe. And we know that Jesus was crucified in about A.D. 33. This means: **Luke's gospel is written less than 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's within the lifetimes of people who followed him.** It's completely reasonable to believe that Luke did in fact “investigate” the news of Jesus, and did so through interviewing people who were eye-witnesses to Jesus, because plenty of them would have still been around less than 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Luke easily could have spoken with Mary, the shepherds, the twelve disciples who followed Jesus for three years, as well as the hundreds and even thousands of others who heard him teach and followed him for shorter durations of time.

Now, in our day, where we get news shared instantaneously via social media, television news outlets, 25-30 years seems like a long time. We may be tempted to say, “That's 30 years for a lot of fake news to get inserted.” But compared to other biographies from Antiquity that are considered accurate and reliable, 30 years is really fast. For instance, the earliest biographies of Alexander the Great, who died in 323 B.C....the earliest biography we have was written in the first century B.C. – 250 to 300 years after his death; the next nearest ones are about 400-500 years after his death. Others were written before, but no copies exist, except for a few very brief fragmentsⁱⁱⁱ. So when it comes to the biographies that we have and are considered definitive: they're not based on direct eye-witnesses because they were written 250-500 years after he died!^{iv} That's a lot different than the 30 years or less after Jesus' death when Luke had to have written his biography of Jesus.

Additionally, besides making for better research, because many of the people

who were with Jesus Christ and witnessed his ministry and heard his teaching...Luke mentions “eyewitnesses” in his opening words...because they were still alive: **There was accountability for Luke to record history accurately.** It would be next to impossible for fake news to be inserted, because others were alive who knew the truth and could straighten out the story. There were fact checkers readily available in all the towns where Jesus lived and ministered.

Lastly, we know from the apostle Paul's writing (Colossians 4:14) that Luke is a physician. So Luke is educated, and he's no dummy when it comes to pregnancies and this baby stuff. He knows about the birds and the bees. And so out of the four gospels writers, **Luke is the one who would be most likely to doubt the virgin conception and birth of Jesus.** And yet out of all four gospels, Luke's account is the one that gives us the *most* information about the Christmas event, including the virgin conception. He, of all people, should have been the one to dismiss the Christmas event as Fake News. But in the end, after his careful investigation into the events of Christmas, he records them as Real News.

So when it comes to the birth story of Jesus Christ – as well as the rest of his life, death and resurrection – we can trust that Luke and the other gospel writers wrote accurately. They had access to eye-witnesses for research purposes, there was accountability because of those eye-witnesses, they wrote soon after Jesus lived, and they had their own reasons to be skeptical of fake news like a virgin birth and angels and shepherds and all that. So all of that helps us answer the first question about discerning whether or not this is real news. The second question then, is....

What do we then do with this news? First, is to believe the news and trust Jesus. That's step one. And if you haven't come to a place of belief and trust in Jesus, I'd invite you to do that today. And a direct outflow of that belief is that: **We do exactly what the shepherds and so many others did: we share the news.** From His birth to His death to his resurrection, people have shared about Jesus whenever they could. The shepherds are a great example this morning, as we read in verse 17, “When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.” And we're told

that everyone who heard the news was amazed at it. The shepherds were the first evangelists. They let people know that something special had happened. That a special birth had taken place. That God was doing something new...had broken into human history in a way He never had before and this had to be shared with others. They couldn't contain themselves! They had such joy and excitement about this that they told everyone.

Of course, *how* they shared was different than we might now...I mean, they probably actually talked to people face-to-face. Can you imagine having to share news in such an old-fashioned-low-tech way...like actually sit down, face-to-face and...*talk*? ☺ They can't just hit the "share button" and blast it out to the world. But if they were alive today, the shepherds and the others might have shared the good news kind of like this...

(If you're reading this online, you can watch the video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sghwe4TY18>. Click the web address or copy and paste into your browser. Or search for "A Social Network Christmas" by Igniter Media.)

Whether you share on social media, or face to face, or on the phone, or whatever...The birth and the name of Jesus is sharable news. Who are you sharing it with this Christmas? Who are the people in your life – whether they're kings, or wise people, or aunts and uncles, or the equivalent of shepherds in the field...your neighbors...co-workers...who are you sharing the Christmas event with? Who are you sharing Jesus with? And there are a variety of ways: Inviting a neighbor over for a dinner this Advent who's home alone, or new to your community; Inviting someone to join you for a Sunday service or a Christmas Eve service; Giving a gift to someone in need. There are a ton of thoughtful ways to "share Jesus" this Christmas with people who may not know about the good news of Jesus Christ. And I hope each of us, in some way, shape, or form, will share Jesus with others this Christmas, because He is the real news of Christmas. Let's Pray...Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Theophilus-Luke-Acts.html>

ⁱⁱ This article is a little scholarly, but quite readable, and I found it very insightful, beyond even some of the things I've noted in the sermon: <https://www.indieskriflig.org.za/index.php/skriflig/article/view/1701/2530#13>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historiography_of_Alexander_the_Great

^{iv} Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christmas*, p. 31-32.