



Luke 1:5-25
 Christmas: Fake News?
 Doubtful News

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This morning we continue the series of messages we've been in the last few weeks, that will take us right up through Christmas Eve. This series is all 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 say it is...that even the whole life of Jesus is fake news. Others say it's credible and good news. So we're exploring the birth of Jesus through that lens. And then we have different kinds of news that comes our way that causes different reactions in us: we're amazed at one piece of news, grieving at another, sharing other news, joyful at another piece of news, and so forth. And so we're mashing these themes together each Sunday in this series.

And today's message – which is a little out of order chronologically-speaking with what we've looked at thus far – **Today's message is about news that we doubt.** Now, right off the bat in Luke's gospel, he says that he researched everything he writes carefully. We looked at that in detail earlier in the series. He's done the research, and he's writing so that his friend Theophilus can be certain of the things that have been handed down to him (and now us). So Luke wants to put to rest any concerns about whether or not his accounting of the life of Jesus is "fake news." It's not. He's done his homework, he's done the research.

Now, you would think (if this were fake news about Jesus) that Luke would make his accounting of the life of Jesus as straight-forward and easy to digest as possible: edit out angelic visits, some of the miracles, the hard teachings of Jesus', the people who didn't believe Jesus, and so forth. Because: **Those aspects of the life of Jesus make it hard for some people to believe.** I mean really, probably many of us for example, might wonder about the angelic visits that permeate the birth of Jesus. And yet, Luke includes them, knowing they could be an obstacle. Why? Because it was the truth. It's what his research showed to have happened.

A few weeks ago we talked about the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, and I shared with you the story of my mother-in-law and a car accident she was in

when she felt the presence of God with her in the midst of it. I shared with you what she told me about it earlier that week when I asked her about it. I didn't want to share it just based on my recollection of what I'd heard before, and I wanted to verify the story. But 20 years ago or so when I first heard her recounting of that accident - which was only about 10 years after it happened - I was *pretty* sure it was actually different than what she shared with me a few weeks ago. And after Gwen heard that sermon, where I shared the new version of those events, Gwen said to me, "When that accident happened, what mom said then right after it, and at other times when I've heard her talk about it, was different than what she shared with you in preparing for that sermon." So Gwen confirmed for me that what I *thought* I remembered was right: And that is, that when she got hit by that car, it wasn't just that God's presence was with her in the car: it was that there was somebody in the car with her, who wasn't there when she started driving. She was on her way to an appointment by herself, but in the midst of the accident, someone appeared in her car, sat in the passenger seat next to her, talked to her, and told her that everything would be ok. And then he left the scene of the accident never to be seen again. Angelic visits are doubted by many; and for sure they don't happen very often. But I know Gwen's mom well, and she's not given over to telling fake news. She's all about the truth. And I believe an angel visited her that day, much as Luke records angelic visits here in the birth narrative of Jesus. And this morning, we see Zechariah getting visited by the angel Gabriel.

Now, remember Zechariah is a priest. **This is a guy whose job is to live by faith, believe God, and help others in their relationship with God, too.** Let's call him equivalent to a pastor in today's churches, though there were some differences. But essentially, the same kind of role. He's on a team of people who take turns on their duties and responsibilities when it comes to leading worship, and Luke tells us that on this particular occasion when Zechariah was doing his job in the inner part of the temple, an angel visited him and tells him that he and his wife are going to have a baby boy. **And Zechariah - this man of God, a leader in the faith community - responds to this news with doubt.** "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." As kind of an aside, here: notice he didn't say "...and my wife is an old woman" even though he called himself an "old

man.” Just in case his wife or one of her friends in her Bible Study might overhear his response, he’s not going to call her “old.” She’s “well along in years.” It’s more dignified. Zechariah has some wisdom that all of us husbands should pay attention to.

In spite of his wisdom, Zechariah's response to Gabriel is one of doubt. Given that Luke is writing to help us be certain of our faith, it’s surprising that Luke would relay this to us. He wants our faith to be strengthened, to be reinforced through what he writes. And so what does he start us off with? A report on what he discovered about Zechariah, who was not certain of anything there in the presence of the angel. He doubted God.

This reminds me of a story about prayer and ice cream. Those are two good things, right? Combine them together and it’s gotta be really good. Here’s how a dad relates what happened: Last week I took my children to a restaurant. My six-year-old son asked if he could say grace. As we bowed our heads he said, "God is good, God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would even thank you more if mom gets us ice cream for dessert. And liberty and justice for all! Amen!"

Along with the laughter from the other customers nearby, I heard a woman remark, "That's what's wrong with this country, kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream! Why, I never!"

Hearing this, my son burst into tears and asked me, "Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?" As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job and God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached the table. He winked at my son and said, "I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer." “Really?” My son asked. "Cross my heart," the man said. Then he whispered, "Too bad she (the woman) never asks God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes."

Naturally, I bought my kids ice cream at the end of the meal. [He had to, right?!?] My son stared at his ice cream for a moment and then did something I will remember the rest of my life. He picked up his sundae and without a word walked over and placed it in front of the woman. With a big smile he

told her, “Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes, and my soul is good already.”

That woman had doubts about the boy’s prayer and doubted it would be answered. She ended up being wrong and even ended up with ice cream when she *didn’t* pray for it. Similarly, Zechariah doubted Gabriel. He was uncertain of what God could do in his life. And if *Zechariah* is struggling to walk forward in faith here...if *he* has doubts about what the angel is saying to him, and yet God works through him in spite of that doubt, well: **Maybe God can work through each of us, too.** Maybe *we* can go forward in faith, even as we have doubts. Maybe we don’t have to have it all together in perfect faith or have all our ducks in a row exactly as we’d like, in order to be a follower of Jesus and a part of His church. Mary’s response to the angel a little later on is one of just total trust and faith, “I am the Lord’s servant” she responds. Elizabeth has an equally faithful response. Those are certainly noble and inspiring responses, and we can all seek to answer similarly in our lives; but sometimes that may feel almost out of reach, like they’re too perfect...and we just aren’t really ready to take that step of faith. And so frequently, we end up responding more like Zechariah: “Really God? I’m too old for this stuff – and so is my wife!” Or, “I’m too young to do this...I’m not experienced enough. You sure you got the right person? You sure those are the plans?”

Like Zechariah, too often we just can't believe that God can/will/wants to accomplish some particular thing, and that He might work through us. And yet, did that stop God from working through Zechariah? Did the angel say, “Never mind, I’ll wait until it’s another priest’s turn, and see if he’s more trusting?” No. God works through him in spite of his doubts. And maybe it’s even *because* of the doubts, so that the glory of God, the obviousness that this is God’s handiwork and not Zechariah’s, would be completely clear, so that God’s name would be praised.

And it’s the same with us: **In spite of our doubts and questions, God is faithful to accomplish his purposes.** God is not looking for perfect people, perfect Bible Studies, or perfect churches through whom to work. Like with Zechariah, God may have to hit the mute button on us, or do something else

to get us in gear and make us aware that he's serious, but God's will shall be accomplished. And we see that here, as the angel Gabriel says in verse 20, **“And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time” (Luke 1:20).**

Zechariah didn't believe God could do what he said he would do. This was doubtful news to him. But God had a plan, and he wasn't going to let Zechariah get in the way of it happening. He wasn't going to let Zechariah's doubt spread to others. So the angel silenced him. And if you skip ahead in your Bibles to Luke 1:57, you'll see that all the neighbors and relatives who have gathered around Elizabeth and Zechariah at the birth of their son want to name the baby “Zechariah Junior,” or something along those lines, but Elizabeth says he's to be named John. Then we see *more* doubt, as they doubt that's really the right name, because no one in their family has ever been named John...and so they ask Zechariah what his name is, but he still can't speak, so he asks for the first century equivalent of an iPad, and writes, “His name is John.” And immediately he's able to speak for the first time in 9 months, and although the text doesn't say this, it's safe to guess that Elizabeth immediately burst in to tears, because for the last nine months Zechariah hadn't been able to try and fix everything she talked to him about! She had the perfect husband: all he could do was just listen and give nods of understanding, and hugs of affirmation and support. It was the best months of their marriage. ☺ Ok, that's getting speculative. But the point is: God was faithful, and did everything the angel Gabriel said God would do, in God's timing – and in spite of Zechariah's doubts.

So God works out his purposes, even when our faith is weak and we have doubts about the wisdom of where God is leading us. **But through it all we see God's guiding hand and we see God working out His purposes to bring Jesus into the world and into people's lives.** God is there, working in and through people like you and me to accomplish what He has set out to do through His son, Jesus. We are reassured of God's presence, of his provision, of his providence. God's plans will not be thwarted. There may be twists and turns and revisions to plans from *our* perspective, but no obstacle is too great to overcome – including our own doubts and uncertainties. Nothing is too

great for God to overcome and prevent him from accomplishing his purpose.

So: in what ways are you, like Zechariah, doubting God? Maybe you have doubts about Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection and God is speaking to you about taking a step of faith in what you believe about Jesus. Or perhaps you're going through a season of doubting that God loves you unconditionally. Maybe you doubt his voice in your life leading you to minister to someone. Maybe you doubt something new He's doing in your life, or that He forgives you, or that His mercies really are new every morning. We see in this passage that even with our doubts and questions, God doesn't abandon us, and actually still works in us and through us, and He will accomplish what He sets out to do. And that will build our faith. My guess is by the time John was born, Zechariah had a whole new level of faith. And God will bring us to a whole new level of faith as well. But his doubt didn't stop God. **And *our* doubt won't stop God, either.** In fact, He desires to bring about those accomplishments in and through us in spite of our doubts; He specializes in that kind of work. And my friends: there's *no* doubt about *that*. Let's pray...Amen.