



Luke 2:1-7
Christmas: Fake News?
Good News

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We've been in a series during Advent that has been wrapping together different kinds of news we get in our lives with the news of the birth of Jesus...and looking at all of this in light of the cultural phenomenon of fake news that we find ourselves in. The phrase "fake news" may have been coined in just the last couple years or so, but the reality of fake news is not new. It's even been a part of Christmas that we celebrate every year – from the promises that the gifts we give and get will be everything we need ("you'll be satisfied/happy/fulfilled with this stuff"), that we should indulge ourselves, stores that proclaim: "we have everything they need," and so forth. There's a lot of fake news when it comes to this season of the year.

But there's also some fake news around the actual reason for Christmas: the birth of Jesus. There's stuff that has been added in over the years that ultimately cheapens and even discredits the Good News that the birth of Jesus is. And **Jesus doesn't need fake news to augment his message and his cause.** Jesus is enough on his own. This fake news actually eats away at the credibility of the gospel, and can erode our faith...it can plant seeds of doubt. So tonight I want to look at three pieces of news about the birth of Jesus that we have concocted over the years, and really serve to discredit the Good News of Jesus' birth, and hopefully help us have a more solid faith built on the truth of Jesus.

The first bit of fake news is one we looked at several years ago on a Sunday morning in Advent, so this will be a refresher for some of you. But this one is so ingrained in our understanding of the birth of Jesus we probably need a reminder almost every year about the truth.

Luke tells us that a census was taking place, and the people went to their ancestral hometown to register for it. So Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem, which was his home town because of his family lineage to King David who was from Bethlehem. And Luke writes in verse 7 that after Jesus was born, Mary placed him in a manger, because there was no room in the "inn." At least, this is how most older translations read. Tonight's did not, for

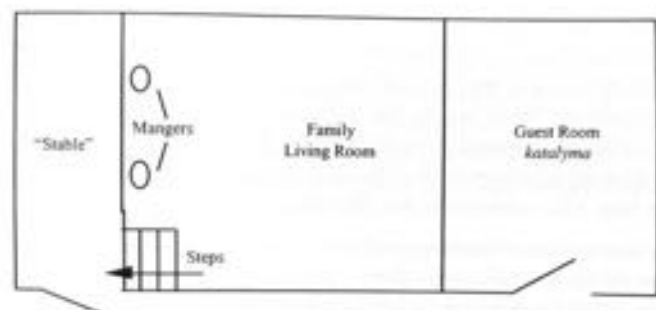
which I'm grateful. But this is where we come to our first bit of fake news.

The Greek word here that has historically been translated as “inn” is *katalyma* (ka-TA-lema). It is *not* the normal word for “inn.” The normal word for “inn” is *pandocheion* (pan-do-HI-on). Luke uses both of these words in different settings. For instance, in Luke 10, when Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan who helps a guy out in his time of need, one of the things the Samaritan does is put the guy up in an “inn.” And the word that Luke records for us is this word, *pandocheion*, the normal word for “inn,” not what he uses here at the birth of Jesus.

Later, Luke again uses the word we have here in the birth narrative. It's Luke 22:11. This is when Jesus is looking to celebrate his last Passover meal with his disciples. He sends a couple of them ahead to go to a house so they can borrow a room in it. The verse reads, **“Say to the owner of the house, “The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room (*katalyma*) where I may eat the Passover with my Disciples?” (Luke 22:11, and Mark 14:14 is the same.)** This is the same word that we have in the story of Jesus' birth. If Luke had intended to say that there was no room in the inn then he could have used *pandocheion* (pan-da-HI-on) here in 2:7. But he uses *katalyma* (ka-TA-lema), which more commonly means guest room.

So, where did they stay, and where was Jesus born? The text gives us some clues, because connected to, and really a part of the first room, would have been the “stable” where a couple of animals would have been kept – like a sheep and a cow. They didn't have a separate barn or stable where the hay was stored and the animals slept, safely out of smelling distance from the home. It was right there, connected to the house. I know, it sounds odd to us, but it was normal for them. We know this from archaeology and careful reading of documents such as this passage in Luke, and piecing it all together. Here's how it might have looked (**picture**):

In fact, the stable area would have not only been open to the main room, but a couple steps down would be the eating troughs – the



mangers – for the animals on the main floor, in the main room. The animals would stand in the stable and eat their food from the main room.¹ In all likelihood, this is what happened and what Luke intended to convey. We have imposed our understanding of the world (like where farm animals stay in relation to a house) onto the text.

Now, this begs a particular question. What about infamous the inn-keeper who said that he had no room in the Inn? This is why it's so important to read the Bible carefully, take off our 21st Century lenses through which we view things and try to put on first century Jewish lenses, and not make assumptions or read things into the text that aren't there, because: **There is no inn-keeper ever mentioned.** The Innkeeper is fake news. And I know some of you are now in serious shock and having a major existential crisis because when you were in third grade you played the inn-keeper in the church Christmas pageant and it's one of your favorite memories of all-time. That's ok, hang onto that. You only did what you were asked to do! But the fact is, there never is an inn-keeper mentioned. He's read into the text, assumed to be there, because we've always thought that "the inn" was full: there must have been an innkeeper who told them this. But in all likelihood, that wasn't the problem. In fact, they didn't need to go to an inn. They had plenty of Joseph's relatives who would welcome them into their home. All he had to do was say "I'm Joseph, son of _____, grandson of _____..." and on down the line a bit, "and in the lineage of King David" and *anyone* in town – relative or not – would open their doors to let them stay. And one of them certainly did – it's just that the normal *guest room* was full with some other relatives. And in a pinch, they could stay with the homeowners in the main room, and Jesus could be born there, and a feeding trough that's full of hay, right there at the end of the main room would make for a pretty decent crib for a baby.

The second piece of fake news I want to dispel tonight comes from one of our all-time favorite Christmas Hymns: Away in a Manger. We just sang a Christmas hymn that has fake news about the birth of Jesus in it. Any guesses as to the words that constitute the fake news? ... "no crying he makes." Have you ever met a baby who didn't cry? Usually they're crying the moment they're born – it's a universal sign that your baby's lungs are working. Just because Jesus was God in the flesh is not a reason for him not to cry.

My family and I experienced this recently when we went to get a family photo taken with Santa. (Yes, we do that – it’s a good memory.) As we were standing in line waiting, there were some kids sitting on Santa’s lap who did *not* want to be there. Actually, it’s not fair to say that they were sitting on Santa’s lap. They were squirming, sliding off, running away...and not just crying, but screaming. And the parents kept putting them back in Santa’s lap, even trying to jump out of the way just before the picture snapped. I managed to get a photo of one family that really had an emotional trainwreck with Santa. Here’s **(picture)** how it looked:



OK, so that’s my family, imitating what we witnessed. But babies cry, and Jesus undoubtedly did as well. **In fact, as an adult, Jesus sheds tears on several occasions.** Every child’s favorite bible memorization verse in Sunday school is John 11:35, and probably many of you know it. It says, “Jesus wept.” He did so because his friend Lazarus had died. He also shed tears in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before his crucifixion, and he wept over Jerusalem one time because of the lack of peace the city was experiencing. If he shed tears as an adult, why wouldn’t he shed them as a baby?

The last piece of fake news, very briefly, concerns wise guys who came and visited Jesus with their gifts for him and his family. **First, the word used to describe them is “magi,” and it doesn’t translate to “kings” as the hymn “we three kings” calls them.** Magi is the Babylonian and Persian name that covers a host of different but related kinds of people: wise men, astrologers, sorcerers, dream interpreters, physicians, and some others. But not kings. **Additionally, nowhere does the Bible tell us that there were three of them.** We’re told of the three gifts they brought – gold, myrrh, and Frankenstein. I mean frankincense...but this doesn’t mean there was exactly one person per gift. Could’ve been more...could’ve been less.

So, what does this mean for us? Let me share just a couple of thoughts in light of pulling out some of the fake news from the birth of Jesus. **First, what do we do with all this fake news surrounding the truth of Jesus' birth?** Do we re-write "Away in a Manger" so we at least sing "some crying he makes"? Do we change "We three Kings" to "we unknown number of wise guys?" Do we re-write all the children's Christmas Pageants going forward so that there's no Innkeeper and no stable or barn out in the back 40 where they go to stay and where Jesus is born?

We had a Christmas pageant here a week ago yesterday. It was awesome – we had over 30 kids participating, and it told the birth story of Jesus in this really authentic and somewhat chaotic way – which is probably not unlike the actual night of Jesus' birth. The 1-year old playing the cow was all over the front here. The star that stood still over the holy family was more like a shooting star, going back and forth all over the place. But the night Jesus was born was also authentic (what's more "authentic" than a birth?) and probably a bit chaotic, too.

But you know what? We had three wise guys, and we sang the hymn "We Three Kings;" because we had so many kids participating, there were like 5 inn-keepers who didn't have any room in their Inns, and so baby Jesus was born in a stable, and we sang "Away in a Manger." I was watching this, my own kids were participating, my wife had a hand in making it all happen, and I'm thinking, "I'm preaching on Christmas Eve that several of these things are 'fake news.' I feel like a hypocrite!" All I can say is that: Traditions, even ones built around fake news, are hard to change. Maybe you've experienced that in your own lives. And so I think the main thing we can do is: **Read our Bibles carefully and know the differences between the true news God's word tells us happened, and the fake news we've imposed on the text.** Maybe over time some of our hymns and pageants and other traditions will line up better with the Biblical accounting of Jesus' birth. But until then, we can be educated about what Scripture tells us, and know the truth that's underneath the fake news.

The second, and most important thing I want us to take away from the true and factual news of Jesus' birth is this: **The coming of Jesus into the world,**

and into our lives is Good News all on its own. Jesus, Emmanuel, is God with us. He doesn't need fake news to augment his message and his cause. And maybe this stuff actually raises questions and erodes our faith? The gospels hold up under the microscope just fine, and the Good News of Jesus is trustworthy. Why would we add to it? We don't *need* to add on to it, and some of the additions probably actually serve to discredit the truth, and inhibit people from receiving the Good News of Jesus. Look at the fake news that the culture tells us about Christmas. They use all the same language of the Bible – that Christmas is about joy, love, hope, peace, and so forth. But the fake news that dominates Christmas is that we get that stuff through the gifts we receive or the experiences we have of Christmas parades, Santa, Christmas movies, and so forth. There is enough fake news from the secular world around us in regards to Christmas; we don't need to add to it.

When the first angel visited the shepherds out in the field, the angel said that he had come to bring “good news, that today, in Bethlehem, the Savior is born.” That's the truth of Christmas. It means that God is with you. He loves you, he forgives you, he desires to be in relationship with you, for you and me to trust Him. I pray that each of us this evening would know that Good News in our lives...because the Good News of Jesus is for all people: Rich, poor, sick, healthy, short, tall, black, brown, white, married, single, Huskies, Cougars, elderly, young, and so on...The Good News of Jesus is for all. His birth, his life, his death, his resurrection: It's *all* Good News. And that's the truth. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Among other things I read on this passage this week, the three things that have helped me understand this is “Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes,” by Kenneth Bailey, a Presbyterian minister who's spent most of his professional life as a teacher in Seminaries and Universities, including for 40 years in various places throughout the Middle East, including Jerusalem, and then also a blog post written by former RH church member and Internationally known NT Scholar, Sam Tsang. You can find it at:

<https://engagescriptures.wordpress.com/2012/12/22/christmas-myth-buster-4-a-gospel-to-the-poor/>

Lastly, I read this article as well: <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/once-more-jesus-was-not-born-in-a-stable/?fbclid=IwAR2ARCVTGcg8qC756xIK61jplkvA0cQNCTBf083PeFr1r1u4LKv1GXdarLQ>