

Incarnation: God Comes

John 1:14

Rev. Brian Bill

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Scripture Reading

Here's a question on Christmas Eve. How can we be certain that what happened on that holy night is not a hoax? How do we know that the news about the nativity is factual and not fake? Can we be sure this is *“good news of great joy for all the people?”*

We're hearing a lot recently about fake news stories. While bogus reporting has always been around, it now spreads like wildfire on Facebook and Twitter. These scam stories are often sensationalist and extreme, designed to inflame passions or prejudices.

Just this week, *Forbes Magazine* ran a story with this headline, *“Americans Believe They Can Detect Fake News. Studies Show They Can't.”* From August to November, fake stories earned more shares, reactions and comments on Facebook than real news stories. I guess we should be encouraged that Facebook is now flagging fake stories but I'm not sure if this story is factual or fictional.

I experienced some fake news last Thursday afternoon when I read a breaking story on my newsfeed regarding a mother in Rock Island who killed her three children and then stabbed herself. My eyes filled with tears and I immediately prayed. I then sent the link to the staff team and our deacons and asked them to pray. I even contacted a couple pastor friends in Rock Island to see how we could minister together in this tragedy. And then I found out it was an unholy hoax...and then I was grieved that someone would make up a story like this.

Oxford Dictionary has just released its 2016 term of the year – *post-truth*. Here's how they define it: *“Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”* In other words, truth takes a backseat to emotion because feelings have effectively replaced facts. Relativism is more relevant than reality.

That can certainly happen on Christmas Eve when sentimentality and the “spirit of the season” can cloud the truth of the incarnation.

We're going to focus on facts, not our feelings because it's not a fable that Jesus was born in the stable. In this time of "fake news" and "horrible hoaxes," you can trust what the Bible has to say because it's true. Listen to these words written by a very bright physician under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Luke 1:1-5:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

So how do we know if the Bible is phony or factual? Is it a hoax or a Holy Book? Like a good reporter, the learned Luke did some fact checking with eyewitnesses and followed up with all leads, writing an orderly account so that we can have ***"certainty concerning the things you have been taught."*** We just heard the Christmas narrative from Luke's gospel. Let me point out that this account is anchored in history – the events took place when Caesar Augustus was emperor in Rome and a guy with a hard name to pronounce (Quirinius) was governor in Syria. These were real rulers so this is clearly not a fable or fake news.

Here's our approach today. We're going to set up camp in one primary verse found in John 1:14 and focus on three main points related to the coming of Christ at Christmas – the *reality of His coming*, the *relevance of His coming* and finally, our *response to His coming*.

Let's look first at the reality of the coming of Christ.

The Reality of Christ's Coming

While the Gospels of Luke and Matthew give the details surrounding the birth of Jesus, John provides us with the back-story, or the theology behind the nativity. John 1:14 is startling in its simplicity but also incredibly deep: ***"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."***

The first part says that the ***"Word became flesh..."*** This is the single, most unique quality of Christianity that makes it different from any other religion: God became flesh. The miracle of Christmas is the infinite becoming an infant.

The whole superstructure of Christianity rests on this truth. Jesus is fully God and

fully man. A theologian described it this way: “...*God must be able to come over to our side without leaving his own ‘side.’*”

As you may have heard, the famous astronaut John Glenn died earlier this month. This made me think about what James Erwin, who traveled to the moon, said about Christmas, “*There’s something more important than man walking on the moon, and that is God, walking on the earth.*”

Notice the next phrase: “...*and dwelt among us...*” To “*dwelt*” refers to “*to pitching one’s tent.*” More specifically it means, “*to settle, to stay, to inhabit.*” One paraphrase puts it like this: “*Jesus came and moved into our neighborhood.*” When our family would camp at campsites growing up, we couldn’t help but get to know the other campers around us. In fact, it’s difficult to be private when you’re camping because everyone can see what you’re doing. To say that Jesus pitched a tent implies that He wants to be on familiar terms with us. He wants to be close. He wants a lot of interaction.

When we think of what “*dwelt among us*” means, we might be tempted to think that Jesus just came to hang out with us. But John uses a specific word that would make his first century readers remember the “*tent of meeting,*” where God met with the Israelites in the Old Testament.

This is also the same word used for “*tabernacle.*” This was a portable worship center where God dwelt and met with his people. It was also the place where sacrifices were made and where God’s glory and holiness were displayed.

In Exodus 40, after the tabernacle was completed, God’s glory filled it to overflowing: “*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the **glory of the LORD** filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the **glory of the LORD** filled the tabernacle.*” (Exodus 40:34-35)

The word “*glory*” is a bit difficult to define. It literally means, “*Heavy in weight, important, significant, having great reputation and splendor, brightness and majesty, worthiness and honor.*” It has to do with the fame of God’s name. God’s glory also refers to God’s presence with His people.

The Jewish rabbis coined the expression *shekinah glory*, a form of a Hebrew word that literally means “*he caused to dwell.*” For many years, people met with God and knew of His glory through the Tabernacle.

Later on, God instructed King Solomon to build a permanent worship center called the Temple. In 1 Kings 6:13, after finishing the construction, God says this: ***“And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel.”***

We read in 1 Kings 8:10-11 that ***“a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.”*** Moses was not able to enter the Tabernacle because God’s glory was filling it and the priests couldn’t get in either.

The glory of God fills the Temple for about 350 years. But then, because of people’s persistent sin and rebellion, God raised up the Babylonians, who wiped out Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. God’s glory then departs slowly and reluctantly. First, the glory leaves the Holy of Holies and then it hovers over the threshold of the door at the east gate and then in Ezekiel 11:23 we read these sad words: ***“And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.”*** As a result, God is no longer dwelling with His people and the display of His glory on earth becomes a distant memory.

Isaiah 64:1 captures the plaintive plea of the people as they lament that the glory of God on earth is gone. This cry lasts for centuries: ***“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!”*** The song we sang earlier captures this sense of longing and expectation, ***“O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel...”***

In this series we’ve been celebrating the link between the Old and New Testaments. Last weekend we saw the connection between God’s covenants and Christmas. You might want to lean in so you don’t miss another one...

The heavens are silent for four centuries until Harold the Angel (I mean, the herald angel) starts harking in Luke 2:9: ***“And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the [wait for it...] glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.”***

Then the angel announces not “fake news,” but factual news, as he gives the message about what happened in the manger: ***“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news [“to publish glad tidings”] of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a***

Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

And then a whole arsenal of adoring angels break through the heavens and proclaim that God’s glory has now returned in the birth of a baby: “[wait for it...] **GLORY TO GOD** in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.”

I love the words from “Silent Night.”

*Silent night holy night
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia*

Now with all that as background, hear John 1:14 again as I read it slowly: “**And the word became flesh and dwelt among us...**[listen to this next part]...**and we have seen His GLORY, GLORY as of the only Son from the Father...**”

Are you ready for this? *In a similar way that God dwelt with His people in the Tabernacle and in the Temple He now dwells with people through His only Son Jesus Christ!* In Him, the glory of God has descended and He has pitched His tent to dwell with us. God’s good news comes into our bad news. Centuries of waiting are now over.

Don’t miss this! God’s glory was previously tied to a place but now it’s wrapped up in a person. And, when we put our faith in Him, His glory comes and resides within us. In fact, the glory of God now dwells in individual Christians according to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: “**Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.**”

Now that’s a great news story! It’s not fake or fabricated or fictional. It’s been fact-checked, researched, and verified by multiple eyewitnesses.

That’s the *reality* of Christmas – which answers the question, “*what does it mean?*” Let’s move now to the *relevance* of the coming of Christ – which answers another question, “*what meaning does it have for me?*”

The Relevance of His Coming

Ponder the last part of John 1:14: “...**full of grace and truth.**” The word “**full**” means, “*abounding or complete.*” “**Grace**” refers to a favor done without expectation of return and “**truth**” has the idea of factual, pure, sincere and without error.

Grace and truth are two concepts that don't often appear together. As humans we tend to err on one side or the other. If we stress grace, we can be too quick to cut someone slack. If we pull the truth trigger too quickly we can wipe someone out. Grace without truth can lead to sloppy sentimentality and truth without grace can lead to religious rigidity.

With Jesus you can always count on both truth *and* grace. He tells the truth about your situation and your sins, and then His grace causes Him to stick with you all the way. I love what Max Lucado writes: “*God loves you just the way you are [that's grace], but He loves you too much to let you stay the way you are [that's truth].*”

At Christmas we're reminded that the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. The manger is filled with the awesomeness of God's glory and grace but we're also faced with a terrible truth: because of our sin, Jesus Christ came to die for us as our substitute. Romans 3:23 says, “***for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.***”

Because He is full of grace, you can come to Him just as you are, without having to clean up your act first. And because He is full of truth, you can come in complete confidence knowing that He will keep His promise to forgive you and grant you eternal life.

That's grace and that's truth. Without both working together, we would have neither.

At Christmas, we see Jesus as 100% God and 100% man. *Jesus became what He had never been before without losing what He had always been.* Because He is God, He is sovereign. Because He is man, He can be our substitute by taking our place of punishment on the cross. God the Father is just and therefore demands payment for our sins and because He is a God of grace, He provides the Savior, who shed His blood as full payment for our sins. He is just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Him.

I was given a bird feeder about a year ago but hadn't put any birdseed in it for a long time. When we had that really cold weather last weekend I finally filled it up because I felt sorry for the birds. I told Megan, our 17-year-old that I was now officially old because I was concerned about the birds. She agreed with me.

Anyway, I filled it to the top but no birds came for breakfast, or lunch or dinner. They completely ignored it. This went on for two days. I was more worried then I should have been and wondered how I could get a message to the birds that there was free food for them. The only way I could accomplish that would be if I became a bird so I could tell them. I guess I'm not only getting old but also losing my mind. Jesus became one of us in order to get a message to us that He alone is the ***“way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him.”***

I like what Tim Keller says about Christmas: *“Christmas is the end of thinking you are better than someone else, because Christmas is telling you that you could never get to heaven on your own. God had to come to you.”*

That reminds me of the little girl who was frightened at night during a thunderstorm. She cried out for her daddy and he came and comforted her by saying, *“Honey, God loves you and will take care of you.”* Just then another bolt of lightning and clap of thunder caused her to cry out again, *“Daddy!”* Her dad gave her the same response – *“Honey, God loves you and will take care of you.”* To which the girl responded, *“Daddy, I know that God loves me, but right now I need someone with skin on!”* Jesus is God with skin on.

We've looked at the *reality of Christ's coming* and the *relevance of His coming*. Let's wrap up by considering our *reaction to His coming*.

Our Response to His Coming

In the verses before John 1:14 we see three different responses to Jesus that are still very common today.

1. You may not recognize Him. Unfortunately, even after all that Jesus did to dwell among us, verse 10 reveals that Immanuel is often ignored: ***“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.”*** There has always been a great divide in the human race. The majority never recognized Jesus for who He really is and never came to Him to have their sins forgiven.

2. You might reject Him. While some are apathetic and ignore the Christ of Christmas, others reject Him outright. Listen to verse 11: ***“He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.”*** Jesus came to the people who should have known Him best, but they wanted nothing to do with Him.

3. You must receive Him. While it is true that the world did not recognize Him and His own people rejected Him, there have always been some who receive Him. John 1:12 is one of the most profound verses in the Bible because it explains clearly how someone can personally become a Christian: ***“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*** Notice the three key words.

- **Receive.** This literally means, *“To take, or to seize.”* Have you taken hold of Him?
- **Believe.** To believe means to engage your total being so that you put your trust completely in Christ as an act of the will.
- **Become.** The moment you receive Christ into your life, God gives you the right to become a member of His family.

Believe, Receive, and Become. We must first *believe* that Jesus is the only way to a relationship with God the Father. Then we must personally *receive* what He has done on the cross by appropriating the gift of salvation. Then, we *become* children of God.

Apart from Christ, we would never fully know the depths to which we are loved or the lengths to which God can be trusted. At the heart of the incarnation is an invitation.

Martin Luther once said, *“Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times, and it would be daily sung in my ears in a most lovely manner, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own.”*

Prayer of Invitation

If you're ready to repent, to believe and receive Jesus Christ, you could pray this prayer silently with me: *“God, I admit that I'm a sinner and that I'm making a mess of my life. I repent of how I've been living and now turn to your Son who is full of grace and truth. Thank you Jesus for coming to earth and for going to the*

cross. I believe that you died in my place, your blood paying the price for my sins. I believe and now I receive so that I can become your child. Please save me from my sins. I also believe that you rose from the dead on the third day, proving that everything you said was true. I desire to live under your leadership for the rest of my life. I believe in the reality of your coming, I know it's relevant to my life and now I respond to you in faith. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen."

Have you ever wondered what the word "Noel" means? We see it in our Christmas cards and sing it in our Christmas carols, but my guess is that most of us don't really understand its background. In French, it means "Merry Christmas." Our modern English word comes from the Middle English *nowel*, which is defined as "a shout of joy or Christmas song." The background of the word means "birth."

Another root for *noel*, also from the French, is the word "*news*." The news that Christ has been born is not fictional but factual. It's good news you can count on! But in order for the reality to become relevant in your life, it must be received. If you prayed to receive Christ, would you raise your hand?

Closing Song: "Noel"