

## A Reasonable Christmas: A Saviour for those God favors

Luke 2:8-14

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About a decade ago a big debate raised its head in the retail world as to whether or not Christmas music should be played over the public speaker system. Secular society argued that it wasn't fair that they had to listen to music that didn't line up with their beliefs. But that may not have actually been the issue.

When pressed most people had no problem with songs about spooky Santa keeping naughty and nice lists – obviously these don't line up with anyone's beliefs. More interestingly very few people even had problems with songs like "Baby it's cold outside" which trivialize sexual abuse. So the problem probably wasn't the music not lining up with what people believe.

Maybe the issue was the falsification of history. After all if something claims to be historical while actually being fiction that's a problem. But not long before this debate began raging Dan Brown published his book "The Davinci Code" which sold millions of copies. If you aren't familiar The Davinci Code is a novel that claims, on the first page, to be set in the context of real history. But then the 'real history' it portrays includes all sorts of things that secular historians dispute: Jesus wasn't married to Mary Magdalene, Constantine didn't invent the idea that Jesus was God. The Gnostic Gospels weren't written earlier than the four Gospels. The facts of the book are fiction, but who cares.

So the problem isn't whether Christmas music lines up with our beliefs – lots of stuff doesn't line up with our beliefs. And the problem isn't that the historical records of Jesus are false – arguably they aren't. The problem with Jesus is that the verifiable historical record that surrounds Him includes a bunch of supernatural things that if true place a moral hold on our lives.

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Alright, please grab your Bible and open it to the Gospel of Luke chapter 2. If you are just joining us today we are in the second week of our Advent series: A Reasonable Christmas. If you missed last week you can get it on our website. Would you stand with me as we come to the text. Luke 2 starting in verse 8. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Luke 2:8-14]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

It is very popular right now to say that a person shouldn't trust the Bible – at least not all of it. And the reason is because while there are some good messages in it there are also some bad ones. Some of its facts that are correct, and others are wrong. And so, like Dan Brown, you shouldn't trust the Bible because it's hard to know where the truth ends and the fiction begins.

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Today I want to do two things, first I want to argue that the Bible should be trusted. And that's in spite of the fact that its story includes miraculous ideas that can't be proven in a lab. And second, I want to look at Luke's depiction of a night sky full of angelic beings. And I want to do this, not simply because it's important to get history right, but because the history of Scripture can actually change us. And I need that. I need to be changed. My mind needs to be renewed and perhaps yours does too. And this is what God says He wants to do for our good and for the increase of His glory.

So last week we established that faith in Jesus is reasonable because the stories about what He taught and did aren't mythology, they are history. In contrast none of the stories about Athena or Brahma or Santa are framed in the context of things like tax audits or censuses because mythology doesn't include this kind of stuff, but history does.

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Today I want to add two more factors that point to the trustworthiness of the Bible. First it's message about Jesus is too early, and second it's message is too counter-productive to have been made up.<sup>1</sup>

So one of the big attacks Dan Brown makes against the church in the Davinci Code is that the miraculous aspects of the story were made up long after the fact by people who profited by selling it.

So yes, Jesus was an historical guy who taught some nice stuff about love. But all the angels and virgin births and miracles and resurrection were added in later by church leaders who wanted to use Jesus to bolster their power.

And this idea has gained a lot of traction because it explains away the supernatural. Of course if you can sell the forgiveness of sins and promise the miraculous that is going to be a lucrative career move.

And isn't the modern record full of church leaders who have done this kind of stuff? Just this last month another celebrity pastor was fired after using his position and power to have multiple affairs – great! So it's not strange to assert that church leaders would make this story up if they could. But what matters is not what could happen, but what did happen. And history tells us that the account of Jesus was written too early and it's too counterproductive to have been made up.

So if the first writings of the New Testament were written in the fourth century by Constantine then they could say whatever they wanted because everyone who was actually there was dead already. But Luke records his account only 30 to 40 years after Jesus' resurrection. And the problem with this is people were still alive who were there. In fact talking with these people is the premise of Luke's Gospel. He opens:

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Alistair Begg's <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/savior-christ-lord/> (Accessed December 2, 2020)

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke's point is it's important to get this right so I talked to the people who were there, and if you've got any questions you can talk to them too.

So Luke writes way too early to fabricate the story of Jesus because people were still alive who knew Jesus. Actually Paul writes even earlier – 20 years before Luke. And this means even more people would have known Jesus and His disciples personally. And similar to Luke, Paul tells people to ask around about what he's writing. He says:

I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins.... He was buried, and He was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, He was seen by more than 500 of His followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)

Paul says go ask these people if what I'm saying about Jesus is true. I'm not making the part about Jesus being divine up... Actually, on this topic one of the most interesting sections of Paul's letters is found in Philippians 2 where he quotes some worship music the early church was singing. The song went:

Though He was God,  
He did not think of equality with God  
as something to cling to.  
Instead, He gave up His divine privileges;  
He took the humble position of a slave...  
and died a criminal's death on a cross.  
Therefore, God elevated Him to the place of highest honor...  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

Get your head around this: Just a couple decades after Jesus was walking around people are worshipping Him. This means Constantine couldn't have invented the divinity of Jesus in the 4<sup>th</sup> century because the eyewitnesses had come to this conclusion hundreds of years earlier.

So the documents of scripture are simply too early to have been fabricated by church leaders after the fact.

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Okay fine, the records are early, not late. But maybe the first leaders of the church are the ones to blame. They concocted the story to consolidate their own power. That's not hard to imagine is it? Not really. People do terrible things.

But again the problem with this theory isn't how improbable it is (it might be quite probable). But the problem is that when you read the Bible you find out that it is way to counter-productive to have been written for this purpose.

So if you were going to make a story up in order to gain power you wouldn't write the Bible – at least not the Bible we've got. You would write something that made yourself look good. But that's not how the Bible reads.

So the early leaders of the church were Jesus' disciples. And they, and people who knew them, were the ones who wrote the Bible – we know that. But the way the disciples depict themselves in the Bible is incredibly unflattering.

Throughout scripture Jesus' closest followers look like idiots, jerks and cowards. They are constantly running away and denying Jesus. They repeatedly fail to understand what He's talking about. They get things right once and then wrong six times in a row. Now if you were making the story up you probably wouldn't tell lies that make you look worse than you actually are – that's just not a thing. So the only reason to record the stories we've got is that they actually happened.

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Or consider this, first century Rome was an incredibly patriarchal society. Women were possessions and couldn't even give testimony in court. And none of the early church's central leaders were women. And yet the first eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus were women.

Now if you were making the story up, and the central truth claim involved witnesses claiming someone came back from the dead, you wouldn't make women be these witnesses. The only reason to include this is if it were true.

So the New Testament was written too early, and it's too counter-productive in its content to have been concocted by church leaders intending to bolster their power. And this means believing in the Bible's message isn't a call to blind faith. Instead, choosing to follow Jesus is a reasonable response to the historical record.

And of course this is the problem Christmas music highlights. Most North Americans simply don't want to think about the claim Jesus makes on their lives. But why not?

Well the thought is that Christianity is about control and restriction and people don't want to shackle themselves with that – who would. But this is why it is so important to keep telling the people around us about Jesus. The world has Jesus wrong.

In fact Jesus' message has always been one of good news and great joy for people on whom His favor rests. Yes, God wants us to live our lives for His glory, but He wants this from us because this is what is best for us.

And we get this in our text today which is full of angels and shepherds – the miraculous and the mundane – wrapped up in the context of a birth announcement.

Now birth announcements have always been big. In the good old days, dads would celebrate the arrival of a new baby by bringing cigars to work in order to enjoy an increased chance to get lung cancer with some co-workers. Today people do all sorts of crazy things to celebrate now or arriving babies.

So when Nikki got pregnant with Nathan we had the ultrasound tec secretly write "boy" or "girl" on a piece of paper without showing us. And then we bought two packs of balloons, one pink one blue, and delivered them to the lady with the helium at Save On Foods along with a big cardboard box.

She filled the balloons that corresponded with the secret note and sealed them in the box. And the next day we took the box to our family get together where we opened it. A brilliant idea except all the helium leaked out of our dollar store balloons so a bunch of slightly shrived blue rubber fell out of the box onto the floor – not quite the affect we were going for.

But even the best birth announcements have nothing on this one. Angels. And not just one, but piles of them. Countless angels. Singing "glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests."

Now this is well into the realm of the miraculous. None of this can be reproduced in a lab. And so a lot of people have tried to write this off as a fabrication. People made the angels up in order to make Jesus' birth special. And this makes perfect sense until you cloud the story with shepherds.

So if you were in the first century and googled "Job's ex-cons can get" shepherding would have come back near the top of the list. Interestingly I googled this today and the first sentence the internet spit back at me was "Many convicted felons find that welding is a rewarding career." Now if you happen to be a welder you might find that a bit offensive. But perhaps if you're an ex-con this is helpful advice.

The point is shepherds in the first century weren't known for their for their honesty or integrity. They were dirty low lifes society had rejected. They didn't do any of the ceremonial cleaning that the religious people did. And they worked long hours and so didn't even show up at church.

So if you were going to make up an angelic birth announcement why would you choose shepherds to be the recipients? People wouldn't do this. But God would.

You see throughout scripture God is always choosing dubious people to be part of His plan. And God chooses these people because they demonstrate that salvation is about Him not us. So in one place Paul rather offensively reminds the Corinthians:

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise... or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish.... [and] powerless.... God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

(1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

If you are second captain, first pick on the playground then you choose the strongest, fastest, biggest players available because you want to win. But God doesn't choose the people we would choose because His message is different than ours message.

His message is that a Holy God has made a way for broken people to be saved. And He did this so we can enter into the life we were created to enjoy in the beginning. Listen to what the angels say – verse 14:

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests." (Luke 2:14)

Peace to those on whom His favor rests. Another translation reads: "Peace on earth to people He favors!"<sup>2</sup>

So who gets God's peace? Who does He favor? Is it the strong, the rich and the powerful? No. It's shepherds. It's broken, stinky, unpopular outcasts who get God's favor. It's sinners who know they aren't good enough. Those are the people God chooses throughout scripture to receive His peace and join His team.

And guess what, those are the kinds of people He's still looking for today. Not good people who are like Him. Not people who can help Him. Not people who have things He can use. There are no people like that. God's favor rests on the poor in spirit; those who recognize they need Him.

And to those people the word is "peace" and – verse 11 – "a Saviour has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord."

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Friends, humanity doesn't need or even want proof that history in fact happened as the scripture says. Humanity's problem has been the same since the Garden in the beginning – we want to rule our own lives.

But God's response, to those on whom His favor rests, is to send a Messiah – God's anointed and chosen one – to be our Saviour – the One who rescues. But God requires that all who will receive Him would come as the Christmas carol sings:

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Standard Bible

Oh, come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant! Come to Bethlehem. Come and behold Him born the King of angels. O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

The problem with Christmas carols is that they line up with the historical record and make a claim on our lives. And the question they ask is how are you going to respond to the angel's message this Christmas?

Are you someone who's got your life together and all figured out? Or are you someone who needs God's chosen Saviour?

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If, as you look at yourself you realize you aren't good and you do need God's help then the good news of scripture is that you are among those on whom His favor rests.

And that's because God is reconciling the world to Himself. He who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God. The God of scripture is the greatest giver of gifts. And there is nothing greater that He could give than Himself into the world that we might be set free from sin and death in order to live the life of abundance God created us for in the beginning.

Friends, God's love is so great, so don't spurn it. If you hear God's voice calling you today don't harden your heart. Call out to Him. His message of good news is for people who will confess 'Jesus, I don't have it all figured out, but I know I'm a sinner. I know I can't save myself. So please come and rescue me from the life of sin I've been trapped in. Come be Lord in my life.'