

This morning, we are in the fourth week of an Advent series that will draw its themes from the four Advent candles: Hope, peace, joy, and faith. This morning, we will look at the faith that Jesus gives us. Let's begin by reading Matthew's account of the Christmas story.

Matthew 1:18-25 - *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. **Matthew 2:1-6** *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."**

Next Sunday is Christmas, and Christmas is of course famous for two competing, hard-to-believe narratives that bring a lot of joy and wonder to many. The first narrative is about Santa Claus, a large man who lives year-round at the North Pole with his wife and a number of elves. Every Christmas Eve, so the story goes, he gets on his sleigh, pulled by 8 flying reindeer, and goes around the world delivering toys to boys and girls by sliding down their chimneys. The second narrative is about a baby who, as we just read, was born to a virgin teenager in a stable or cave, surrounded by animals, visited by shepherds and Magi. And oh, did I mention that this baby was God in human form, come to save humanity from their sins and to reconcile them to a right relationship with God.

Now, if you have little ones listening, you may want to mute this part. At some point, children learn to do math and they come to the conclusion that it seems really impossible that this Santa Claus could travel around the world and hit every house in one night. And so, eventually, they realize that it is just a legend, and they stop believing. But what about the other story? Well, many people also grow up and come to the conclusion that virgins don't have children, God probably didn't come to earth, and maybe this Jesus story is just as much a myth or fairy tale as the story of Santa Claus.

Yet here I am. And here we are. And as hard-to-believe as this Christmas story might be, it is true. Let me give you three reasons why you can trust that the Christmas story is true.

1) It was written by eyewitnesses, or companions of the eyewitnesses

You see, while no one has ever seen Santa Claus, the story of Jesus was written down by eyewitnesses, or companions of the eyewitnesses.

Many of you are familiar with the assumptions that many people make about the stories of Jesus: They are not contemporary to the events they narrate. They are not close to the time either, like a game of telephone. There are not enough sources. They are not independent of each other. They are not consistent. They are biased. Therefore, we can throw them out as historical documents.

First of all, if we buy this argument, then we have to throw out the entirety of history before the printing press as unreliable. The NT documents have far more copies closer to the time they are reporting about than anything else: 5700 Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin manuscripts, 15,000 manuscripts in other ancient languages (Syriac, Coptic, Slavic, Ethiopian, and Armenian), written between 50-100 AD, dated to 130 or less (a gap of 30-80 years). The next most reliable work are the works of Homer. There are fewer than 2,400 manuscripts of Homer. Homer wrote ca. 800 BC but earliest manuscripts date to 250 AD (a gap of over 1000 years). Plus, you have 86,000 Biblical quotes from commentaries, sermons, and treatises written by the church fathers.

Secondly, the gospels are written as historical documents. Consider Luke: Luke tells us he is writing history. That it is based on eye-witness testimony, and that he himself has carefully investigated everything:

“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. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided 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)

Then Luke gives a lot of historical and chronological detail. These are claims that can be tested.

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” (Luke 3:1-2)

The other gospels have similar claims to authenticity. As for the authors:

Luke was a contemporary of Paul (Col 4, 2 Tim 4) and would have had access to the eyewitnesses.

Mark was based on Peter’s accounts (Papias)

John could have been based on the eyewitness called “The beloved disciples” – could be John the Son of Zebedee or another John known as John the elder (Papias)

Matthew may have been the tax collector Levi, but it is not clear

They bear marks of historicity - Unnecessary details (like the number of fish they caught or water jars). Embarrassing testimony – Women as first eyewitnesses, disciples as cowering deniers. Loose ends that aren’t answered. Names consistent with that time period.

Regarding the contention that the gospels are no different than a game of telephone

- There is a difference between oral tradition of stories and history. Oral tradition was corporate memory, oral history is a matter of mining the memories of living participants. Transmission of knowledge about Jesus was controlled by the eyewitnesses and could not be changed. The gospels were written during the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, who would have exercised quality control over what was recorded. And to the argument that “witness testimony is unreliable,” that argument is overblown; on the contrary, the more important the event was, the more it is fixed in our minds. They are not remembering things that happened 50

years ago; they are compiling the things they have been teaching for 50 years, things that their Lord said, which you can imagine would have been treated with the utmost respect and care. And remember, the Holy Spirit would remind them of all Jesus had said: **John 14:26** - *But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*

Papias (Greek apostolic father lived from 60-130 AD), writing from about 110 AD (Bauckham, 15) – *“I shall not hesitate to put into properly ordered form for you everything I learned carefully in the past from the elders and noted down well, for the truth of which I vouch. For unlike most people I did not enjoy those who have a great deal to say, but those who teach the truth. Nor did I enjoy those who recall someone else’s commandments, but those who remember the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the truth itself. And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on the elders should come my way, I inquired about the words of the elders – that is, what Andrew or Peter said, or Philip, or Thomas or James, or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord’s disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.”* In other words, the testimony of eyewitnesses was of utmost importance.

They are written within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses.

2) It fulfills a remarkable number of prophecies

Let me begin by setting the context for the Christmas story. Because after all, the Bible is not meant to be read like a bunch of morality tales, or a book of rules, or a collection of sayings. It is one grand narrative, written by many authors in many contexts over many years.

In the beginning was God. Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Out of the overflow of their love and community, God created us to enjoy a relationship with Him, to bear His image and bring Him glory. But Adam & Eve rebelled as the serpent, Satan, tempted them to disbelieve God, and sin entered the world, causing brokenness between humanity and God, humans and each other, humans and themselves, and humans and the world. But even in the beginning comes this promise to the serpent: **Genesis 3:15** - *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*

Sin had separated humans from God. But in order to redeem the world and bring people back, God called a man, Abram, to follow him along with his family.

Genesis 12:1-3 - *The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. ² "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

But things don't go well for the people of God. They eventually end up in slavery in Egypt, where God raises up a man named Moses to help lead the Israelites out of slavery. Moses tells them in Deuteronomy 18 that there will be a prophet greater than him.

Eventually they settle in the promised land, and they grow restless with God as their leader, and so they ask for a human king. They get Saul, and then King David, to whom God promises:

2 Samuel 7:16 - *Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."*

God raises up prophet after prophet, many of whom would prophesy about a Messiah who will one day come to save the people of Israel, with very specific promises:

Isaiah 7:14 - *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

Micah 5:2 - *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."*

This Jesus, born of a virgin and born in Bethlehem, would go on to begin His public ministry around age 29, and for three years he would teach, heal, and tell people that their eternal destiny depended upon how they responded to him.

Mark 1:15 - *"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*

Mark 10:45 - *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

This Jesus, according to the eyewitnesses, forgave people's sins, claimed to be without sin, claimed the divine name "I am," and was eventually arrested and killed for blasphemy, for making himself out to be God. But by doing so, he would die on a cross for the sins of the world, fulfilling multiple prophecies.

He would enter Jerusalem on a donkey's colt ([Matthew 21:4–10](#); [Zechariah 9:9](#)). He would be betrayed by a friend ([John 13:18](#); [Psalm 41:9](#)).

The betrayal would be for 30 pieces of silver ([Matthew 26:14–16](#); [Zechariah 11:12](#)).

The money would be used to purchase the potter's field ([Matthew 27:3–10](#); [Zechariah 11:13](#)).

The Messiah would die a sacrificial death for us ([Matthew 27:50](#); [2 Corinthians 5:21](#); [Daniel 9:26](#); [Isaiah 53:8](#)).

He would die with criminals but His burial would be with the wealthy ([Matthew 27:57–60](#); [Luke 23:33](#); [Isaiah 53:9](#)).

He would rise from the dead ([Matthew 28:6](#); [Psalm 16:8–11](#); [Isaiah 53:10](#)).

He would say certain words on the Cross. He would be mocked, and people would gamble for His clothes ([Psalm 22:1, 8, 18](#)).

Because in the end, it is not just about him coming to live among us and reveal God to us. It's not just about a nice story that fills us with wonder. No, Jesus came to bridge the gap between us and God, to deal with the problem we have had from the very beginning, the sin that separated us from God, to live the life we could not live, to die in our place, to rise from the dead, to destroy the serpent, Satan, to restore us to God.

Did Jesus just maneuver his life to fulfill the prophecies. Or did the Jewish community fabricate fulfilled prophecies? He could do that with a few, but not all – 30 pieces of silver. Soldiers gamble for his clothing.

Remember Jesus on the road to Emmaus:

Luke 24:25-27 *He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

It all points to Him.

3) It shows us God in human form

All around the world people have reached out for God, tried to understand the divine. In Christmas, we have God coming to earth, the eternal Son of God in human form.

John 14:8-11 - Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." ⁹ Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus has made so many claims about Himself:

John 2:19 – predicts his resurrection

John 3:13-18; 4:13-14; 6:50-51; 8:23-24; 10:27-30; 11:25-26 – those who believe in him will have eternal life; those who reject him will be condemned and die in their sins

John 4:25-26 – he is the Messiah

John 5:19-27 – Jesus is the judge and gives life

John 6:35-40; 8:23-24 – Jesus has come down from heaven, and all who believe in him will have eternal life

John 7:16-17 – He speaks God's words

John 8:46 – He is without sin

John 8:58 – He is the eternal God

John 18:36 – He is a king from another place

In the words of C.S. Lewis:

"I'm trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really silly thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must never say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic, on the level of the man who says he is

a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman, or something worse. You can shut him up as a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you may fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about him being a great moral teacher. He did not leave that open to us, and he did not intend to... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God."

If you want to know God, look at Jesus.

You have to put your faith in something. Faith that God exists. Faith that there is no God. Evidence won't get you to certainty. Read the eyewitness accounts for yourself. Put your faith in God, in Jesus who died for your sins.

Faith like a child.

Matthew 18:1-4 - *At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"² He called a little child and had him stand among them.³ And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

There is something about the childlike wonder, the dependence of a child, that mirrors what it means to truly believe. Some might find that offensive, but if you are offended, you will miss out on God, on the wonder of the gospel and the wonder of Christmas.

If you do not believe, read the eyewitness accounts for yourself. If you do not know Jesus but would like to, you can pray something like this from your heart to His:

Jesus, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I believe in you as my Savior and Lord. Amen.

Believe in Jesus today, with faith like a child.