

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Heaven's Media

Luke 2:1-20

One of the keys to preparing for tonight's service was getting the news out. We used printed announcements, verbal reminders, email updates, and church website banners to remind you that this year, we're gathering for worship on Christmas Eve Eve. I hope there's no one who didn't get the word and shows up tomorrow night, only to find locked doors and a dark sanctuary.

And now that we're here, we assume that you've silenced your phones. The last thing we need during our remembrance of Christ's birth is a chorus of ringtones. Or if not ringtones, at least not any of those notification sounds that break in on a regular basis. Our daily lives are already saturated by notifications. Some research indicates that the average person receives 65 to 80 of them per day. Many of them have to do with breaking news. That's because staying up to date with what's going on in our communities, our nation, and our world requires that we keep our phones within reach, ready for the next headline.

Plus, it's not as if the news is only being pushed upon us. We also search for it. As one person pointed out in a prominent business journal, "Not only are we constantly interrupted by alerts, alarms, beeps, and buzzes that tell us some new information has arrived, we constantly interrupt *ourselves* to seek out new information." He adds that "trillion-dollar industries are dedicating some of their brightest minds and untold resources to come up with newer and better ways" to grab your attention and divert it to something else.¹

Attention-grabbing would be an understatement in tonight's text from Luke. Earthly serenity is disrupted by heavenly illumination. Darkness turns into near daylight as divine incandescence surrounds the shepherds and their sheep. Without warning, a messenger from beyond appears. "Breaking news!" he says. "Calm down, you're not in danger. This is actually good news. In fact, good news of great joy for all the people. A Savior has just been born in the town of David. He's the Messiah, the one in charge."

Now that's news worth paying attention to. Not that there isn't lots of other news that's worthy of our time and focus. The problem is, there's so much of it. Every day, all sorts of media outlets, websites, publications, and television sources are pumping out information on events, people, and places. Our lives are saturated with updates. It used to be that most people got their news from traditional media such as newspapers and television. At most, that would involve one newspaper delivery per day or one particular newscast at a specific time of the day. It felt more like there were some boundaries, some limitations, to how much news and information we were receiving and processing.

But now, with the growth of the internet, and particularly the expansion of social media, the amount of news has exploded. News is easier to produce and distribute. Notifications pop up on your screen. Algorithms track your online activity in order to determine which topics, issues, and events are of greatest interest to you. That way news can be aggregated and channeled to you for your knowledge and consumption. It's no wonder that so many of us now struggle with what's called "news fatigue." We're overwhelmed with headlines, hype, and the latest happenings.

And it's not just a matter of quantity but also quality. In other words, who do you trust to provide accurate, reliable news and information? Earlier this week, I got an email from a ministry watchdog organization that began: "We live in an age in which there is a crisis in credibility. Americans have stopped trusting their institutions. Confidence in government, the church, and journalism are at or near all-time lows." Interesting how, in one respect, all three of those are in play in our text from Luke. There's a kind of journalism going on as the angel delivers news. The subject of this news is government, namely the birth of a Messiah in the royal city. And the target audience for this news is God's people, the religious folks of the day. In short, God reigns and deliverance for the faithful has arrived. That's the Christmas broadcast we're given to report.

But we do so in an atmosphere of sensationalism and mistrust. An issue of *The Economist* once carried an article titled, "Yes, I'd lie to you: The post-truth world." It analyzed the dishonesty that's wreaking havoc in politics, journalism, social media, and other areas of common life. According to the piece, one of the most effective ways to tell lies is by hiding the truth in a glut of information. In other words, it's hard to tell what's actually happening, or to get a handle on the way things really are, when you're drowning in distracting information. One expert quoted in the article said, "Right now, it pays to be outrageous, but not to be truthful."²

Remember that our life as Christians, individually and together, is built on the truthfulness of the gospel. And the truthfulness of the gospel is grounded in how God has acted in the world, in time and space, in concrete historical ways, to reveal his faithful love, to forgive our sins, to accomplish our deliverance from sin and death, and to launch his new creation. These things aren't just good ideas, sound dogma, solid philosophy, wise teachings, or moral virtues. All these things are important and have their place. But the gospel is way more than the sum of these things. The gospel is an announcement of what God has done, is doing, and will do through Christ. And because the gospel flows out of the action of God himself, it prevails in spite of persecution, falsehood, and every attempt to drown it out or distract the world from it.

Sometimes the gospel even prevails in spite of the church. That's because even though we're the community sent to proclaim the message, we sometimes get in the way of the message. Instead of spreading the news, we become the news. Our sins and failures, our disunity and divisions, our power grabs and popularity contests, end up making the headlines and in the process drown out our own headline, "Jesus Christ is Lord." Sadly, we Christians can get just as involved as anyone in perpetuating falsehoods and inflicting pain on others. We end up damaging reputations and distracting others from the news we need to be reporting most, namely Christ himself, not just born but most of all crucified and risen.

From the time Jesus was born, and Mary cradled him in her arms, we've been given the angelic assignment of reporting news of God's arrival. In a sermon on Luke's story of Jesus' birth, N. T. Wright opens with a scene in which the angels are rehearsing for their announcement to the shepherds. He says:

The choir had been practicing for hours, and the singers were tired. But the conductor kept them at it. This was the most amazing music they were ever going to sing, and they were only going to get one chance at it. Had to be right the first time. Finally they were there: one last run-through, and it was perfect. But then one of the singers asked a question.

"How come we only get to sing this once? This is fantastic music: wouldn't it be better if we could give several performances, in different places to different audiences?"

“No,” replied the conductor. “This music is for a very special occasion. It’s only to be sung once—at least by you. Once you’ve done that, the people who’ve heard it will have to learn to sing it for themselves.”³

We’re still learning how to sing this music in our time and place, in a culture where news proliferates and there’s relentless competition for people’s attention. All sorts of individuals, agencies, institutions, and companies are saying to the public, “Behold.” Behold this latest video. Behold this batch of data. Behold this item that’s on sale. Behold this cure for what ails you. Behold this latest report. Behold this development from overseas. And here we are, the church, with our own “Behold.” We’re still announcing, “Behold, we bring you good tidings of great joy.”

“Good tidings.” It still has that King James ring to it. The verb used here has to do with the proclamation of the gospel. What’s proclaimed isn’t good advice, good guidance, good wisdom, or good ideas. It’s good *news*. In other words, it’s the reporting of an event that has occurred out of God’s grace and initiative. In the context of life in the Roman Empire, it was customary for poets and orators to announce peace and prosperity at the birth of one who was to become emperor. But in this case, the declaration of a change in regime doesn’t come from the pen of a poet or the mouth of an orator. It comes through an angel, a reporter from another realm, soon backed up by a choir of messengers. So this isn’t good news from the world as we know it. This is good news from heaven, from the realm of God, where God’s will is done.

And while we wait and watch for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we still keep up with the news. As I noted, we have plenty of options. Some of us turn to the traditional television networks. Some of us rely on CNN or Fox or MSNBC. Some of us still subscribe to a newspaper. And many of us wait for our phone to feed us the latest headlines. Then there are those of us who don’t read, watch, or listen to much news at all, because it gets too discouraging and depressing, or because we’re suspicious about whether we’re being told the whole truth. Anchorman Walter Cronkite used to end his newscast by saying, “And that’s the way it is.” But as one person has suggested, given the tenor of today’s news media culture, he might close with, “And that’s the way we say it is.”⁴

We look to the news to help us define reality, and define ourselves. There’s probably never been a time like today, where so many people ground their sense of identity in where they get their news, which feeds into a lot of the division, conflict, and strife in our culture. All the more reason for us as believers to remember the news that most deeply determines who we are and what we’re all about in this present world. “A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” That’s the church’s headline, especially this time of the year. It remains “good news of great joy.”

This doesn’t mean that we ignore or turn away from the suffering, injustice, and devastation that scar the world and so many people’s lives, including our own. But it does mean that as we confront the reality of sin and death, and face the darkness, we do so with defiant joy, joy grounded in the reality—the news—that through Jesus God has arrived to save, and that this God truly is with us and for us. This is news from heaven, and we are heaven’s media, sent to report this act of God for the redemption of the world.

¹ Ed Batista, “The Marshmallow Test for Grownups,” *Harvard Business Review* (September 15, 2014).

² Adapted from “Yes, I’d lie to you: The post-truth world.” *The Economist* (September 10, 2016). Summarized at <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/december/5121916.html>.

³ N. T. Wright, “The Shepherds at Midnight,” Sermon at the Cathedral Midnight Eucharist, Christmas 2007. Accessed December 17, 2009. <<http://www.ntwrightpage.com/sermons/ChristmasMidnight07.htm>>.

⁴ Connect magazine (Spring 1996). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 9.