

In the Beginning Sermon Series
Who's Right? – Matthew and Luke
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Did you know there's a movie out right now called "Wicked"? Considering the fact the marketing budget was \$350 million, if you haven't heard of "Wicked" you may need to check your pulse. "Wicked" is a spectacular telling of the story of the Wicked Witch of the West, which is based on the iconic Broadway play of the same name, which is based on Gregory McGuire's 1995 book "Wicked," which is based on L. Frank Baum's 1900 book "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," which also spawned the 1930 movie "The Wizard of Oz" and the 1978 movie "The Wiz," which was adapted from a 1974 musical of the same name.

So...which version is right? Depends on what you mean by "right." If you mean the most accurate, that would be the original version, on which all the others are based. But how much does accuracy matter when you're telling a good story? You could argue "Wicked" the movie is much better version of the story, even though it strays far from the original. It features the Wicked Witch as a sympathetic character and Dorothy is still somewhere over the rainbow in Kansas, barely even showing up.

The question "Who's right?" is just as problematic, and potentially irrelevant, when asked about the birth of Jesus. For our Advent sermon series, we're looking at how each gospel tells the story of how Jesus was born. We've learned so far that Mark doesn't say anything about it and – if you don't like spoilers close your ears – neither does John. That means Matthew and Luke are the only gospels that have anything to say about "eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn infant Jesus, who doesn't even know a word yet—so cuddly but still omnipotent." And the stories they tell as are different as "The Wiz" is from "Wicked."

Let's start with Matthew. By the time Matthew is written, Mark's gospel had been circulating for at least a decade or so. People knew the story of his ministry, but there were a lot of questions about exactly who Jesus was. Jews would have known of Hebrew Scripture prophecies that predicted the coming of the Messiah. So, Matthew, writing to a very Jewish audience, goes to great lengths to show that Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of those prophecies and is truly the Messiah sent from God.

Matthew's birth story is a big part of making that point. For example, five different times in the story, Matthew says, "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet." Matthew is showing how the events surrounding the birth of Jesus line up with what the prophets predicted would happen with the coming of the Messiah. And Matthew starts his gospel with a genealogy, Jesus' family tree, which goes all the way back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith. Not the most attention-grabbing start to a book, but it makes the point.

One of the things that makes Matthew unique is that he tells the story from the perspective of Joseph. Mary is only mentioned in passing; it is Joseph, the earthly father, who gets a visit from the angel and is told that Mary's pregnancy is a legit miracle. Notice that the angel doesn't give any proof: no positive pregnancy test, no ultrasound pictures. Joseph must take on faith what the angel is saying. He could have created an instant scandal, condemning Mary to judgment or even death for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. But he trusts in spite of the evidence growing in his fiancée's belly, and Jesus is born.

That's really all Matthew has to say about the birth itself. He does include the story of the magi, or wise men, but historically that probably didn't happen until Jesus was a toddler, because

in Matthew 2:11, it says the Magi went to the house to see Jesus. So, they are only tangentially a part of the story, although we've lumped them in with the nativity scene. Sorry, wise guys, you gotta wait a bit.

Unlike Matthew, who was writing primarily to Jews, Luke's audience is mostly Gentiles, so Luke has no interest in showing how Jesus fulfills Jewish prophecy. Instead, he is trying to show that Jesus came not just for one group of people, but for all people. For example, Luke also gives Jesus' family tree, but he doesn't stop with Abraham. He goes all the way back to Adam, to show that Jesus is descended from the father of all humankind.

In contrast to Matthew's gospel, Joseph is hardly even mentioned in Luke. Instead, Luke tells the story from the perspective of Mary. As we read, the angel comes to Mary to share the good news. In addition, Luke adds the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who, much to their shock and delight, become, in their old age, first-time parents of John the Baptist. And Luke includes the story of the angels coming to the shepherds. You'd figure that if God was going to announce the birth of God's son, that announcement would go out to the most powerful people in the land, like Caesar or the Jewish religious leaders. Instead, the only people who hear from God about Jesus' birth are a group of shepherds, the lowest of the low on the social status scale. By doing this, Luke says, Jesus is coming for everyone, especially those whom others think don't matter.

So Matthew gives us Joseph and the wise men. Luke gives us Mary, Elizabeth, and the angels and shepherds. Over the years, we've smushed these two stories together, so much so that we have all of them gathered together at the manger, with a few camels and donkeys thrown in for good measure. For me, the fact that these two authors didn't get their heads together to make sure their stories lined up doesn't make me question its authenticity. We each tell our stories in different ways.

One of my most favorite Christmas memories is gathering at my PawPaw's house for breakfast on Christmas morning. The house would fill up with people as the smells emanated from the kitchen. I can still taste the biscuits and gravy, which was my favorite part of the morning. But if you were to ask my cousin Kerry, he might most remember opening presents, and my sister Katie might remember the lights on the tree, and my cousin Sarah might remember having all the family together. We would all remember differently. Was Uncle Herman there? Did PawPaw make fried apples? Each of us would tell the story in our own way, including or leaving out certain details to fit our memories. But there would also be similarities across the stories: the feeling of being together as a family, the joy of the morning, the sharing of the delicious breakfast.

As different as the stories are in Matthew and Luke, there are several places where they come together, such as the names of the parents, the birthplace, who the ruling monarch was. But beyond the historical consistencies, there are some emotional and spiritual ones. It's in these places of congruence where I believe we can find the deeper meaning of the story for us today.

Here's the biggest one for me. In both stories, Joseph and Mary had nothing to gain and everything to lose in this situation. Joseph is asked not to divorce his pregnant wife, sticking with the story that it was an immaculate conception when all the tabloids and gossipers will rush to tell a much more salacious story. Joseph could lose his reputation, his job, his standing in the community. Likewise, Mary stands to lose even more if Joseph rejects her. She could be cast out of the community or even killed for a pregnancy out of wedlock.

When the angel comes to both Mary and Joseph, he starts with the same phrase: "Do not be afraid." In the midst of these frightening circumstances, in the face of an unknown future,

with the terrifying knowledge that they were about to deliver the most important package in history, the angel says, “Do not be afraid.” And both Joseph and Mary move forward in trust, believing that God’s promises are true despite what conventional wisdom and common sense tell them.

It’s into this world that Christ will be born, and once again we are told, “Do not be afraid.” Easier said than done, right? It’s a lot easier to go into defensive mode, to withdraw into our safety zones, to stop making ourselves vulnerable by helping the helpless or building relationships with people who are different or giving away money we may need. But as soon as we let our fears dictate what we do, what we think, who we welcome, then we miss the importance of Christ’s birth. Do we have the courage, the trust, to let go of the securities we’ve built up around ourselves, to live out the gospel of peace and hospitality, to not be afraid?

At the end of the classic “Charlie Brown Christmas,” Linus steps on stage to recite part of Luke’s birth narrative, blanket firmly in hand. As you know, Linus goes nowhere without his blanket. As he recites the scripture, something amazing happens. Here’s what it looks like: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” At the moment Linus says, “Fear not,” he lets go of his security blanket. “Do not be afraid.”

What do we need to let go of this Christmas to fully experience the birth of the Savior? What fear is keeping us from trusting God’s promise to us? It could be the fear for our own safety and security or fear for the future of our country. It might be the fear of those who don’t look like us, or believe like us, or have names or skin that are different than ours. Our fears may be more personal, like the fear we’re not living up to our potential or fear of loneliness or fear that you’re not good enough to be loved by God or others.

To all those fears – global local, personal – the angel says to us, “Do not be afraid.” Remember the name the angel spoke to Joseph? “Emmanuel.” It means “God is with us.” No matter what we are going through, God is in the thick of it, supporting us, consoling us, crying with us, spurring us to action. The imminent arrival of Jesus again this year is a reminder that we have been given the power and courage to confront our fears, to stand up to the wicked witches of this world, to be brave in taking the next step in our faith journey. The world absolutely needs to know the love and peace Christ is bringing to us. Mary and Joseph hear the good news and stepped forward to face their fears, daring to be the bearers of Christ in this world. The lowly shepherds courageously share the good news of Christ’s birth with everyone. We have also been given the gift of Christ to bear to this hurting, hate-filled world, a world that needs to know Christ is born again. How will we respond? “Do not be afraid.”