Bridge from “Still He Came”

_We wander and we’re accustomed to darkness, blinded by our own sins as we turn our backs on you. And yet, Jesus you still came…for us._

And so here’s a question. How do we know that it’s even true? Can we have any confidence that Christmas really happened? Can we know with any certainty that the Savior has come?

We’re continuing in our series called, “Christmas According to…” Two weeks ago we heard from Matthew and learned that at its heart Christmas is a call to conversion and commitment as Jesus still turns to you and to me and says, “Follow me!” The Gospel of Mark reminded us that even if we’ve failed or folded, the coming of Christ means we can have a fresh start.

Luke’s approach is a bit different. He’s a reputable historian who did some deep research, conducting intensive interviews to put his narrative together. The closest contemporary illustration of his approach is how Laura Hillenbrand went about writing the history of Louis Zamperini, the legendary Olympian and war hero. Critics have called her a “research genius” and one of the “best writers” alive today. She conducted 75 interviews and pored over countless historical documents, taking 7 years to write “Unbroken,” a 496-page biography of Zamperini’s life.

Ruth MacAnally allowed me to borrow her audio CDs and I became so engrossed in the story when I was listening in the car that I would do laps around the block before coming home. I couldn’t wait to hear what happened next so I went to the library and checked out the book. I would then figure out where I had last listened to the audio and pick up the story in the book, reading large chunks. Then, when I got back in the car, I’d fast forward to the place I had left off in the book and then repeat the process until I finished the story.

While Hillenbrand is a great historian and author (she also wrote _Seabiscuit_), she’s nothing like the gospel writer Luke who researched the life of the Lord Jesus. He interviewed eyewitnesses and pulled together other source material. As a physician, he was careful, thoughtful and persuasive. As a scientist, he was accustomed to handling data and details as he crafted it all together in a compelling narrative we know as the Gospel According to Luke. By the way, if you have a skeptical and scientific mind with a logical bent, this book is for you.

In the opening verses of his gospel, he uses classical Greek to show that his research was deep and his interviews intensive. He is no doubt a man of culture and high education. Listen to verse 1: “…to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us…” That’s a common phrase that was used when recounting history.

Check out verses 3-4: “…to write to you an orderly account…that you may know the
certainty of those things in which you were instructed.” That helps us know that this is fact, not fable. What’s contained in this book is inspired and inerrant, it’s not legend but the actual life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke’s purpose was to present Jesus in all His fullness, focusing on verifiable facts so his readers could know that His account was absolutely accurate and remarkably reliable.

It’s important to know that the Bible is true but we also want to grow in our understanding of the Scriptures. And the only way to do that is to read it every day.

As we approach 2015, we want to provide some tools to help you dive deep next year. Can you take out the insert in your bulletin? What would your life look like if you set aside 15 minutes a day to read the Bible and pray in 2015?

This week I took our youngest daughter Megan with me to deliver Christmas gifts to some shut-ins. Our first stop was to Evelyn Skaggs, who is a joyful and peaceful 94-year-old, and a long-time member of Edgewood. Megan and I were moved to learn that she prays for our whole family by name every night. In the course of our conversation Evelyn humbly mentioned that she has almost finished reading the Bible through this year.

When I asked her what plan she is using, she reached for a book that helps her stay on track. And then she handed me another devotional. And then another one was added to the stack. She handed me a fourth booklet and then a fifth. I opened each of them to the bookmark and saw that each one was marking the very day we were there. And then she added humbly, “Plus, I read the Bible every day.” I asked to see it and got teary as I flipped through well-worn pages held together by a weathered leather cover. I asked her how long she spends reading and she smiled and replied, “About an hour a day.” That explains her joy and peace, doesn’t it?

Friends, in order to Grow, it’s essential to spend time in God’s Word and in prayer and we want to help you with that. Simply click on the “Take 15” tab on edgwoodbaptist.net and you’ll see a wide variety of reading plans designed to help you read your Bible for at least 10 minutes a day. 8 different printed plans are also available at the display in the lobby and in the hallway by the gym. I’m finishing up a plan that has me reading from a different section of the Bible each day of the week. Next year I’m going to utilize the Legacy plan that is divided up according to the seasons of the year.

After you finish your daily reading, we’d like you to take 5 minutes to pray for our four vision points (Gather, Grow, Give and Go) for yourself, your family and for our church.

- Ask God to help you gather on a regular basis with God’s people at one of our four weekend services.
- Ask God to equip you to grow in your faith by committing to an ABF class or Life Group.
- Ask God to enable you to give that which He has given to you, including your tithes, talents and time.
• Ask God to mobilize you to live on mission as you go with the gospel to your family members, neighbors, friends, classmates and co-workers.

Can you imagine what God will do for His glory in your life…in Edgewood…in the Quad Cities…in all the Earth…when we take 15 in 2015?

If you’re wondering where to read before Christmas, check out the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters in Luke. On Christmas Eve at 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. we’ll give our attention to a couple verses in the first chapter of John to see that the infant was really infinite. By the way, if you’re able to come to the 6:00 service that would free up more seats for our guests at our 4:00 p.m. option, which we anticipate being the more popular one.

Most of us are pretty comfortable with the Christmas story. Some have sentimentalized it so much that they skim along on a superficial level, counting down the remaining shopping days, stressing about all the things to do, while neglecting the Nativity.

Let’s lock into Luke so we can hear the message from the manger. In his first chapter, Luke introduces us to John the Baptist and we listen in as Gabriel comes to Mary and she responds in praise. In the beginning of chapter two he explains how Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem and then we read how God chose to send the birth announcement about His Son to some smelly shepherds in Luke 2:8: “Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”

Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. I love that the Lord comes to the lowly, to the most undeserving, to the neglected and marginalized in order to show His power. The Shepherds help us see that God has a message for sinners just like us. That’s really the message David was communicating to Tim in the drama.

As we briefly look at three responses the shepherds had, we’ll see some lessons that we can apply to our own lives.

1. They were awed by the message. Look at Luke 2:9: “And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.”

God’s Shekinah glory lights up the sky and they shake in their sandals. The phrase “stood before” can refer to a sudden assault. Maybe the shepherds were terrified because they didn’t know if this was an angel of judgment or not. Maybe their sins were catching up with them and they were about to be vaporized.

To be “sore afraid” (as quoted by Linus in Charlie Brown’s Christmas) or “greatly afraid” literally means, “to fear with great fear.” Whenever we come face-to-face with God’s holiness, how can we not but fall apart because of our sinfulness? Peter had this response in Luke 5:8 when he said to Jesus: “Get away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.”

I wonder, when’s the last time you and I were in awe? Do you marvel at the Messiah?
2. They accepted the message. Check out Luke 2:10: “Then the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.’” I like how Matt Papa puts it: “Christianity’s first call is not ‘Behave!’ but Behold!”

The angel tells them to chill out because he is bringing good news of “great joy.” The Greek word here is “mega” which means exceedingly, large, loud and mighty. It’s a superlative of greatest degree. Wycliffe translates it this way: “I evangelize to you a great joy.” We received a Christmas card several years ago that captures the sense of this scene: “May your steps jingle with delight and anticipation this time of year!”

And this message “will be to all people.” That’s why we get to know our neighbors and seek ways to share Christ at work and why we reach out to refugees and give gifts to Operation Christmas Child and the Floreciente neighborhood and why we support some 90 missionaries positioned strategically around the world.

Verse 11 contains the heart of the birth announcement: “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Notice the three words used to describe this baby born in Bethlehem:

- **Savior.** He came to save us from our sins. The name Jesus means the one who saves.
- **Christ.** This means “The anointed one” or “Messiah” in Hebrew.
- **Lord.** This is the Hebrew word Adonai and refers to “Master or Owner.” It speaks of His total possession and my absolute submission.

They’re given an indication of what to look for in verse 12: “And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” And then suddenly a whole regiment of rejoicing warrior angels fills the sky, praising God in a thunderous voice and saying in verse 14, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” Like David told Tim, the angels were giving glory to God because the message of the manger is that peace and goodwill are now available through Jesus.

Have you accepted the message and allowed the Word of God to work in you? God’s good news is a gift that must be received if you want it to be activated in your life.

3. They acted on the message. We read in verse 15: “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” When they heard the angels on high they were ready to high tail it to Bethlehem.

- **They went and saw.** We see in verse 16 that they moved quickly to the manger: “And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.” The idea behind “haste” is “come on, hurry up, let’s go!” This is pretty amazing because shepherds normally did nothing quickly. They could have doubted or delayed but instead they decided to act and they departed for Bethlehem.
They left and shared. It’s striking that they don’t pull up a bale of straw and make themselves comfortable. Instead of gathering a group to study the message they headed out to share the message from the manger. And the story they shared had nothing to do with seeing the amazing angels or Mary’s magnificence. They came to see Him and now they head out to herald the good news about Him. Look at verse 17: “Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.” The phrase, “they made widely known” means to “make known in such a way that people can understand.” We’re here today because they couldn’t keep quiet!

In what area is God calling you to some action? Some of you need to come and see and others of you need to leave and share. The shepherds were changed forever by what they saw and you can be as well if you follow their example:

- Be awed by God’s message to you
- Accept the message of good news
- Act on the message and then share it with others

Christmas is real history but His story must become your story. Luke loved to spell out that Jesus came to save sinners as he quoted Him saying in Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Steven Lawson put it like this: “Salvation is not a reward for the righteous, but a gift for the guilty.” Check out Luke 2:11 again: “Today [that means in the present time] in the town of David [the promised place] a Savior [one who forgives sins] has been born to you; [personal] He is Christ [the long-awaited Annointed One] the Lord [your Master and Leader].

I love what Corrie Ten Boom said: “If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost.” It’s time today to make sure that Jesus is born in you.

The book, “Unbroken” has been made into movie that is coming out on Christmas Day. Unfortunately, Angelina Jolie, the director, left out the most amazing part of the story. After returning from a POW camp, Zamperini was a broken man. He was plagued with dreams of his tormentors, he drank heavily and his marriage was hanging by a thread. At the urging of his wife, he reluctantly agreed to attend a Billy Graham crusade in 1949.

He left before the invitation but then went back another night and was gloriously and completely saved. He immediately threw out his alcohol and cigarettes and picked up a Bible. He later gave his testimony at several Billy Graham crusades.

Listen to how Franklin Graham, Billy Graham’s son, explains it: “His life was transformed instantly that day. And it stayed with him for the rest of his life. He never turned from what he put his faith and trust in, and that was Jesus Christ.” Zamperini, who died just recently at the age of 97, summarized what Jesus meant to Him: “The heart of this story is when I found Christ as my Savior. That’s the heart of my whole life.”
Incidentally, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association is releasing a documentary on Christmas Day, the same day that “Unbroken” hits the theaters to give the “rest of the story.” You can watch it here. I posted the link on the EBC Facebook page and on the “Sermon Extra” tab on our website.

Speaking of books, a week ago I returned two library books that were a couple weeks late. I found a librarian and said sheepishly, “This is the face of a delinquent.” I handed over my books, hung my head, and told her I was prepared to pay the fine. She smiled pleasantly, scanned the books and politely told me that I owed $5.50. I handed her the money, and she smiled again. She then handed me a receipt and said, “Your balance is Zero. It’s as if it never happened.”

I thanked her for the shame-free zone, telling her that the library where we used to live practiced public shaming. If I was a day late, I’d walk meekly up to the counter, slide my book to the librarian and would hear her exclaim loudly for all to hear, “You’re late, Mr. Bill. That will be 10 cents!” I was always tempted to tell her that she wasn’t using her library voice but was afraid that would just escalate the shaming.

I much prefer the Moline librarian: “Your balance is zero. It’s as if it never happened.” Maybe you have a temper like Tim. Perhaps your relationships are all messed up. We’re all sinners and because of that there’s a price to pay. You can either pay it yourself by serving time in Hell forever. Or you can ask Jesus to pay it for you.

Be in awe. Accept the message from the manger. And then act on the message. Your fine has already been paid by Christ. Your balance is zero…if you receive and accept what He has done for you. As David told Tim, “God reached down and now we must reach out and receive the gift of salvation.”

You can do that right now by praying this prayer: “I’m in awe of you. Thank you for loving me even when I feel like a loser. I don’t understand how you can accept me when I don’t measure up. I confess that I am a sinner and I want to turn from the way I’ve been living. I need you to be my Savior. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under your leadership and lordship for the rest of my life. Thank you for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so that I can be born again. I now accept the gift of salvation and forgiveness by asking you to come into my life. Make me into the person you want me to be. I want to act on what I know to be true. It’s only through Christ alone that I can be saved. In the name of Immanuel, the babe in Bethlehem, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross, I ask this. Amen.”

Invitation Song: “In Christ Alone”

Benediction: Luke wrote a sequel to his account about Jesus and it’s also included in your Bible. It’s called the Book of Acts. It continues the story of Jesus at work in the world. As you leave today, go with these words from Acts 1:8 as your marching orders, looking for opportunities to speak about the message from the manger: “But you shall receive power
when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”