

THE CHRISTMAS RUMOR

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Grace Church in New York
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And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. (Luke 2:12)

Would anybody here tonight like to become rich? I mean really, fantastically rich. If so, listen carefully, because I'm about to tell you one way to do it. Rumor has it that hidden somewhere in the Rocky Mountains is a beautiful bronze 12th-century chest that is filled with gold nuggets, two of which are the size of eggs and weigh a pound apiece. What is more, the chest is said to contain hundreds of gold coins, rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, and exquisite antique jewelry. The chest alone is rumored to be worth \$35,000, but filled with its treasure the value today is said to be approximately \$2 million. Best of all, it can be yours. It will belong to the lucky searcher who happens to find it.

But where is the treasure to be found, if indeed it exists at all? And who started the rumors of its reality? It all goes back to a man named Forrest Fenn, who is currently 88-years old and lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Fenn is an Air Force veteran and retired antiques dealer. He claims that in 2010, when he was 80, he loaded the chest into a backpack, ventured into the Rocky Mountains somewhere north of his home, and hid the treasure. Then he wrote and self-published a book about his life entitled *The Thrill of the Chase*. In the book is a 24-line poem that contains cryptic clues on how to find the treasure.

Since its publication thousands of people have bought the book, tried to decipher the clues, and embarked on the thrill of the chase. The rumor of the riches enralls the seekers. The rumor has become their passion, even their reason to be. The rumor has gathered them into online and actual communities. They even meet up at an annual festival to compare notes. Fenn himself receives hundreds of emails and letters every day, some asking for advice, others angry and threatening. He confesses to being tired of giving interviews, and says that he will take the secret to his grave if no one finds the treasure. To date, no one has come forth claiming to be successful. Therefore, as we sit here tonight, if you choose to believe the rumor is true, the treasure is waiting for you to find it.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. In tonight's reading from the Gospel of Luke we've heard the familiar Christmas story. Luke begins the passage with mention of Caesar Augustus, ruling over the Roman Empire, and in particular, ruling over the Jews of Jerusalem and the surrounding regions. The Jews themselves were enthralled by a rumor – a rumor that not only gathered them as a people, but gave them hope for the future. The rumor, in fact, was the very core of their identity. It was their passion, even their reason to be. What was the rumor? The Jews believed that they were the chosen people of the one, true, living God. Did they have any proof? Not really. To be sure, they did possess some old prophecies and poems thought to contain cryptic clues. But if the Jews had attempted to verify the truth of the rumor according to worldly standards, they would hardly have ranked as God's favored nation. Quite the contrary, they were a small and frequently conquered people. Nevertheless, the rumor went on to say that God would raise up from out of them the Messiah, the Christ: a Savior who would set the world right.

When would the Messiah come, and where would the people find him? The writer of Luke makes it clear that after centuries of waiting and hoping and searching, the time was finally at

hand. It came to pass that the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a young woman who was espoused to a man named Joseph. The young woman's name was Mary, and the angel told her she would conceive in her womb a child who would be called the Son of the Highest. "*And the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end,*" the angel went on to say. Apparently, Mary wasn't the only one privy to the rumors about her child. Some shepherds, abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night also received a visit from an angel. The angel told them not only that the Christ had been born, but also where to find the baby: in the city of David, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. The shepherds went with haste, found Mary and Joseph and the baby, and told them of their experience, as if to confirm the rumors they'd all been hearing.

Who else? The Gospel of Matthew tells us of the Wise Men, or astrologers from the east. They came to Jerusalem because they discerned in the night sky a star they believed foretold that the King of the Jews had been born. When they inquired of King Herod where the child was born, the rumor began to spread like wildfire. Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Nevertheless, the Wise Men pressed on because they believed they would find a treasure that would surpass all earthly treasures. They didn't expect to find gold. Instead they brought gold as an offering. What Matthew and Luke, and indeed all the gospel writers were trying to convey is that the rumors were true. This child, this little helpless boy would go on to live such a life so as to redefine the whole concept of Messiah. This Messiah was more than a messenger of God. This Messiah was God: God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, of one being with the Father. This rumor – this Word – had become flesh and dwelled among us, full of grace and truth. Fear not. The Lord is with us.

Does it trouble you, perhaps, that I've reduced the Word of God to a mere rumor? We all know that rumors often turn out not to be true. Case in point: Mr. Rogers. For years I'd heard the rumor that Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian pastor turned mild-mannered host of a beloved children's television show, had also fought in World War Two as a Navy Seal and trained assassin. In fact, I'd heard the rumor so often that I believed it – and repeated it. I "made known abroad the saying" whenever the subject of Mr. Rogers came up in conversation (which, I admit, wasn't a frequent occurrence). So it was that last summer, when the documentary film "*Won't You be my Neighbor?*" came out, I was expecting confirmation, or at least an investigation of these rumblings. I was expecting action. Spoiler alert: the movie isn't like that at all, because the man in the cardigan sweater was true to the aesthetic he always presented. He had no such dark side that he was atoning for through children's television. The rumor was untrue, as rumors often are.

Likewise, the Rocky Mountain treasure. The skeptics think it's merely an elaborate hoax to boost the sales of Forrest Fenn's book. Sadly, four people have died on the quest, and others have spent tens of thousands of dollars they could ill afford searching for the elusive chest. Does it even exist? More than a few people in anger have declared that Fenn should come clean and admit to the ruse, or at least retrieve the treasure himself so no one else gets hurt.

Likewise, all of religion, which the skeptics think is merely an elaborate hoax to prop up antiquated world views. I mean, here we are in the 21st century, and the Christmas story is requiring us to believe in angelic visitations, a virgin birth, and the Incarnation of God. Does God even exist? Given what we know today about how the world works, all of these rumors about Jesus involve too much miracle, which the laws of nature do not allow at all. So what do we do with the peculiar stories about Jesus' birth?

I ask you again: would anybody here tonight like to become rich? If you want to find Forrest Fenn's treasure, you have to study his poem for clues. In a similar way, the Gospel writers planted clues in their narratives to light our way to God. When Luke told of the angel's

announcement to the shepherds, he wrote, *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.* It's not a coincidence that the words echo those of the prophet Isaiah (9:6): *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.* Isaiah prophesied seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, so Luke meant for his readers to conclude that the rumors of a Messiah were in circulation and had persisted for a very long time.

But it's the writer of John's Gospel who goes back even further. In fact, John (1:1-3) traces the rumor back as far as anyone can possibly go: to the moment of Creation. He wrote: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.* Truly, it boggles the mind to go back to the beginning, but the thrill of the chase is calling us to behold God's miraculous, creative handiwork, not only in the birth of Jesus, but in the birth of all things visible and invisible.

So if the Wise Men could chase a star, perhaps we too might permit ourselves a moment to ponder the heavens. Cosmologists who peer through increasingly powerful telescopes tell us that the expanding universe we know today actually began as what they call an infinitely dense "space-time singularity." There and then, in the beginning, the laws of nature break down. In other words, the laws that rule out the miraculous hadn't come into play. All the constants that govern the universe only came into being at the miraculous instant of the big bang, when God spoke the Word, *Let there be light.* In the beginning, the Word that spoke the laws of nature into being also echoed with the rumor of God's own existence. Both the laws of nature and the rumors of God (which are two sides of the same coin) would resound through the ages, but it would take eons before any conscious creatures emerged to notice. Finally, the Word took hold of a particular people in the calling of Israel. The Word spoke through the prophets. Then in these last days the Word became flesh and lived among us to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world: Jesus, the Son of God. The late British poet-laureate John Betjeman pondered the mystery when he asked:

And is it true? And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?

Is it true? Rumor has it that a terrific treasure lies hidden in the Rocky Mountains, waiting for you to find it. If you want to be rich in worldly goods, you can take your chances and begin searching for it at any time. Good luck to you, and if you happen to find Forrest Fenn's treasure, please remember Grace Church in your estate planning. But if you want to be rich in a different way – really, fantastically, and eternally rich, then follow the clues we've traced tonight in Matthew, Luke, John, and Isaiah. And listen to the Christmas angels. They speak a much, much older rumor: that the one whose birth we celebrate tonight was in the beginning with God, and was God, and is with us from this time forth, even forever.

It's true. The Maker of the stars and sea became a child on earth for you, and me. Rumor has it that he's coming again. But for now, *Fear not. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*