

Fake News and Fake in the Pews

Luke 4:21-30 | 2/3/2019

“Fake news!” The concept has been around for a while. The 1796 presidential race between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson was notorious for smear tactics carried out by the newspapers of the day. Political parties owned newspapers in those days. There was no independent media. Jefferson’s supporters wrote that Adams wanted to become king of the United States by trying to marry off one of his sons to a daughter of English King George III, or so the story goes. Other newspapers reported that if Jefferson were president, “Murder, robbery, rape, adultery and incest will be openly taught and practiced,” that the country would be “soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes.” —James W. Cortada, “How new is ‘fake news’?” *Oxford University Press Blog*, March 23, 2017.

The idea of fake news refers to published information intentionally designed to mislead. Fake news has many names: “propaganda,” “misinformation,” “yellow journalism,” “libel” and even “lies.” For example: “NFL lawyer who claimed Super Bowl is “rigged” is found dead.” Or “Pluto has been officially reclassified as a planet!” Both false.

But then there are some headlines *that we all wish were fake* — but aren’t. Such as “Televangelist wants his followers to pay for a \$54 million private jet. It would be his fourth plane.” Or, “Heroin suspected in 20 Milwaukee deaths in 2 weeks.”

Yet recently, some people have broadened the concept of “fake news” to mean *any reports or political news that they don’t like* — regardless of the veracity of the information. Then, not only the news but the *source* of the news is attacked. You don’t like the political viewpoint someone is expressing? No problem. Dismiss it by saying it’s fake news. End of discussion.

This is interesting because it seems to be exactly what’s going on in the Nazareth synagogue when Jesus goes there one Sabbath and is asked to read the biblical text for the day. He reads from Isaiah 61:1-2. The news is this: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

Good source? Fake news? If you compare Jesus’ rendition of two verses from Isaiah 61 to the verses as they appear in Isaiah, you’ll see that Jesus stopped short of reading the full passage, which contains the line “[to proclaim] the day of vengeance of our God.”

After reading the text, Jesus tells the congregation, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” and in so saying, he seems to be declaring that the parts of the two verses he *did* read comprise a kind of mission statement about his work. The fact that he left out that other part suggests that he didn’t see his work as proclaiming the Lord’s vengeance.

Initially, the congregation’s response is quite positive. They hear it as a claim that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and they gossip with each other, saying, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

It’s like you’ve heard that a neighbor boy just graduated from Harvard Medical School. “You mean that’s Josh, the long-haired kid with the nose ring who used to play Dungeons & Dragons and wore earbuds all the time? *That* Josh, from the house on the corner? Harvard? Medical School? Seriously?”

Unfortunately, they also hear it as good news *primarily for them*, the people of Jesus’ hometown. If Jesus pronounced the Isaiah passage as truly fulfilled, then they assumed they must be the first and special beneficiaries of it.

Jesus, however, deems it necessary to dispel that notion. He squashes their exuberance by declaring that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” And to further make the point, he alludes to two biblical stories about which they were quite familiar.

The first reference is to a famine during which God sent the prophet Elijah to a starving *Gentile* widow rather than to a starving Hebrew widow. The second story involves the prophet Elisha and his healing ministry with

the *Gentile* Aramean military officer Naaman who had leprosy. Elisha, apparently, was not sent to heal any of Israel's lepers. The people in the Nazareth congregation get Jesus' point — that even though Jesus is a hometown boy, his fellow Nazarenes have no special first claim on his powers — and they don't like it one bit.

We can almost hear one of them shriek, "Fake news!" And they react with anger. Not hearing what they want to hear, they reveal their true colors. They're fakes in the pews. Soon, a mob mentality takes over. They try to throw this purveyor of unwelcome Scripture lessons off a cliff. Somehow, Jesus escapes and goes on his way, but we cannot assume that he is unaffected by their rage. We can also imagine that at least some members of the Nazareth congregation begin to spread the word that Jesus is a fake. "He's certainly not one of us."

What makes Jesus' words unacceptable to them is that they don't conform to the commonly held understanding that the Messiah would destroy Israel's enemies. Jesus talking about God's mercy to a Gentile widow and a Syrian soldier doesn't fit that image. Therefore, in their minds, Jesus isn't the Messiah after all and what he says is phony at best, and dangerous at worst.

But why would they think that? All Jesus said in his adoption of Isaiah 61 as his own statement of mission is that his work was to:

- bring good news to the poor,
- proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
- let the oppressed go free,
- proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
- and, by omission, *not* proclaim the day of vengeance of God.

And the only thing he said to the congregation subsequently was that there was to be no favoritism toward Israel in the delivery of the ministries cited above. This went against the popular expectation of what the Messiah would do. But when Jesus cited the two biblical stories about Elijah and Elisha, he was telling them stuff they already knew.

Then again, anger and violence are sometimes the last defense of those who must face the truth of their own religious affirmations. Right there in their Scriptures were these two stories about God's mercy to gentiles, but Jesus' hearers that morning weren't interested in being reminded of biblical evidence that they didn't have an exclusive relationship with God. They weren't willing to support the graciousness of God shown in their own Scriptures, so in that sense, they were fakes in the pews. And so, they got angry. *Really* angry.

It would seem that the folks in the Nazareth synagogue that morning weren't much interested in handling their sacred texts with care. *They wanted those texts to say what they believed, rather than believe what those texts said.* And used that way, the texts became justification for attempted murder.

Over centuries, Bible verses have been used to justify totalitarianism, slavery, abuse of women, poverty and blaming all Jews for the death of Jesus. For example: "... whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." (Romans 13:2.) Or "For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." (Matthew 26:11) Or "... Pilate ... took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:24-25) Or again, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ." (Ephesians 6:5.) Or finally, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord." (Ephesians 5:22)

The lesson here is that we need to approach our Scriptures with faith *and* intelligence. If Jesus left out the vengeance stuff, maybe we should too. Retribution and vengeance — it's just not part of the church's mission. We should read the Bible with a peaceful intent, putting the texts that can be used to support violence into a context consistent with the overall message of Scripture and one that does not bring shame to the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

So, don't read your personal opinions into the words of Scripture. Instead, let your opinions be formed by what the Scriptures actually say!

Pastor Keith

Children's Sermon

“How do we know what is happening in the world around us? How do we get the news of what is going on?” We might listen to the radio or watch television or find out current events online. Show the children newspapers you have brought to your conversation. (Be mindful of the topics.) Show them several newspapers you brought because they have big, bold headlines. Have volunteers read a headline and ask the children what they think the story might be about. Before television or computers, this was how people found out about what was going on in the world. Ask the children to imagine that they are writing a newspaper story about Jesus. Their job is to tell the world about Jesus and why he is here, as though they were living in biblical times. What would their headlines be? Be ready with suggestions. Close with a prayer: “Thank you God for the gift of your Son Jesus. Help us to share the good news of his life. Amen.” (An ideal use of this text would be to coordinate your conversation with the Sunday school teachers. As the children are excused to their classes, have each class write a news story together about the good news of Jesus. Format it like a newspaper story with headlines. Is there a bulletin board available to post their stories?)