Fake News vs. Good News
Sermon 8-13-17
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James 3:1-12
Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Message:

I. Intro (Watch video at https://youtu.be/PZI0Q3LQZmo)
Guess you didn’t expect to see something like that this morning, did you? “You are Fake News!” I am willing to guess that at the end of the year when they coin the “word” or “phrase” of the year, the term that burst on the scene so that at it’s mention, everyone knows what it means – I think “Fake News” is going to be right up there.

“Fake News” – what is “Fake News” – how would you describe it? What would you say? Lies? Exaggerations? False Accusations? But maybe accentuated because the connotation of the “news” part of it is that it is conspiratorial. The idea is that these “false narratives” are being intentionally
promoted, by the Russians, by the left leaning media, by the right wing crazies – all in an effort to impact the psyche of public opinion.

Why so prominent? We now live in the Information Age. The speed at which communication now occurs and the accessibility of information as well as the explosion of information surrounding us – has actually made “fake news” a weapon. Fake News makes us anxious. We worry. We fear. In fact, Google research shows that searches on the topic of anxiety are one of the most searched terms in the US.

But the truth is that Fake News isn’t new, is it? Maybe there’s more of it, in more places because of the tech that now surrounds us, but Fake News goes all the way back, all the way back to the Fall of Man – to the Garden of Eden – doesn’t it? Lies, False Witness, False Accusation meant to deceive, to persuade, to tempt, to destroy have been a part of the story of man since Eve took the ill-fated bite of the apple and shared it with Adam, no?

And we could exclude ourselves from this conversation and just speak of this as something that the politicians do or that we see on TV, but that wouldn’t be correct would it? Maybe we have taken part in a personal way – using words to mislead another to achieve our purposes. Using words to negatively smear someone or something? Playing a part in passing on a juicy morsel of gossip? Guilty? Guilty?

But not all news is fake is it. Somewhere out there, amongst all that muck is, get ready for it, the Truth. Truth is something that we talk about a lot, but do we always seek it? The Bible has a lot to say about Truth, especially the Truth of the Gospel. The word gospel itself actually means “Good message” or Good news and we as Christians often use it to refer to the Good News about the gift of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

So how do we discern the Good News, that which is based in Truth and Righteousness and Purity and Grace, versus Fake News? That’s what I want to talk to you about today, so that when you are faced with something that is making you anxious, that is worrying, that you are wrestling with in terms of is it true or is it fake, you might begin your evaluation – with the mind of Christ as described in the Scriptures. I want to give you three characteristics of Fake News versus Good News and some biblical illustrations to help. Sound good?

#1. Fake News Confuses; Good News Clarifies.
In that little clip I played, did you see how chaotic that press conference became? Something isn’t right there. Where there is Fake News, there is confusion and chaos. When one hears the Good News, there is clarity and order.

As I said, Fake News is not new. In fact, let’s go back to the first incidence of Fake News recorded in the Bible – Genesis 3:1-5 where it begins with these words “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Fake News sowed the seed of doubt. Did God say? Well, actually, he most certainly did! You will not certainly die (lie). – You actually will certainly die, which is then exactly what happened it it not? Were God’s words shrouded in mystery or interpretation? Let me quote from just a verse prior in Genesis 2:16-17 “And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” Clear? Confusing? And on the other side of that fateful decision, what was the result? Death, the fall of man, brought about by the confusing, deceiving lies of the evil one.

Jesus addresses this source of confusion when he is sternly addressing the Pharisees in John 8:43-47:

Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”
Today we live in a world that is totally confused by the same question Pontius Pilate asked Jesus. Truth? What is Truth? Listen to Pilate’s conversation with Jesus found in John 18:

So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”
“If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.”
Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”
“But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.
Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”
“Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”
“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”
Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”
“You are a king, then!” said Pilate.
Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”
“What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?”
They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

The Good News however is consistent and clear and available to all of us through the Holy Words of Scripture:

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.
Does it get any more clear? When we are confused, when those around us are confused, how many of us seek the Good News shared in the scripture as the grounds for understanding?

I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me.

Did God really say that? Yes, he did. Clearly? This is Good News. Fake News sows Confusion. Good News provides clarity in understanding our need for a savior.

My second point has to do with the fact that the Good News is not always well received is it? And I am not excluding ourselves personally from this. Good News that clarifies things can often be pretty jolting can’t it.

Take that last statement of Jesus – I am The Way, The Truth and The Life, No one comes to the Father except through me – well that’s pretty closed minded isn’t it? What about all those good people out there doing good deeds all over the place, certainly this doesn’t pertain to them? What about those who piously believe differently?

Leads me to my second point:

Fake News Accomodates, Good News confronts.

For my illustration here, let’s reference the life of King David as described in 2 Samuel 15-16.

While David’s men are out trashing the Ammonites, he stays behind. Takes a walk up to the roof of his palace where he sees a beautiful woman, bathing. He checks her out – It’s Bathsheba, wife of Uriah. Uh oh. The King sends for her and sleeps with her, while her husband Uriah is out fighting David’s campaign. Uh oh, she sends word – She’s pregnant. Oh no, time for the cover up. He sends for Uriah, from the battlefield, makes some small talk and sends him home for the night on a free pass (maybe because one might understand how Uriah’s wife might have become pregnant). But, fly in the ointment, Uriah doesn’t go home – says how can I do that when all my brothers are out there fighting on the front lines, I can’t eat and sleep and be with my wife, so he sleeps at the palace gates. After David discovers he didn’t go home he’s like – What are you doing?? So he keeps him another night, gets him drunk, figures
that will take care of it. Nope, Uriah won’t go home. David sends him back and
instructs Joab to put Uriah at the front of the fighting force and basically
charge him right at the enemy until they kill him, which is what happens. Ok,
little mourning by Bathsheba. Good enough, David takes Bathsheba for his
wife. One problem, however, “But the thing David had done displeased the
Lord”.

David had it all worked out. He saw what he wanted and he went for it. He had
an alibi to cover it all up. But it wasn’t Truth.

Enter Nathan the profit sent by the Lord to share some Good News with David.
Now to David, I’m guessing it didn’t seem like Good News, but it was the
TRUTH. Nathan tells a cool story about a rich guy and a poor guy. The rich
guy has lots of sheep and cattle, the poor guy only has one, but the poor guy
loves that little sheep. Raised it, loved it, shared his food and drink with it,
even slept with it in his arms. When a traveler comes by in need of a meal, the
rich guy doesn’t take one from his flock, but takes the poor man’s beloved
sheep and kills it and prepares that for the travelers meal? What do you think
should be done with that rich guy David?

David gets pretty ticked off and burns with anger saying – well surely the man
who did that should die and not only that, he should pay for that lamb four
times over. Nathan responds memorably “You are that man” and then proceeds
to level God’s justice on David.

Did you ever notice when someone (especially politicians in the public light)
tries to cover something up (fake news) because of an indiscretion, that the
Truth always seems to come out, usually at the worst possible time, and usually
with a great deal of embarrassment? I’m not going to name names but I’ll bet if
I asked you to take two minutes, you could rattle off 4 or 5.

Here’s the tougher question. Did you ever find yourself in that position? Have
you ever felt the presence of the Holy Spirit saying “John, You are that Man”. I
have. And truth be told, if I were to listen more deeply in prayer, I’d probably
hear it more often than I like. But truth is righteous. It is RIGHT, it is Just.
One of the reasons that the Good News of the Bible is not always so warmly
received is that Good News is Confrontational. It confronts us with our sin and
clearly points us to our need for a Savior!
Fake News is accommodating. It tells us we’re OK, we’re good people, no need for a savior here thank you. Fake news allows us to rationalize. But the truth is All have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. We are all the same in the eyes of God’s judgement. But thank the Lord for his Sacrifice and his gift of Grace, Forgiveness and Atonement. If we are led astray (and by the way, all have been led astray, The Truth is that Salvation is ours as the Gift of God if we will just accept it and begin to understand the depth of his love for us.

But the world around us doesn’t want to necessarily hear the Good News, we’re happy with the fake news thank you. Why do you think Jesus so often said Those who have ears let them hear.

2 Timothy 4:3 reminds us: For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

Folks, anyone’s ears itching? We need to ask the Lord to share with us where we’re astray and lead us back to the path of righteousness. Maybe someone that is close to you, a family member or a friend are heading down a path that is of great concern to you? Maybe God is calling you to be a Nathan in someone’s life. A word of caution here, sharing that concern and asking input from your Christian fellowship would likely be advised before you try to take this one on as a lone ranger. Fake News Accomodates sin, Good News confronts it and points to our need for a Savior.

Lastly, the point that should be so obvious but that we so often miss. Fake News destroys, Good News saves. Why is Truth so important? Because God is truth, God is love, God is Justice, God is perfect and pure. But often, “fake news” is meant to destroy and tear down. The Russians want to sow discord in our society, so they put out fake news about the electoral candidates. The press wants to destroy the President, so it publishes fake news to take him down. The President wants to destroy his enemies, so he pushes fake news about them.

Wait . . . There’s someone that we don’t really like, so we join in the gossip about them. There’s someone who has made us angry or upset us. Maybe rather than have a conversation, we’ll just call someone else to tell them what’s wrong with that person. It’s our own form of fake news.
But Good News builds up. Good news is full of grace and forgiveness. Good News saves.

Let’s talk about another of my favorite people in the Bible, Joseph.

Now Joseph has a problem, actually, his brothers have a problem with him. He’s Dad’s favorite – does not sit well. In fact we’re told that they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. It gets worse, let’s leave it at that, and Joseph’s brothers conspire to murder him and throw him into a pit so a ferocious animal can devour his remains. Now that’s hate. Thankfully, one of the brothers wants to spare him his life and convinces the others not to kill him, but instead they decide they’ll sell him for 20 shekels who then took him to Egypt.

Time for the fake news. In this case, the fake news was to cover the destruction of Joseph. The fake news would also destroy their father Jacob, when they came up with the idea to take his robe, dip it in goat’s blood and take it to their father with the story that some ferocious animal devoured him and tore him to pieces. Jacob mourned and refused to be comforted as he said he would continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.

Fast forward, you probably know the story, Joseph, through many trials, rises to be the right hand man of Pharaoh, one of the most powerful men in Egypt. Eventually, in the midst of famine, his brothers come to Egypt to beg for food. They don’t recognize Joseph after all the years. Joseph recognizes them. Joseph plays this as a way to be reunited with his brothers and his father in a story filled with grace and salvation. Joseph was as good as dead, but now his brothers greeted his father with the Good News – Joseph is Alive!

I really like the end of the story though. Father Jacob dies, and the brothers still haven’t learned:

When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” 16So they sent word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: 17‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept.
His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said.

But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

And then, there’s Judas.

Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

There are all kinds of thoughts for why Judas would do such a thing. But Judas played right along with the fake news story about Jesus, and then tried to cover it.

Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?”

Jesus answered, “You have said so.”

This is the news of the Gospel, that which Satan meant for the destruction for the Son of God, God used for the Salvation of man.

Do we ever get caught up in such “fake news”? The Good News is that God knows all about it. Do you use your words to destroy or to build up? Do you use your words to be part of God’s salvation story? Are we ever the victim of such fake news events as were Joseph and Jesus and numerous others in the scripture. Take comfort that God loves you and works good for all those who are called to his purpose!

While fake news aims to destroy, Good news saves through the saving grace of Jesus Christ.
So Fake News – Confusing, Accommodating, Destructive

Good News – Clear, Confronting, Saving.

How do we know the difference? By examining our words, actions, deeds and the stories we hear through the lens of the word of God, the Power of Prayer and the Fellowship of other believers. We are told to Test Everything and hold onto what is good. We are told to use our words to build up, not to destroy, we are told to think of things that are noble, right, pure, admirable. We do that through the grace that comes to us through the Good News of the Gospel of Christ.

When overwhelmed by what seems like a torrent of fake news, try this one for What is Truth?

1. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life
2. Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
3. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Be the one that carries this Good News. Cut through the philosophies of this age and of this world to focus solely on His Truth. And take that truth out into the world, for as we are told “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News”. I pray that we all have beautiful feet!