

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (January 27, 2019)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

Fake News!

“The Republicans were trying to end the shutdown.”

“No, the Democrats wanted to end the shutdown.” No they didn’t. Yes they did!

Fake news!

“The President caved in to reopen the government. No he didn’t. Yes he did.”

Fake news!

“Those Catholic School students were racist bigots! No they weren’t. Yes they were!”

Fake news!

“Fr. Mike no longer eats Oreos.” (Clearly, fake news!)

It gets harder to watch ‘the news’ anymore, because we seem less capable of telling each other the truth. For instance, we saw a short video clip of students from Kentucky, and instantly Howard Dean declared that the school should be shut down for teaching hate. One commentator – and I am not making this up – called for those Catholic high school students to *die*, and for their parents to die...

And then... more video... different perspectives. Maybe the truth is more complex than it first appeared. Maybe questions can be asked of *lots* of folks in that video. Clearly, life is more complex than the first reports claimed.

Fake news?

We know this, yet so many people seem addicted to the cycle of half-truths and vitriol that spews forth across our TV screens and social media pages. And whether our favorite sources come from the left or the right, there is plenty of fakery going around.

Many more of us have a growing concern – what will our future be like, if we constantly give

in to the latest call to be angry, to once again hate and judge someone who is different? A difficult time in our nation's life.

In today's first reading, we catch a glimpse of a very difficult moment in the life of ancient Israel. This event takes place in the year 450 BC. Israel had just gone through a century of suffering. Their country had been invaded. Their temple was destroyed. Their young people were dragged off, forced to adopt another culture and religion.

Their religious leaders kept promising that God had a future full of hope in store. And the people believed the preachers.

Then, thanks to more conquests, the Jewish people were told: "go home, rebuild your city, rebuild your temple, and live your lives."

But a funny thing happened when they got home. They started arguing among themselves: "the temple should be built this way. No it shouldn't. The city needs this. No it needs that. You're raising our taxes?"

They started to judge each other – "you're not a faithful Jewish person – you married a heathen. You're not a faithful Jew – you're not keeping the Law the way our grandparents did."

So let's review: It was a time of: anger, accusations, division, yelling, lack of unity. Sound familiar?

It was in the midst of that dark hour that Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor call all of the people together for a prayer service. And let me just pause here – some of you complain that Mass takes too long here at St. Mary's, but we heard in the first reading that *this* prayer service lasted from sunrise to noon!

And what did Ezra read to them for four hours? He read the scroll, on which was written the story of God's covenant with the people of Israel. It was the story of God's promise: "I will be your God, you will be my people. I will give you a land. You will worship me in a temple. And you will know how to live a holy life by listening to the Word of God."

And listen they did. For four hours, they listened as Ezra explained the Law to them – the Law based on the 10 commandments. Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, do not covet, do not lie, honor your parents. The Law filled them with hope, but the Law demanded that they change how they treat each other.

They listened, and they rejoiced because of what they heard.

They rejoiced because, deep in their hearts, the people knew that what they were hearing was not fake news. This was Good News. The Good News that comes from the mouth of God. They were hearing the truth. The truth changes us, and sets us free.

In today's Gospel, we are once again in Israel, this time in about the year 30 AD. And once again Israel is suffering and struggling. Now, the Romans have occupied their land, set up puppet kings, petty politicians adept at telling lies.

Jesus comes to Nazareth. In the middle of the synagogue service, he reads from the prophet Isaiah. So far, there's nothing unusual here. Then Jesus gives the sermon for the day. He simply says, "Today, this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." That was it. No homiletic stories about Pennsylvania or Scrapple. Just an amazingly wild statement – "this prophecy is fulfilled in me."

It is *wild* because all of the folks in that synagogue understood what Jesus was claiming. You see, the passage Jesus read from Isaiah was a passage describing how the messiah would behave. So when Jesus says, 'Today, this description of the messiah's behavior is fulfilled in your hearing,' he is saying... "*I am the messiah!*"

Some people in Nazareth rejected this as fake news. 'Who does Jesus think he is?' But others know, deep in their hearts, that this is the Good News they've been waiting for. They keep listening and believing. All that Truth which Jesus' preached causes them to change their ways, and to change the way they treat others.

How did people know that what Jesus was saying was true? What helped them believe that this was Good News, not fake news?

Well, have you noticed that God's Good News is news that calls US to change? It calls US to serve others? In other words, the authentic voice of God always calls me to serve someone else.

So much of the fake news which poisons our public discourse has a common thread – it gives me a reason to hate you. Fake news provides new reasons for me to blame you, to distrust you, to say that you are the reason that everything is wrong. Fake news allows me to say that everything in the world would be better if YOU JUST CHANGED.

But the Good News of Jesus calls *me* to change, calls *me* to conversion, calls *me* to service. The Good News of Jesus says that world will be better if every believer follows the example of Jesus, the example of sacrificial love, focused on the other.

Listen again to the messiah's job description which Jesus read in the synagogue:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
So that I can bring glad tidings to the poor.
God has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.*

Good News. The messiah came to serve. Good News. The messiah came to show God's love to the brokenhearted. Good News. The messiah came to show us how to live a life focused on others.

Satan would love it if you spent hours glued to your TV and facebook feed, growing more and more angry, more and more bitter, more and more divisive, more and more exhausted. Satan would love it if we became a nation of isolated, mistrustful consumers, full of a message that leaves us devoid of hope.

But the Spirit of the living God has Good News for you. The Good News which teaches you that you don't have to listen to the lies. The God who gave hope and healing to struggling ancient people has a life-changing message for us as well.

The world *will* change for the better, and that change begins with you. The people who follow Jesus the Messiah already know the truth – service, not selfishness, sets us free! And we find fulfillment together, not in isolation. There is nothing fake about the Gospel – so live it, love it, listen to it. Deep in your heart, you already know that it's true.

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