

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ who brings Good News to all people, amen.

We're only 34 days past 2018. Looking back, the major themes, conversations and issues of 2018 were, in no particular order, immigration, the #MeToo movement, possible Russian interference in the 2016 election and — fake news. In our modern-day environment, we've all heard the cry, "Fake News!" The idea of fake news refers to published information intentionally designed to mislead. Fake news isn't anything new. It goes by many names: "propaganda," "misinformation," "yellow journalism," "libel," and even outright "lies."

Here's some examples:

- GOP train crash was "Deep State" assassination attempt
- NFL lawyer who claimed Super Bowl is "rigged" is found dead
- FBI: Antifa planning Super Bowl "terrorist attack"
- Pedophile priest with HIV who raped 30 children found crucified outside church
- Pluto has been officially reclassified as a planet!

Fake... All of them. But then there are some headlines — actual headlines from The New York Times, The Washington Post and other sources 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
- Study: Opioid epidemic increasingly reaching newborn babies
- 31 Opioid Deaths from Friday to Monday in Miami Valley

- Death toll is at 17 and could rise in Florida school shooting

All real stories we wish were Fake News... Some people have broadened the concept of “fake news” to mean any reports or political news they don’t like — regardless of the veracity of the information. Then, not only the news but the source of the news is attacked. It’s a new version of “kill the messenger.” You don’t like the political viewpoint someone is expressing? No problem. Dismiss it as fake news. End of discussion.

I think 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. Last week I told you today would be a continuation of last week’s Gospel and so, today we get to hear the hometown crowd’s reaction to their hometown boy. The headline of the Nazareth Daily Herald might read, “Hometown Man Claims Messiahship, Incites Crowd at Synagogue, Story at 11.”

Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 — the source. 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). If you compare Jesus’ version from Isaiah 61 to the verses as they actually appear in Isaiah, you’ll see 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’s declaring the parts of the two verses he did read comprise a kind of mission statement about his work. The fact he left out that other part at least strongly suggests he didn’t see his work as proclaiming the Lord’s vengeance. AS the Gospel; of John puts it, He came to save the world not condemn the world. Initially, the congregation’s response is quite positive. They hear Jesus claim to be the promised Messiah, and they gossip with each other, saying, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” It’s like you’ve heard a neighbor boy just graduated from Harvard Medical School. “You mean that’s Johnny, the long-haired kid with the nose ring who used to play Dungeons & Dragons and wore earbuds all the time? Never could talk to him. That Johnny, from the house on the corner? Harvard? Medical School? Seriously?”

Unfortunately, they also hear it as good news primarily and exclusively for themselves, the people of Jesus’ hometown. If Jesus pronounced the Isaiah passage as truly fulfilled, then they assumed they must be the first in line for all the special benefits. Jesus immediately dispel that notion. He squashes their exuberance by declaring “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” To further make the point, he brings up two very well-known biblical stories. The first reference is to a famine and the time when 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 got 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!" as they angrily react to Jesus and his message. 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 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 they don't conform to the commonly held understanding where the Messiah would destroy Israel's enemies and return Israel to the glory days of the past under King David. You know a "Make Israel Great Again" Messiah. Then here's Jesus talking about God's mercy to a Gentile widow and a Syrian soldier. This doesn't fit their image. Therefore, in their minds, Jesus couldn't be the Messiah after all and what he says is phony at best, and dangerous at worst. Why would they think that? All Jesus said in his version of Isaiah 61 as his 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.

The only thing he said to the congregation after that was there was to be no favoritism toward Israel in the delivery of the ministries cited above. Some of 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. 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 a way, it wasn't about fake news after all, it's more about fakes in the pews. And so, they got angry. Really angry. It would seem 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. Used in that way, the texts of scripture became their justification for attempted murder.

How do we read and interpret Holy Scripture? Do we look to scripture to justify our own already ingrained religious beliefs or do we see scripture as God's

Living Word and the source of Good News for our lives today? One lesson for us today might be that if Jesus left out the vengeance stuff, maybe we should too.

Retribution and vengeance — it's just not part of the church's mission. Jesus came preaching and teaching about God's love, not God's anger. Jesus came with a message of reconciliation, peace, and to love, even our enemies. That's a hard lesson to learn. How do we forgive those who hurt us or even harder, those who hurt our loved ones? Even in preaching and teaching about God's love, Jesus still pointed out the error in the thinking of his own Jewish, Hebrew, people who wanted to keep the blessings of God's Grace to themselves. They forgot God's covenant with Father Abraham was that he and his descendants would be blessed to be a blessing to the nations. The way I read scripture we're invited to share and even give away the love of God in extravagant ways and to proclaim God's love, even when God's own people don't like what they hear.

May we have open minds and open hearts to hear and love God's Word, even the hard parts that might make us angry. May God grant us wisdom to know the difference between fake news and the authentic Good News of Jesus Christ. May our reactions to the Words of Jesus be ever graceful, kind, and loving so all people will see Christ in us, amen.