

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
John 9:1-14  
March 26, 2017

## Fake News and Good News

Clearly, it was “fake news.” Everybody knew “the man born blind.” A lot of people never bothered to learn his real name, but everybody knew him. He had his stick with which he would go tap, tap, taping along the road. He had his beggar’s bowl, which was his only means of income. He was, as my Scottish relatives would say, a “kent face,” sitting near the city gate or sometimes near the entrance to the temple.

So it had to be “fake news” that the man born blind was seen walking briskly away from the pool of Siloam, without stick, without begging bowl, and without that familiar shuffle of feet that tells the world you can’t see past your own nose.

“Fake news,” as we all know by now, means information that doesn’t fit within the frame which defines reality for you.

For instance, having won an election, you could say that millions more people voted for you than were counted. Or that global climate change is a Chinese propaganda ploy. Or even that a person who used to hold high office had the FBI tap your phones. Anything that doesn’t fit within your epistemological framework is “fake news.”

(Of course, those are far-fetched examples. Nobody in real life would be so absurd.)

The up side of “fake news” is that, by classifying contradictory information as “fake,” you can carry on operating in your own reality. The down side of “fake news” is that it’s not always fake. Sometimes it’s the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it makes you feel.

Our Gospel reading today could be described as a contest between fake news and Good News – or as John would have it, between darkness and light, blindness and sight.

It’s a good yarn, too, this story about the man born blind. And since it’s all about seeing and not seeing, I wonder where you see yourself within it.

For instance, do you see anything familiar in the disciples of Jesus? They take one look at the man born blind and see a good illustration for a very bad sermon. They know how the sermon will run. It will be all about sin and its dreadful consequences. They just want to know where to place the blame so as to reap the most converts when it comes time for the altar call.

**“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”**

Out come the pens and notebooks to record the right answer, for surely this will be on the final exam.

*Nobody sinned, Jesus replies. Not the man. Not his parents. Put away your pens and notebooks and pay attention to what happens next. They’ll be plenty of blindness to go around, sure enough, but it won’t be this man’s blindness.*

Do you see anything of yourself in those disciples? Alright, you don’t have to admit it in front of all these people. I can tell you for sure that I recognize myself. Liberal that I profess to be, I catch myself asking much the same questions.

*Why is this person who has stopped me on the way out of church to an important meeting asking me for a motel room? If she’s homeless, why can’t she go to the Kearney Center and leave me alone? She tells me that she can’t stand crowds, and that she’s running away from an abusive relationship. Well, why did she get involved with a man like that to start with? Couldn’t she see he would be trouble?*

Jesus refused to endorse the idea that bad things only happen to bad people, but something within me still wants to blame poor people for being poor, homeless people for being homeless, victims for having been victimized, as though I were somehow worthy of the blessings I enjoy.

Jesus exposes that dark place within my heart. He is, after all, the light of the world.

And how about the religious authorities? Anything familiar there? Ever run into that strain of religiosity that clings to doctrine no matter how fossilized?

In his brief tenure as the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth, Oliver Cromwell ran into the Presbyterian form of this phenomenon. On August 3, 1650, he wrote to

our spiritual ancestors in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.”

The good, religious folk in John’s story cannot embrace the possibility that they may be mistaken. **“This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.”** Their frame does not allow for a prophet who breaks the sabbath laws in order to give sight to a man who had never seen his mother’s face or watched the sun rise over the temple.

These religious authorities seem to me a bit like some elected officials who would deny health insurance to 24 million people in order not to break the law of laissez faire capitalism. For the Pharisees of John’s Gospel and their spiritual descendants, doing good is not the point. The point is being right.

Polls suggest that younger people these days are turned off by the kind of Christianity they see on TV and read about on social media. For many people today, that word “Christian” evokes images of intolerance, homophobia, and rigid self-righteousness.

On the other hand, Pope Francis appears to be admired by the same folks who wouldn’t be caught dead hanging out with self-affirming Christians. Maybe that’s because people perceive more of Christ in the Pope’s Christianity.

Last week, our church welcomed some folks from South Florida to spend the night in our Education Building. They were up here to lobby legislators on behalf of the environment. They were long on enthusiasm for clean water and healthy air, but a little short on money for a hotel room.

I met them as they got off the bus. One of the group asked if I would be in a photo with her. As she squeezed me into the frame of her “selfie,” she whispered, “I just wanted proof. You see, I’m a Christian, too.”

She seemed reluctant to say such a thing out loud.

After grilling both the man born blind and his parents, the authorities in John’s story decide to kick him out of the club of true believers. Despite his truthful testimony, they stick with their version of reality and reject him instead.

**“You were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us? And they drove him out.”**

Scholars will tell you that there is a narrative behind this story of the man born blind. It has to do with how Jewish Christians were driven out of their communities because they professed faith in Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. That story behind the story colors all of John’s Gospel and accounts for his negative portrayal of Jews and just about all things Jewish.

It’s not hard to see how the seeds of anti-Semitism grew from the soil of John’s Gospel. As much as I affirm the truth of John’s witness that Jesus is God’s Word made flesh, I regret that John’s Gospel has played a key role in the persecution and hatred of God’s Chosen People.

With marvelous skill, John has shown us what can happen when we construct a frame around our faith so rigid and impermeable that no light can shine through to reveal what God is doing out of love for the world. The authorities in John’s story allowed their faith in God to blind their eyes from seeing God at work.

It is a cause of regret and deep shame that, over the centuries, Christians have done much the same. We have constructed a frame that shuts out Jews – and, for that matter, Muslims and people of other faiths. We have turned the Good News of Jesus Christ into the fake news that God loves only those who belong to the Christian tribe.

Like the Jewish authorities in this story, we underestimate the God we claim to serve. In a way that John never intended, this story tells the truth not so much about Jews and their relationship with God, but about you and me, and how we can fall into darkness, even as we claim to walk in the light.

In John’s story, Jesus hears that the man whose sight he restored has been kicked out of the temple. Jesus seeks him out and asks him, **“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”** The man replies, **“And who is he, sir, so that I may believe in him.”** Jesus said to him, **“You have seen him, and the one speaking to you is he.”**

**He said, “Lord, I believe.”**

May our own confession of faith be as honest and as modest as this one.