

## **“Fake News or is Jesus the One?”**

### **Luke 4:21-30**

We're only 34 days past 2018. Looking back, some of the major issues of 2018 were immigration, the Me Too movement, Russian interference in the 2016 election, and fake news.

Fake news is not new, but its definition has changed. In the good old days some of us watched the Daily Show with Jon Stewart whose motto was, “when news breaks, we fix it”. We would get a sense of the news with a heavy dose of hilarity.

The political parody and fake news that was once strictly the property of Saturday Night Live had gone mainstream as comedians were jockeying with journalists to get our attention..

Viewership of network news went down and viewership of entertaining phony baloney went way up. The Daily Show and others that followed became known as “infotainment” when they would take the mostly bad news from traditional news broadcasts and make it easier to digest by wrapping it up in humor and delivering it with sarcasm.

Since there's nothing we can do about most of the news we watch, read, or hear about on a daily basis, the thinking goes, we ought to at least get a laugh out of it.

Then came the election of 2016 and the phrase “fake news” was heard on an almost daily basis. It's definition changed. Now the idea of “fake news” refers to published information intentionally designed to mislead. Fake news has become more like what we use to call propaganda, misinformation, or yellow journalism.

More recently, some people have broadened the concept of “fake news” to mean any reports or political news they don't like.

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 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 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).

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? Never could talk to him. *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.”

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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.

As already mentioned, 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.

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.

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.

Nothing reminds us more that Jesus is the Prince of Peace than the baptism of a little baby born on December 28<sup>th</sup> – Colton Joseph Laurenzi-Lenker. As Colton grows in years, a baptized child of God, may he come to know and experience the peace of God that passes...

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