



Grace Church

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Rector

Fake News, Good News

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2016

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; Canticle 15; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Sermon text: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Luke 1:46 (the *Magnificat*; Canticle 15 in the BCP)

It sounds like a joke: “Pizzagate.” It sounds crazy: an armed man coming into the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington D.C. last Sunday afternoon to investigate an alleged pedophile ring run by Hillary Clinton and John Podesta. He’d heard internet rumors of basement rooms and all sorts of terrible deeds. But there is no basement to the building; there is not a shred of truth to the story. Pizzagate is just a ridiculous conspiracy theory put up by crazy evil people like Alex Jones and believed by the kind of folks who think 9/11 was a CIA plot and the moon landing was staged and a cabal of Jewish bankers runs the world. Except that the currency of lies—what is being called fake news—is spreading more rapidly and widely than ever before thanks to internet social media and a growing suspicion of “mainstream” journalism. Talk of the “lying press” does not raise the level of civic discourse.

In a similar way, but even more seriously, climate change denial obscures the sense of urgency needed for concerted action to slow down global warming so that our children can live in a habitable world. There can hardly be a greater consensus of scientists in the field; there is no alternate planet to move to if the scientists are right and catastrophe ensues. The stakes cannot be higher, and the costs of inaction far outweigh the benefit of business as usual. And yet...it benefits some people to deny what is happening right before their eyes.

Of course, it is necessary to consider and debate all possibilities. Common sense and surface appearances can mislead when there are unusual circumstances; anomalies do occur. There are actual conspiracies out there—witness the level of email hacking directed by sovereign state intelligence agencies. Misinformation is the old Cold War name for fake news; and the CIA was a major purveyor. Propaganda—the selling of a political agenda—is even older. And we are all inundated with a daily flood of marketing designed to get us to buy stuff—doubled down and covered with sugar this time of year. So we need to be critical consumers of information. If knowledge is based on true information, and wisdom is knowing what to do with knowledge—then wisdom depends on getting good information in the first place.

Good news, in other words.

Good news is the English translation of the Greek *euangelion*; gospel is an even older translation. Angels are messengers; so are prophets. And the good news is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. So said the prophet Isaiah, so sang the angels on Christmas Eve long ago and so proclaimed John the Baptist some thirty years later. It is old news now—some two millennia old—but it remains good news, and bears repeating.

But first, let's consider what kind of information the gospel story conveys. What are we to think about the veracity of the "stories you're liable to read in the Bible"? Well, as the old song from "Guys and Dolls" has it: "they ain't necessarily so." That is, they are not historical accounts in the modern sense of the word. There were no journalists who heard the angels sing or followed the star to Bethlehem. These are stories told long after the death of Jesus and all those who were alive at his birth. Who knows what Mary had said to the disciples, or what others had?

But if it is not exactly history the evangelists wrote down, there is a basis of history. Almost certainly, Mary was the mother of Jesus, but Joseph probably only his father by adoption and marriage. John the Baptist was a historical figure who no doubt did preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the wilderness by the River Jordan, and almost certainly Jesus was among those he baptized. But beyond that I find it hard to say what "actually happened." The Virgin Birth is a story that helps explain a theological doctrine, the nature of Jesus as both human and divine, son of Mary and Son of God. The trappings of stars and shepherds seem to be folk stories; but they tell of one who is recognized by both the poor and illiterate and the wise and learned. These are good reasons for the stories; they tell important truths; but they don't demand or warrant the belief that they actually happened in just this way.

More importantly, the figures of Mother Mary and John the Baptist represent two ways of conveying the good news of God in Christ. They are complementary.

Here is a visual aid on this point, an icon of the type known as *diesis*, in which the central figure of Jesus is flanked on one side by Mary and on the other by John the Baptist. You may also see versions of this arrangement in which Mary is Mary Magdalene and John, John the Evangelist. It's a sort of before and after shot: Mary and John the Baptist came before the ministry of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene and John the Evangelist came after.

The God-bearer Mary and the Forerunner John have different ways of telling the good news. Mary bears the child of God in her body and into the world. She willingly took on the awesome responsibility of raising the Savior. She delivers the good news of Christ incarnate, the word made flesh. Appropriately, then, she is a figure of the Church as the body of Christ, working in the world the sorts of things Jesus did in his life.

John points to Christ: "Behold the Lamb of God." His job, as that of Isaiah before him, is to be the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the Way of the Lord." He is the image of scripture, the Word of God written, that functions, as Luther put it, as the cradle to hold and display the Christ child. So we continue to tell the story and point to Jesus as both shepherd and lamb, guide and giver of life.

In this Advent season, we tell again the stories of Mary and Joseph, and of John the Baptist. They are icons of faith, personifications of ways of learning and knowing the good news: through bearing it in our bodies and telling it through our speech. And so we share the good news. It is not so much a matter of “figuring it out,” of getting the story right in all its details. It is a matter of living it out and sharing what you believe, so that others may see, hear and come to believe as well. This is how the gospel spreads. Not depending on word alone, but on the integrity, truth and loving-kindness of those who call themselves Christian. May we here at Grace be such a source of good news always.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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