



### **"Fabrications"**

**Scripture – 2 Peter 2:1-3, John 8:31-32**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, February 14, 2021**

In your mind, what is the greatest threat to the welfare of humanity? Climate change? Another global pandemic? Nuclear war? Rogue biotechnology?

While each of these doomsday scenarios is possible, the worst threat may already be upon us – disinformation. Don McMinn writes, "The much-anticipated and applauded *information age* has been adulterated and is now an infamous tool for mass confusion and corruption. Anyone who has access to social media can post a false narrative which can go viral and deceive millions. The threat is heightened (by the fact that almost anyone) using readily available software and an average computer can create a completely bogus video. Using Artificial Intelligence that can copy your voice and face, someone can make a fake video of you doing and saying anything the creator imagines. Someone can generate a video of you slapping a child"<sup>1</sup> or pulling a gun on someone, or just about anything you can fathom.

You may have some faint knowledge of the plight of the Rohingya people in the nation of Myanmar. For a number of years, the country was governed by a military junta that censored the news. In 2010, it relaxed its censorship and citizens quickly acquired smartphones and opened Facebook accounts. Ahhh, freedom of speech. But the social media platform was used to enflame tensions between the majority Buddhists and the minority Muslims.

In 2014, an ultra-nationalist Buddhist monk concocted a phony story in which he claimed that the Muslim owner of a teashop in Mandalay had raped a Buddhist employee. He posted his lie on Facebook and it went viral. Enraged mobs armed with machetes stormed the city, vandalizing shops and overturning cars. Like a plague of locusts, disinformation spread throughout the country and, by the time Facebook banned the extremists who were egging on violence, 25,000 Muslims had been killed and 700,000 had fled the country.<sup>2</sup>

Vast numbers of people slurped up the lies because it fed their existing prejudice. The fake narrative propelled them to embark on what in their minds was a righteous crusade. No doubt there were others who were skeptical of the veracity of the claims, but used it as an excuse to act on their xenophobia.

You may remember one story that raced around social media sites a few weeks before the 2016 Presidential election. The totally fabricated story claimed that a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. was holding children as sex slaves as part of a child-abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton. A man drove six hours from his home in North Carolina to free the children. Not long after arriving at the restaurant, he fired his AR-15 rifle. Fortunately, no one was killed.

When people fail to discern truth from lies, and they are fed disinformation that bolsters their bias, the ground is ripe for disaster. The deadly and destructive events of January 6 have driven home this point with frightening clarity.

Last summer, a social media post included a video asserting that the Covid-19 pandemic was a giant hoax. The video instructed viewers not to heed the precautions health officials were promoting because they were lying to us. It stated: "A litany of scientists, experts, and leaders are not really interested in your health but in your continued delusion. It's all a conspiracy, but now you have the chance to get in on the secret 'they' did not want you to know. (The person posting it defiantly wrote), 'Deny this if you choose. I believe it. That is my right.'"<sup>3</sup>

If you are tired of wearing a mask and social distancing, and you don't give a flip about transmitting a virus to someone else, then it is your *right* to believe whatever someone posts on social media. It makes no difference how out of line with the facts it is. It is your right to feed your self-centeredness, your right to fuel your anger, your right to inflate your sense of victimhood.

Of course, spreading disinformation long predates Facebook and Twitter. Propaganda, based on spurious claims and conspiracy theories, laid the groundwork for the Holocaust.

We rarely dip into the Second Letter of Peter and I suspect many Christians would do a fair amount of thumbing through the pages of the New Testament before locating it. The main purpose of the letter was to warn followers of Jesus about the appearance of false teachers. The author states that Jesus has taught us how to avoid "the corruption in the world created by evil desires." (2 Peter 1:4). We resist by creating a life patterned on the life of Jesus. The writer urges his audience to "supplement their faith with virtue...knowledge...self-control...perseverance...godliness... mutual affection...and love." (2 Peter 1:5-7)

Focusing on today's reading, the author says that there will be false teachers among you. *The Message* version of the Bible is more straightforward, calling these deceivers "liars." These imposters will introduce "destructive opinions" (NIV), or as we might say today, "alternative facts based on fake news." The author of this letter goes on to warn the Christian community that these charlatans "will bring the way of truth into disrepute...(and) exploit you with fabricated stories." (2 Peter 2:2-3).

Such words could be written about any age, couldn't they? There are always individuals who lust for recognition and power who will tell whatever lies are necessary to boost their status. But today, they spread with the lightning speed on the internet.

When people cannot – or will not – distinguish between facts and fabrication, the ground is ripe for chicanery. Nefarious characters who lust for power will seize the moment. They will create propaganda that plays to people's prejudices.

Living in an era when lies are disseminated routinely, it is essential for people of faith to ratchet up our demand for truth. The prohibition against deceit is so serious that it is one of the Ten Commandments. Telling the truth is so essential that the word "truth" appears more than 20 times in the Gospel of John and more than 90 times in the New Testament.

Love and justice are core principles of followers of Jesus; so is honesty. Creating, endorsing, or spreading lies leads to distrust. And distrust opens the door to alienation, vengeance, and violence. That's why it is essential for us to resist deception and alternative facts.

To be clear, I am not talking about holding different opinions. I'm not talking about asserting different viewpoints. I'm not talking about disagreements over how we interpret facts. I'm talking about standing firm for truth and repudiating lies.

Some will say, "What difference will it make? Me being honest won't open minds that are tightly closed.

Many of us fail to follow the way of Christ when we tell ourselves there is nothing we can do to counter the widespread lies. Millions of people follow QAnon and listen to Alex Jones and today's other false teachers who push lies as truth: that the mass killing of children in Sandy Hook was a staged event, that Jews using a space laser started the wildfires in California, and that Donald Trump won the election. What can we do to counter those who failed to show up for class the day critical thinking was being taught? What can we do to counter the surge in white supremacy groups?

I know that we cannot transform hateful and fearful people into model citizens in quick order. However, I also know that if we believe there is *nothing* we can do, we hand over power to those who seek to increase their influence by peddling in canards. When we claim we are helpless, we embolden those whose pursuit of power and control can destroy our democracy.

Priest and author John O'Donohue, wisely wrote: "The spirit of a time is an incredibly subtle, yet hugely powerful force. And it is comprised of the mentality and spirit of all individuals together...Your outlook actually and concretely affects what goes on. When you give in to helplessness, you collude with despair and add to it. When you take back your voice and choose to see the possibilities for transformation, your creativity awakens and flows to become an active force of renewal and encouragement in the world...You can become a powerful agent of transformation in a broken, darkened world." John O'Donohue, *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings*, (Bantam Press: London, 2007), p.225.

The fact is we have no idea the degree of influence we can have on the direction of our nation. However, we DO know what happens if mass numbers of people relinquish their voice and surrender to despair. Howard Thurman said, "Do not be silent; there is no limit to the power that may be released through you."

George Schultz, former U.S. Secretary of State, who served under three different Republican presidents, died eight days ago. In December, to celebrate his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, he wrote an article for the Washington Post. With his vast experience – one of only two people ever to hold four different cabinet-level positions, earning a Ph.D. from MIT and teaching economics there for eight years, working as a business executive, and the list goes on – he could have written on a wide array of topics. Do you know what he chose? He wrote about the importance of trust.

He said, "Trust is the coin of the realm. When trust was in the room, whatever room that was – the family room, the schoolroom, the locker room, the office room, the government room or the military room – good things happened. When trust was not in the room, good things did not happen. Everything else is details."<sup>4</sup>

Trust cannot be built on lies and deceit. It is built on truth. Jesus said that if we follow the way he has taught us and shown us, we will know the truth. Can you be relentless in your pursuit of the truth? Can you summon the courage to demand it?

## NOTES

1. Don McMinn, "The newest existential threat to humanity's wellbeing," *Think with Me*, February 9, 2021.
2. Don McMinn quoting Nina Schick's book, *Deepfakes: The Coming Infocalypse*, (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2020).
3. Eric Barreto, "Trust and Conspiracy in a Pandemic," *Day1.org*, August 07, 2020.
4. George P. Shultz, "The 10 Most Important Things I've Learned about Trust Over My 100 Years," *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2020.

### Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God — You are the way, You are the truth, and You are the life.

With so many words swirling around us, we are bombarded by sound-bytes and headlines and tag-lines and tweets. Each day we sift through misinformation and blatant lies in search of honesty, in search of truth.

And, amidst the cacophony, we strain our ears to hear your voice.

Speak to us, Living Lord, that we might know the truth that sets us free.

Gracious God, Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

In this time that we have set apart as sacred, help us to *heed* your words of comfort and *rise* to your words of challenge.

Sometimes the Gospel is so easy for us to hear, for it is simply that: *good news* ... good news of your love, good news of your grace.

Other times, the Gospel is harder to grasp because it demands something of us. It demands commitment. It demands courage. It requires us to speak truth to power, to stand up for justice, to seek your perfect peace.

God, as we strive to be your faithful disciples, guide our steps and illumine our way, that we might be witnesses to your truth.

In this moment, when life seems so fragile, give us words to name the truth of our brokenness. Help us to give voice to our grief, and to hold on to hope.

Help us to confess the hurt we have caused, and to create space for healing. Help us to call out that which defies your vision, and to seek wholeness and peace.

God, as our nation continues to grapple with distrust and division, give us words that promote healing, that proclaim hope, that hold us together when suspicion serves to drive us apart.

But, most of all, give us the conviction to claim boldly that you — and you *alone* — are the way, the truth, and the life.

May this truth set us free to serve you wholly, fully — heart, mind, and will.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, the One who gave us words to pray, saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**