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Knowing What to Believe Can Make All the Difference

Acts 3:1-16 NRSV

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One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. ²And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." ⁷And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

¹¹While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. ¹²When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ¹³The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. ¹⁴But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, ¹⁵and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you."

We've been hearing a lot lately about "fake news." What exactly fake news is can be hard to pin down, but I'm using it in the sense of a deliberate fabrication, often designed to mislead others for potential gain. Note, I'm not speaking of fake news in reference to shoddy reporting, though that certainly occurs. Nor am I using it, as some politicians do, to dismiss information they don't want to hear. Rather, I'm referring largely to made-up stories. And in my estimation, this is often done for malicious reasons.

So how good are you at spotting fake news? Let's look at some real-life examples from the past year. You tell me if they're fake or real. Malia Obama has been expelled from Harvard University. Fake or real? Nancy Pelosi wants to put a windfall tax of 100% on all stock profits and give the money to illegal immigrants. Fake or real? A United Arline's flight attendant slapped a crying baby during a flight. Fake or real? Police found 19 white female bodies in freezers with "Black Lives Matter" carved into the skin." Fake or real? And last but not least, now that Donald Trump has won the presidency, Ford is shifting truck production from Mexico to Ohio. Fake or real?

In case you're wondering, all these stories are fake. It's worth noting that fake news is not a new phenomenon. It's been around for a long time. We could probably trace the origins all the way back to Adam and Eve. You know the story. Eve is enticed by the serpent. She's tempted to eat from the tree in the center of the garden. She takes the fruit. Her eyes are opened. She gives some to Adam too. After a while, God comes looking for them. They're hiding. God asks Adam why he did it. Adam replies, "The woman you gave to me - she made me do it." Then it's Eve's turn, "The serpent tricked me. He made me do it." Ever since that time, I think, human beings have had a hard time owning up to the truth. There have been more and more attempts to spin whatever story we're trying to tell into some sort of false and misleading narrative. In other words, "fake news."

Now, some fake news can be relatively harmless. *The dog ate my homework. I caught a walleye that must have been at least three feet long. Yes, dear, I think your new haircut looks fabulous.* But let's be honest, much of today's fake news goes beyond a simple fib to something much more insidious. The news sometimes plays to our fears: *Obama Signs an Executive Order Banning the Pledge of Allegiance in Schools Nationwide.* Often the news is made to sound just plausible enough that somebody will believe it. There's a quote attributed to Donald Trump from a People magazine article in 1998. It goes: "If I were to run [for president], I'd run as a Republican. They're the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they'll still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific." My apologies to Republicans - and to Democrats - but this is exactly the way fake news gets started.

Even though fake news has been around for a long time, the speed of the Internet and the pervasiveness of social media have increased its power exponentially. There's a growing number of persons out there who want nothing more than for you to click on their headlines, because that's how they make their money. And the stakes are getting higher and higher. We're not only talking about United Airlines and the Pledge of Allegiance, but about the election of a president, and Congress, and the very bedrock of our democracy.

Perhaps the biggest problem with fake news is that it erodes our confidence. We're not sure what to believe anymore, or who to trust. It's becoming increasingly difficult for credible voices to cut through the noise of our fast-paced, digital culture. This undermines our sense of well-being and adds to a growing sense of dis-ease. And the reality is, unless we intentionally unplug or stop getting the newspaper or refrain from talking to our friends, some form of fake news is with us twenty four hours a day, seven days a week.

I can't help but think that something akin to fake news is going on in today's story from Acts. Let me share a little of the context in an effort to explain what I mean. Pentecost has

happened. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on the early followers of Jesus. The news about Jesus is spreading and it's creating quite a stir. Some of the Jews are buying it. But many, if not most, are not. To those Jews on the outside looking in, the story of a crucified Messiah who was somehow raised from the dead, doesn't add up to a hill of beans. I can imagine the outsiders confronting the early Christians. They're saying things like: "People, you're delusional. Any number of would-be messiahs have come and gone over the years - so what makes this latest guy any different? The stories you're telling about him are just

Not unlike the political divide in our country, we sense a growing divide in the first century. A vigorous battle is being waged for the hearts and minds of the Jewish people. The stories of Jesus' death and resurrection are at the heart of it. And now we can add the stories of Jesus' closest followers. Almost daily, it seems, something happens that forces people to stop and question: Is this movement of God or not? Is this good news or bad? Is this fake news or real?

As we heard earlier, a lame man is sitting at the Beautiful Gate. He has no way to support himself other than begging. But rather than giving him money, Peter and John offer him the name of Jesus. Then, inexplicably, they invite him to stand up and walk. And he does. At least that's what Acts tells us. So, is this fake news or real?

The incident evokes a variety of responses. The man gets up, and soon he is walking and leaping and praising God. The bystanders are filled with wonder and amazement. But the religious authorities, as we'll soon discover, are not at all pleased with this little stunt. And they're not at all convinced that the power of Peter and John and the other apostles is a power from God. Now, the authorities might seem closed-minded, and maybe they are, but remember that it's their job to safeguard the traditions of their ancestors, and to protect the people from the latest fake news coming down the pike.

So, here's a question I have for you: How do you think you would you have responded to the news of the man's healing? Hindsight is 20-20, of course, but it's worth considering. Would you have believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah? Would you have believed the rumor going around that people had actually seen him alive? And now, considering the story of this lame man, would you have believed that Jesus' followers were healing people in his name. Fake news or real?

Knowing what to believe can make all the difference, but how is a person supposed to know? I suspect it wasn't any easier in the first century than it is today. There has always been uncertainty. There have always been charlatans trying to "sell" us one thing or another. And quite frankly, there have always been situations and events that we don't want to believe - situations and events that don't conform to our way of seeing the world. When that happens, it's easy to just dismiss the whole thing as wrong or misguided or fake.

Let me ask it again: How do we know what to believe? How do we get to the bottom of things? It isn't easy, but there are some things we can try. Whether in the first century or today, we can always do some simple fact checking: *Was the man really lame from birth? Did anyone besides the apostles actually witness the healing? Did anyone talk to his parents?* Fact checking is important because it keeps us from passing on misinformation. In today's

world I see this as a moral imperative. If you want to read more about fact checking, there's an article, "How to Spot Fake News" at the ushers' stand.

There's another thing we can do. Whether in the first century or today, it's always a good idea to consider the source: *Who's the one telling the story? What does he or she stand to gain by telling it?* Notice the humility of Peter and John: "This isn't about us and our power," they claim. "This is about Jesus and his power." Considering the source can be a daunting task, especially if we're talking about Russian hackers, but we should try to do a little digging. It may help us decide if the claims of the storyteller are credible. And if we don't know the answer to that, then maybe we shouldn't believe it, and certainly we should not pass it on.

And finally, whether in the first century or today, it's important to pay attention to the convictions and values of the storyteller. In the case of the apostles, they are sold out to the man from Galilee. It's changing their lives. In Jesus' name, money is shared, the poor are fed, sins are forgiven, and a struggling band of followers have come to believe that Jesus is worth living for and dying for. While these values, in and of themselves, don't prove anything, the apostles seem a lot more trustworthy than someone simply piling up a large bank account.

Sometimes we do all these things, and we're still not sure what to believe. What then? Back in the 19th century, Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrestled with this question. He came to the conclusion that we often cannot know if something is true or not. So Kierkegaard coined the phrase *leap of faith* to describe the act of believing or accepting something that cannot be proven. According to Kierkegaard, this leap is not something we do on a whim. It's an intentional choice. And it has far-reaching consequences.

I don't know if Kierkegaard ever studied Martin Luther's Small Catechism, but he may have found it helpful. Three hundred years earlier, Luther wrote: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel...." Luther was saying that, when it comes to matters of belief, we don't have to do this on our own. We don't even have to take the leap of faith on our own. The Holy Spirit is there, nudging us, prompting us, encouraging us to put our trust in Someone who is bigger than us.

Personally, I've always liked this part of catechism. I find it very helpful. Maybe that's because, like some of you, I'm not always sure what to believe. I'm not always sure if the news, especially the news about Jesus, is fake or real. I need the Spirit nudging me as to where to put my trust. I need the Spirit prompting me to believe that the news about Jesus is not fake news at all, but rather is real and true and life-giving. And most importantly, I need the Spirit encouraging me, much like the Spirit encouraged those early apostles, to believe that this story can change my life, and that it's worth living for and dying for.

Friends, I hope and pray that the same is true for you. Amen.