

Problem: What is real and what is fake?

-I hate scary movies. I know I inherit this dislike from my mom. Infact, even today, my dad has to sometimes preview movies that seem “on the line” in order to make sure that my mom will enjoy the film. This isn’t as extreme with me (yet, who knows as I get older), but I do find myself keeping away from any horror film and/or intense, weird, murder drama. Sometimes it annoys Abby to no end because she’s a fan of the show *Xfiles*. Not really a horror tv show by any stretch, but still kinda weird, intense, and gross at times. She’ll be wanting to catch up on an old episode and I rarely, if ever, want to watch it with her. My mom and I have talked about our mutual disdain for intense/horror films and why we have this dislike. My mom has said many times that it’s hard for her because she “puts herself too much into the film.” I remember her talking about not seeing James Cameron’s famous film *Titanic* because she would “put herself in the place of a passenger on that boat all night long while trying to fall asleep after watching the movie and would be in a panic about how to get off.” Though I have seen (and own) the film *Titanic*, I too get caught up with my imagination after I sometimes see a film. I replay intense scenes in my head over and over again, placing myself or a loved one in the victim’s place, and find it very hard to break this cycle. I find myself getting spoofed more easily if someone makes a sudden move after an intense film and me being careful in looking around corners inside dark rooms. In other words, it is hard for my mom and I to separate realities following films that are designed to make you feel on edge or scared. The best way I can describe it is struggling with what is real and what is fake (on film). Normally, my mind can usually separate the two, but when I see a really intense, scary film, I (with adrenaline pumping) have a harder time sorting it out.

-I feel like our world right now is like Pastor Eric following a scary movie. It’s jumpy, on edge, and most disturbingly having problems separating realities. What is real and what is fake?

Solution: The good news of Jesus Christ for all of creation: God is present in you no matter who you are. This reality remains the constant.

-It’s interesting to me to connect this fact with Jesus’ teachings in the Gospel of Matthew for today. The Sermon on the Mount which Jesus begins here is one of the most famous sections of the entire bible. And for good reason as there are a lot of amazing pieces in the Sermon on the Mount that make up the building blocks of the Christian faith. One of the other interesting things (which sometimes we might forget) that make the Sermon on the Mount so powerful is the fact that it is indeed a sermon. This sermon appears both in the Gospel of Luke as well as here today in the Gospel of Matthew. What is very interesting in contrasting the two sermons within these two gospels, despite the fact that they contain a very similar beginning, is the length: Luke’s version is a sizeable 32 verses, Matthew’s is 3 whole chapters or 109 verses in total. A huge difference! Why?

-One of the main reasons for this is because Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is seen as a teacher, or Rabbi. Matthew, more than any of the other gospel texts, focuses on Jesus teaching and explaining to his disciples what I like to think of as “a new reality” -“The Good News” or “Good Announcement” (εὐαγγέλιον) (ev-ang-ghel'-ee-on), is what we hear again and again named as to what Jesus calls this “new reality”. This is where we get the word “evangelical.” (So next time if you want to feel smart, you can call our national church body instead of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America the “Good News Lutheran Church in America”)

-But what is the Good News that Jesus is teaching his disciples and us about? In a nutshell, I would suggest that the “Good News” means “God’s reality merging with our own reality.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who are hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will become children of God.” God’s reality is now our reality. It is real that God lives within the poor and hungry versus the extravagant and wealthy. It is real that God lives within peace versus war or conflict. It is real that God lives within love of neighbor versus condemnation, scapegoating, or severe punishment. This is the reality that Jesus gives an introduction to in the few verses that we have today and then spends the next 3 chapters (4 Sundays) digging deeper into what he means.

-But like me going to bed after a scary movie, we live in a world of competing realities. We are now living in a world that is preoccupied by “Fake News.” “Fake News”, which has rumbled into our lives through things like internet ads/banners, tweets, and specially devised fake websites like abcnews.com.co. We come into conversations with people who, after being sucked into “Fake News”, now are arguing perspectives that are in a different reality. “Fake News” and “Alternative Facts” compete against our long held realities making us feel overwhelmed and not so sure what is real and what is fake. How then do we hold onto and proclaim the “Good News” when our society is bombarded with “Fake News?”

Implication: How do we allow the good news reality to breakthrough?

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”(1 Thessalonians 5:16-22).

-As I was perusing my news while eating breakfast one morning this last week, I came across a headline which stated something about the Vice President “tweeting” something incredibly inappropriate. After reading this headline, I became so angry and starting to sputter out: “how could say that?” “What kind of *bleep is he?” “Doesn’t he know better??!” After a period of time of getting so worked up, I suddenly thought to

myself, “you know, if he had said this horrible thing, why weren’t other news agencies reporting this?” Sure enough, I dug a little bit and found that the headline which I had read about the Vice President and his “tweet” was utterly false.

-“Hold fast to what is good” meant for me to stop, take a breath, and think just for a moment. A “Fake News” reality is designed for immediate response, usually anger. It is usually anger because anger is a powerful emotion that can be twisted and manipulated in calculated ways in order to make hate. Hate, as Jesus reminds us in the Sermon on the Mount, has NO PLACE in a “Good News” reality.

- This is not to say that one cannot be angry and upset. Sad and/or moved to action. Christians have a right to stand up for injustice and be angry at actions taken based in fear, but as “blessed peacemakers” we must not give into a reality of hate. Hate is a “Fake News” reality.

-Holding fast to a “Good News Reality” also means to ground oneself. For thousands of years, Christians have come back again and again to the reality and ritual of worship. Through many events throughout history which have tried to disorient the reality of followers, the reality of gathering together, singing together, breaking bread together, and learning together has remained strong. That is a real fact, not an alternative one.

-May you, too, find grounding in the “Good News” reality. A reality in Christ that lifts up the lowly; that binds the broken-hearted; that proclaims peace; that is real. Amen.