

Hymns: 75 From all that dwell below the skies  
720 We turn to you, O God of every nation  
154 Come, divine Interpreter  
707 Make me a channel of your peace  
682 God of grace, God of glory

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Readings: Isaiah 51.1-11  
Romans 12.1-8  
Matthew 16.13-20

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### **“News of the past, news of the future”**

#### Prayer

News itself is much in the news these days – Fake news! Paid for news! Spin on spin! The accusations fly around our heads like angry wasps. Conflicting headlines driven by political bias and simple manipulation. Perhaps better than the phrase fake news, is to say simply ‘disinformation,’ that is, the intentional spreading of lies.

“No, I did not say that. Whatever the tape or video says, it did not happen.” News of the past, news of the future – stories overlapping and swirling in a chaotic rabble.

Friends, we live in a world where it is harder and harder to tell what is true, or what true means – and yet it has never been more important to listen to what is going on in our world – to listen and hear and act for the good.

So I have one gentle point today, as I read these scriptures: no one is going to do the work of listening to our world for us. It may be hard work – but is it our work. Interpreting the past, for the future.

No one is going to do the work of listening to our world for us, and listening to the world around us, and listening with the ears of faith is part of our responsibility as Christian people. And then, listening deeply and faithfully, to act.

It is our work as we hear the news to resist cynicism, to keep listening between red herring stories for news of welcome to strangers, or not, for feeding of hungry or not, for delight and protection of creation, or not.

Because Jesus had to deal with fake news too. Listen to the text – And Jesus asked his disciples, who do they think I am?’ (in essence, ‘what are people saying about me,’) some say John the Baptist! Others Elijah or Jeremiah! Fake news! And these things were not value neutral, each had political machines, and agendas, and ultimately violent intentions behind them.

It is our work to listen and sometimes to do that most counter cultural, unheard of thing – to change our minds – not to be conformed to the way of the world which is set in bunkered camps of opinion, but to be transformed by what we hear, by the renewing of our minds, to quote Paul from Romans.

To change the mind, when we see a new thing and understand something new of the will of God is the mark of a Biblical Christian. And going on in that section of Romans, to not think too highly of ourselves, nor to assume we know all about how someone else is – but to expect that we have gifts that differ, and are given by God, for God’s pleasure, into the world.

It is our work to resist whatever fake news is, and to think for ourselves, with the eyes and judgment of Jesus as our guide.

I have said Jesus dealt with fake news too - Speculation, agendas flying amongst political and religious factions –Ultimately, it would be this exact kind of ‘fake news’ that would lead to Jesus’ conviction as a criminal, a threat to the state. But that is a story for another day.

Fundamentally, news tells us what has happened. It’s worth asking why this is something we think is necessary, to have news of the past. Thomas Jefferson thought it was fundamental to a free exercise of democratic authority for people to know what was happening. Not just what a ruler or leader or even a minister said was happening, but what WAS happening. SO that we could take responsibility, knowing the past, for the future.

And from small beginnings, we today have news of each day as it becomes the past - Air crash, wars, credit crunch, elections – leadership – weather – how much about the weather, and train delays, and lightening strikes, and the rest. Precious little good news. Some.

And sometimes on a Summer evening at the beginning of the holidays a few stories about animals – so one national newspaper last week ran a full half page picture of the cat at Downing street, which had taken a duckling and was proudly marching off with it. And you know, someone somewhere will have made a party political point out of it!

Whatever the news is, we have absorbed a sense that we should BE INFORMED. It creates our sense of the past as more of it gets made.

And because news is a bit of an industry itself, selling its own importance to get your ears – yes, for public welfare, but also because your ears, your attention is VALUABLE – news also tells us things that confirm what we already think we know. News both confirms and create our prejudices.

Here I turn to Isaiah – reassuring those who ‘pursue righteousness,’ those who seek the Lord.’ I think we can read this passage, written to a people in exile in Babylon who have lost all sense of permanence and value in their own culture – these are a people whose ears are stopped by tragedy. They have heard the story of tragedy so long, they cannot hear anything else.

I think we can read this passage in Isaiah 51 as a lesson in how to listen to news of the past, for the future. He is trying to get them to listen to history in a different way, to hear a different news story, if you will, and he does this by first asking them to remember where they come from, and who they are.

There is a critical moment, a pregnant moment before the story is told – when meaning is still being formed, when we do not have a sense of how something right now fits with what has been, when the public story about it is not yet set.

It is into this moment that Isaiah speaks:

Look to the rock from which you were hewn, he says – before you get ready to observe the world, or decide what is going to happen - remember first, before you do anything else, who you are, and where you come from.

Remember first, the image of God that is in you – and what that God in Jesus is like. Remember that you are no orphan, no weak abandoned one, but you are the one who is set free by forgiveness, the one who can afford compassion. You are no one’s victim, says Isaiah. Tragedy will not be the last word.

So here’s a question, what was Jesus like, about spreading news? Did he try to correct the narrative when it was going against him? Get his own spin out there and play the algorithms of the social media of his day to go viral? Did he speak only in bunkered groups who already agreed with him?

No – he said ‘tell no one about the Messiah.’ Utterly counter intuitive. And no, he went to the exact unexpected place and people.

And I hear the silence as Jesus looked at his disciples, and they looked at him – and I hear in Peter’s response to his question who do people say I am, a deep listening to the past. ‘You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.’ He didn’t answer based on what he saw in flesh and blood, or by what any of the wild speculation in the fake news of the day flying around them, but by a deep attention to the past.

Remember, for Jesus truth was truth, is truth – is not changed by whether people know it or not. Is not created by public opinion, but is from the first an unchanging rule of love. Of generosity and forgiveness, and feeding. For all people.

So if I ask how are we to hear news of the past, I'm going to say first, with Isaiah, remember who we are and then with Paul – do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God.

I wonder, when did I last feel transformed by the renewing of my mind, so that I could discern the will of God, by a news story?

Isaiah goes on – The Lord will comfort Zion, he will comfort all her waste places. Joy and gladness will be found. This doesn't just mean someone else's waste place, it means our waste place. Here. The waste places of my own heart, and yours.

And news not only about past, but very quickly goes to predicting the future! Will house prices fall? Will war spread? Will this heat wave be the first gasp of an oven of global warming that takes away our way of life (even ours, in this northern latitude – some are well ahead of us, ask the Fijians or Tongans in our midst)

And as news goes on to predict future, Gospel reading also gives news, of the present and future – you are the rock on which I build. And the gates of hell shall not prevail.

And the gates of hell shall not prevail. This is Peter we're talking about – abandoned a perfectly decent boat, will deny Christ on the very night of his greatest need – he is all there is to build the church, as we are all there is to build the church today. And Jesus looked at him, and he looks at us, and gives proper news of the future: the gates of hell shall not prevail.

News. Of the past, of the future. Point is, we each of us have to choose who to listen to. What we believe, and how we will act based on what we know.

Be transformed, be changed. Our prayer is that God should involve us for the good in the news of the day – each of us, differently, as God's gift to this present – here and now.

And the judgment of God will roll out in creation – some enduring truths that do not go away no matter how the headlines spin them or who believes them: violence follows poverty. Violence follows prejudice. Violence follows sexism, and racism, and homophobia, writ large across our society.

Peace follows education. Peace follows plenty. Peace follows a tearing down of prejudice of all kinds, and repentance, and listening to each other, and serving one another.

Ours is to Be the news! TO come to know each other BEFORE we form opinions of one another, and to learn to assume nothing about one another. Because of our past, for the future.

Not for a headline, not for power, not to win an argument, but for the new life that is coming. The news that is here already. What is it the poet said? All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.

So today I want to read our scriptures gently, to consider how we can do something not conformed to our world, but transformed in the renewing of our minds. TO listen faithfully, with open hearts and generous spirits – not for prurient interest or voyeuristic delight – nor even or especially to feed a grievance – to listen to news of the past – who we are, who we come from, and news of the future – where God is at work, what God promises.

And who do you say that I am? Jesus asked the disciples. ‘You are the messiah, the son of the living God,’ Peter answered.

And Jesus still looks at each of us, from across the centuries, and says ‘You are the rock on which the church, my kingdom is built. And while you are here, and my spirit alive in your heart, the gates of hell shall not prevail.’