

The title of the meditation: Real News

Let us pray. Loving God, as we reflect together this Holy Night, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

According to a recent post I read on the internet:

The Supreme Court has ruled that there cannot be a nativity scene on Capitol Hill this Christmas. This has nothing to do with the U.S. Constitution's prohibition against the establishment or promotion of a religion by the federal government. They simply have not been able to find in our nation's capital three wise men and a virgin.

Following a year of heightened rhetoric and a new appreciation for real and fake news, we gather tonight to bask in the *good news* of the birth of our Savior. It is good to be together again, amid friends and family, in this noble, historic sanctuary to celebrate our graduating and rising seniors in the traditional Festival of Lights, to nourish our spirits in the gift of superb music, to hear the holy, ancient words of Scripture read with reverence and joy, and to ring in Christmas Day.

It is good to remove ourselves from the noise of the world and the bombardment of news (real or fake), to remember who we are and to celebrate the God whose humble birth changed the world so long ago. It is a story which in many ways seems unreal, and yet it is a story which has survived the fake news delivered by false prophets along the way and born the test of time as it spread throughout the world over two millennia.

Mary learns the news of the birth of her son from an unidentified source called Gabriel. Wise men hear the good news from afar and seek to verify it. The good news is passed from one believer to another through the medium of oral tradition. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John report the who, what, why, when and how in the gospels which become a part of the Canon, edited by the early Roman church in the fifth century. This good news is developed and delivered by the unquestioned liturgy, tradition and theology of the early church, reinterpreted and reformed by Luther, Calvin, and Knox in the 16th century, and subsequently delivered to the doorsteps of believers around the world in their vernacular language through the invention of the printing press.

In this modern age of instant and ubiquitous news, we have all the information at our fingertips, yet not necessarily the discernment. In November 2016, Stanford University researchers made an alarming discovery, according to journalist Laura McClure: Across the United States, many students cannot tell the difference among a reported news article, a persuasive opinion piece, and a corporate ad. This lack of media literacy makes young people vulnerable to getting duped by “fake news” ---which can have real consequences.

The ability for citizens to discern real news from fake news is at the heart of our democracy. The first amendment to the Constitution in the Bill of Rights provides for the freedom of speech which empowers a free press to report real news. “Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government,” according to founding father and printer Benjamin Franklin, who also warned “Never argue with someone who buys ink by the barrel” alerting us to beware of those who would like to purvey fake news and propaganda.

Tonight we celebrate, tell again and report the good news at the heart of our faith, that the God who is beyond our understanding, the God who created the ends of the earth has joined us in our humanity in the Christ child, born of a woman. Tonight we walk with Mary and Joseph through the hills and valleys of their journey to Bethlehem long ago and we affirm the God who entered into the cold and lonely places of our humanity through the backdoor of a stable. God identifies with those for whom there is no room at the inn: the poor, the ordinary, and those marginalized by society. God stands with them, not against them. And what is more, Emmanuel, God with us, entered into the joys and sorrows of this life and walked the hills and valleys to Golgotha... conquering death by dying on a cross.

As we retell this sacred news of old, we close with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's words written in 1863 amidst the Civil War while the Reverend Albert Hale, friend of the President, served this abolitionist congregation. The Westminster Bell, which called us together this holy night, has rung through the ages to call men and women to worship, to honor the lives of those who have gone before us, and to celebrate the good news of the Emancipation Proclamation. At the close of this service in a meaningful Westminster tradition, we will join in the ringing of bells to celebrate the birth of our Savior.

Listen to these words by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound the carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn the households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth God sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

On this holy, silent night, may our lives resound with the good news that Christ is born and God will prevail with peace on earth and goodwill toward all. So be it. Amen.

Benediction

And now, let us go out into the world with peace and joy, have courage, hold on to what is right. Return no one evil for evil, strengthen the faint hearted, support the weak, help the suffering, honor everyone. And let us join the angels we have heard on high, singing and ringing in our Savior's birth. Amen.