

This morning we are beginning a new series of messages for Advent, though the first Sunday in Advent is 12/2. If you've been reading the Believe Bible each week during our last series you may be sitting there thinking, "What about the rest of that? We got through 10 chapter, but there are 20 more chapters to go?" Well, I decided to treat Advent on its own, rather than merge the Believe series with Advent...and rather than get two weeks into Part 2 of Believe, I decided it was better to take a break at the end of Part 1, even if it didn't quite line up with the start of Advent. So Part 2 of "Believe" will begin the first Sunday in January. And so rather than just have a couple of random Sundays before Advent, our Advent/Christmas sermon series starts today. Just be glad it didn't start the Sunday after Halloween, when some people started putting up their Christmas decorations.

So unless you've been living in a cave for the last year or two, you know that "Fake News" has been a problem and a major topic of discussion. In fact, it's recently become a problem for us here at Rose Hill. I don't know if you saw this or not, but I was able to get a picture of this as the news piece aired on television a couple nights ago.

(Picture Here.)

Apparently, I'm going to space to evangelize aliens, and church leaders who wished not to be identified have

leaked this to the media. They even got a photo of me with sunglasses on that look like they're made with glass from a space suit helmet.¹ I just want to say, this is Fake News, and I cannot believe that this would find its way out into the world. ☺ See how easy it is to generate Fake News? Anyone can do it. And there are better versions of this kind of thing than the one I used, which gives itself away with the "breakyourownnews.com" watermark in the upper



right corner.

This has become such a social phenomenon that even a game built around this theme got released in 2017 that's called, "Fake News/Real News." And another one that's simply called, "Fake News." I'm serious. That's *not* Fake News. In fact, if you're so inspired, you can go out today and buy these as Christmas gifts at Target or other physical stores or go online to Amazon or other online retailers and order it while you're sipping on your coffee in the lobby after the service.



Even Christmas is not unscathed by the whole Fake News phenomenon.

A year ago, the Pew Research Center updated a study they did in 2015, and had done in the previous few years as well. It was a survey they did of Americans and Christmas. It wasn't always clear which of the results were comparing 2015 to previous years, and which ones were updated in 2017, but I'm not sure that matters a ton. According to the study, 90% of Americans celebrate Christmas. 46% say they do so primarily as a religious holiday, as opposed to a cultural holiday. In 2013, it was 51% who said they celebrated it primarily as a religious holiday. So this is on the decrease.

Most alarming, though perhaps not really surprising was American's beliefs about Jesus and the Christmas event. Here's what the report said: **"Most Americans believe that elements of the biblical Christmas story reflect actual historical events, although the percentage expressing this view has dropped noticeably in recent years."**ⁱⁱ Two-thirds (66%) say Jesus was born to a virgin, compared with 73% who said this in 2014; 75% believe he was laid in a manger, down from 81%. Similarly, the shares who say they believe that wise men, guided by a star, brought Jesus gifts — and that an angel appeared to shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus — also have declined. A slim majority of U.S. adults (57%) believe that all four of these things actually happened, down from 65% three years ago. Belief in these events has declined not only among people with no religious affiliation, but among Christians as well. **Overall, about one-in-five Americans (19%) now say none of these things actually happened."**ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, for nearly 20% of Americans, significant aspects of the birth of Jesus are Fake News. And according to a study done by Barna research: while 92% of American adults believe Jesus Christ was a real person who actually lived, only 56% believe in the Divinity of Jesus.^{iv} **So the whole reason we celebrate Christmas – that God has come to us in the flesh, in Jesus – is believed by nearly half the American adult population to be Fake News.** Half of Americans see the Christmas event, and more than likely also the life of Jesus and his death and especially his resurrection, as Fake News.

Meanwhile, culturally, we lift up Santa and flying Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, the Grinch, “Walking in a Winter Wonderland,” Christmas trees, and more, as the truth about what Christmas is about. And I’m not here to say we should *not* have those elements of Christmas; I dream of white Christmases as well - as long as it starts snowing well after the Christmas Eve services are over! Last year was about 3 hours too early! I think the secular aspect of Christmas has a place in our culture, and that’s ok. But: **It’s as if all the “fake” part of Christmas has become the Real News and Jesus is now the Fake News.**

So today we embark on this journey exploring different kinds of news in the Bible and in our life...separating the real news from the fake news...and trying to grasp a little more of what this means for us in our walk with Jesus.

The passage this morning from Isaiah comes to God’s people in the midst of their exile under foreign rule of three different world powers, as one was taken over by another and by another, with Israel caught up in it all: Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. Isaiah is part of the lineage of Biblical prophecy. But Biblical prophecy is not only about predicting the future. In fact, it’s not really about predicting the future at all, at least as we think of it. **Biblical prophecy is much more about calling God’s people back to Yahweh, back to the God of the universe, and reminding them (us!) that God will ultimately bring about His will and bring to fruition His plans.** This is oftentimes done through people, though God works in the miraculous as well. And it happens more than once. Biblical prophecy is not about a one-time fulfillment of the prophetic word, although there will be an ultimate and final

fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

And so there's this continual sense of anticipation and waiting for God to move in this final and ultimate kind of way, even as God moves in "smaller" and less eternal kinds of ways in the meantime. And we see all of that in today's passage. As I said a moment ago, Israel is under foreign rule. The leaders of the nation and their families, and other people of influence and their families have been taken away from Jerusalem into foreign cities. Jerusalem's walls are broken down, the city is a shambles, the country isn't its own country anymore. And into this place of despair comes the voice of Isaiah. And he writes of what God will do in the future. Clearly, there's a word of hope in this passage, and in much of the rest of Isaiah as well.

It's a prophetic word of someone who will come, in the lineage of Jesse, who was King David's father. The image used here that a "shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse" is one we are probably all familiar with from walks in the woods. Undoubtedly you've seen new vegetation growing out of a stump that was left by a tree that was either cut down or had blown down in a storm. Oftentimes, that new vegetation is of a completely different variety, like ferns or thorn bushes growing out of a stump of what had been a giant tree like a Redwood or Douglass fir, or whatever. Other times, something takes root and starts as a small shoot, but it's another good-sized tree, like in **this photo**. You can clearly see the stump of the old tree, and out of it is growing a new tree that, even though the picture doesn't show a whole lot of it, it's clear that it is also a pretty significant tree, and undoubtedly would continue to grow and become even more significant.



This is the picture that's painted in verse 1. That out of the old Kingdom that came from Jesse through King David, there will be a new leader. One who will have the favor and the power of the Lord with him, who will have wisdom and understanding and a knowledge and fear of the Lord. He will delight in the Lord.

And so with that word of hope, comes anticipation. **This is news that would**

bring great anticipation in the lives of the Israelites, as they desire to become their own nation once again. News that brings this kind of anticipation into our lives is good, and we start looking forward to when it becomes reality. For instance, there's a building anticipation for the Apple Cup next Friday...An engagement to be married brings great anticipation for the wedding date; A pregnancy brings great anticipation of the birth of a baby; that child growing and turning 16 brings great anticipation, for that child, of a drivers license. It strikes fear into the hearts of the parents. Not that Gwen and I would personally be going through that right now, of course...I just happened to come up with that one on my own, with no influence from real life! ☺ So this news from Isaiah creates anticipation for the future of Israel.

But Isaiah's prophecy extends beyond just Israel and their hoped-for freedom. Isaiah writes: "...he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;...the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord" (Isaiah 11, various verses). **The vision Isaiah has is one of a wider impact than just for Israel.** This person who comes forth in the lineage of Jesse is going to have a world-wide influence, with an extension of mercy and grace to the poor and the needy, with a great sense of righteousness and faithfulness, and will work for reconciliation between the powerful and the powerless: the wolf lying with the lamb, the leopard with the goat, and so forth. So there's a great sense that while this is a prophetic voice that brings hope and anticipation to the people of Israel for their future – and they did in fact return to Israel in the mid-500's B.C. – it is also for something more.

And what is being anticipated here, beyond their immediate circumstances, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself quotes from Isaiah in a worship service when he read:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

This is Jesus reading from Isaiah 61, so not today's passage, but it has very

similar language and prophetic themes. And after reading it in the synagogue in Nazareth, he rolled up the scroll, and said to everyone, “Today this is fulfilled in your hearing.” He’s speaking of himself. He’s saying that the one about whom Isaiah wrote, who would be a shoot from the stump of Jesse, is himself.

And Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection has had the world-wide impact about which Isaiah 11 prophesies. And his impact is for eternity, as his death was not a pointless death, but one with a purpose to atone for what separates us from God, and making a way for us to be in the presence of God in eternity. And that saving work that he does on behalf of individuals, for people like you and me, is important, and we praise God for it. Every one of us who follows Jesus has a great sense of thankfulness for what Jesus has done for us on the cross, and the validation of it through his Resurrection, and the hope for eternal life that the Resurrection gives us.

But there’s also a societal impact that Jesus seeks to bring about. The passage from Isaiah this morning is clear about the wide-ranging social impact of this leader he’s anticipating, and Jesus makes it clear as well in his ministry. Author and scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, **“It [this Isaiah passage] is a reminder that Jesus...was received, celebrated, and eventually crucified precisely for his embodiment and practice of this vision of social possibility” (Water Brueggeman).**^v We who follow Jesus, who seek to be Christ-like, have a responsibility to help bring about the world that Isaiah envisions and that Jesus envisions in his own statements about himself. It’s something we can anticipate, and seek to live into.

Just last weekend Gwen and I had the opportunity to attend an event that reminded us of some of the prisoners that need to be freed in our world, including right here in the Seattle area. We got invited to an auction fundraiser and dinner that was raising money for a Christian non-profit here in Seattle called “REST” that works to get girls, boys, men, and women, out of prostitution in Seattle. In fact, we got invited to two of these events on the same night that were both for similar causes – one that works here in the Seattle area, and another that does the same kind of work in Africa, though it’s based here in Seattle. We don’t get invited to these kinds of things very

often, and when we do it's not because we have deep pockets and can purchase a dessert at an auction for \$6,000 or purchase a vacation to Italy for \$13,000...we get invited on rare occasion to these things because someone just wants a couple more warm bodies at their table. I get it. And I'm ok with that. Actually, they also do it as a way of helping me, as a pastor, to be aware of these ministries and the impact they're having.

So we went to this one for REST that frees people from the slavery of prostitution in Seattle. 300-500 youth are prostituted locally. Talk about needing "freedom for the captives" or "the wolf living with the lamb" or "the lion lying down with the goat." These are metaphors of peace; of one person with power and one without it getting along and living together in right relationship because the one with the power understands that abusing that power is wrong...that the one with power understands that the one without the power is a human with dignity and value and deserves to be treated that way...deserves to be loved. And that was on display last Saturday night at this event, as people with power gave generously to support a cause that benefits the powerless.

So: This word from Isaiah creates anticipation for a future where today's passage actually is true: Wouldn't it be nice to see that come to fruition in our lifetimes? It's an uphill battle because sin has such a stronghold in our world. But that doesn't mean we give up. We can anticipate a day when it's true that the powerful and the powerless have healthy relationships with one another, that the captives are free, that the oppressed are free.

And the thing is, most people are never all one or the other in these metaphors. For instance, most of us in this room have a place of power and privilege in the world. The fact that we got here in our own cars, woke up with food in the refrigerator, have a roof over our own heads, a cell-phone in our pocket, Christmas trees that will be in our living rooms soon, and a church building to worship in means we have a certain degree of power in this world. But there's probably something that is holding you captive, too. There's something from which you and I undoubtedly need to be freed...some place in our lives where God's grace and love and truth need to break through and set us free. Could be pride, lust, greed, addiction, a

judgmental attitude, abuse of power, or something else. So while we work to set captives free from readily identifiable inequities like poverty, prostitution, mental illness, hunger, and so much more: we each have things that we need freeing from as well and will ultimately also have a positive effect on our relationships and society.

And then lastly: **As God always does, this passage is a prophetic word not only for here and now or sometime in the future here on earth, but it's a prophetic word for beyond the temporal world as well.** God will *always* exceed our expectations. He's not limited by our perspective. And we can anticipate that there will be a day in eternity where the wolf will rest with the lamb, the leopard with the goat...because the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as verse 9 says. So let's keep anticipating that, as God works in us and through us today, and for eternity. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ For the record, those are not my sunglasses. I tried on the craziest-looking pair I could find at Saks when on vacation in San Francisco in the summer of 2017. If you like them, you may still be able to get a pair. I think they were in the range of only \$400. Total bargain! ☺

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/18/5-facts-about-christmas-in-america/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} <https://www.barna.com/research/what-do-americans-believe-about-jesus-5-popular-beliefs/>

^v Word Biblical Commentary, Isaiah 1-39, p. 101.