

**May 16, 2021**  
**Seventh of Easter**

**Meditation:** “Good News, or Fake News?”

Before I start on this week’s sermon, I just wanted to say something that I wished I had said last Sunday. I sort of danced around it, but I don’t think I came right out and said it straight up. Do you remember last Sunday? I was talking about breaking boundaries. What I wished I’d said is that, from God’s perspective, we are all different. We are fragile, finite, mortal beings, and God is wholly other. In reaching out to us, to be in relationship with us, God is the ultimate boundary breaker. Let us follow God’s lead when it comes to our fellow human beings.

Did you hear about the atheist who tried to sue the government for denying him his charter rights of equality? His lawyer stood before a judge and argued that his client was being discriminated against because he was an atheist. He said, “The Jews have Passover and Hannukah. The Christians have Christmas and Easter. The Muslims have Ramadan and Eid al Fitr. But my client has nothing. It’s not fair.”

The judge looked at him for a moment and then said, “Well. I’m sorry that your client is so misinformed about his position. He does have a special day specifically for himself and people like him, and I find he is not being discriminated against.”

The lawyer looked at the judge, surprised, and said, “Your honour, my client and I are unaware of this special day. Would you please enlighten us?”

The judge said, “Psalm 14:1 says ‘Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God.”’ April 1 is April Fools Day. Case dismissed.”

This past week I was listening to CBC radio and heard host Piya Chattopadhyay interview neurologist and author William J. Bernstein. He is the author of the book *The Delusions of Crowds: Why People Go Mad In Crowds*. He talked first about human pre-history. He said that one of the most important traits of humankind, a trait that allowed us to survive in the world, was imitation. He said we did not all think up how to make stone cutting tools, or bows and arrows, or anything else. He said that one person either thought it up, or stumbled upon it by accident, and it worked so well that when others saw it they copied it. Most of what we know how to do we know because we learned from seeing someone else do it first. We are beings that imitate, and imitating allows us to survive.

Another trait is that we are story-tellers. Stories tell us our understanding of how things came to be as they are, and who we are. Stories give us our identity. And stories, he argued, are stronger than facts. To demonstrate his point, he told a story of a scientist who stated there was no scientific evidence that vaccines are linked to autism. Then a politician stated that he knew a family who had a beautiful baby, and they vaccinated the baby and the baby became autistic. The politician stated that the problem was rampant, an epidemic even. The audience believed the politician over the scientist, because the politician told a story, whereas the scientist had delivered facts.

These two traits, imitation and story-telling, lead to a third trait. Bernstein said that human beings, despite liking to think of themselves as rational beings, are self-deluding beings. Our delusions take many forms. For example, there is a segment of our society that believe that the covid-19 vaccines are laced with tracking microchips so that the government can track our every move. They believe that proof of this is that Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, contributed millions of dollars towards the production of the vaccine. Other stories about the vaccine are that if you take it the government will be able to control your behaviour through the use of those microchips, or that you will become a zombie, or that it will alter your DNA and you will become a potted plant, and so on.

I call all these conspiracy theories fake news, but a surprisingly large number of people actually believe them, just like some so-called Christian congregations believe that covid-19 is a fraud perpetrated by the government in order that the government could take away our constitutional rights of freedom of religious practice, or that mask wearing is part of a satanic occult ritual, or that staying 6 feet away from others, having 6 people in your social circle and using a 6" swab for covid tests is really the mark of the beast - 666.

Bernstein said that one thing that is pervasive right now, globally, and this runs through Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, is religious mania. The mania is focused on the 'end times.' Whether it is Islamic belief about Paradise and the establishment of a universal Islamic state, or Christian belief about the rapture, in which God will lift up the believers and take them safely to Heaven before unleashing hell on earth to punish all the unbelievers, there seems to be an obsession with the future. This plays out in all kinds of ways. In Islam, it led to the rise of ISIS, who were determined to create this Islamic state. In Christianity, dispensationalists in the US, who had much political sway in the previous administration, believe that the Jewish state must be restored for the end of time to arrive and a 1000 year reign of Jesus to be initiated. That means that Jerusalem must become a unified, Jewish city, and all of Palestine must come under Jewish control. There must not be a two-state solution. The Palestinians need to be removed from the land. And Jerusalem needs to be recognized as the capital of Israel, hence, they moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This group would be excited about recent events between the Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza this week.

With all of the crazy conspiracy theories about vaccines and 'end times' mania, which I call fake news, listen anew to the first words I read from the epistle: "*If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater.*" In a world of global communications, global news media, and social media it is difficult not to hear what is happening anywhere on the planet, and how some people are interpreting the reasons behind it. My question is, why is it we are willing to believe foolishness about microchip laced vaccines, but turn our backs on the story of the grace of God? Bernstein's answer is that we are self-deluding beings.

While we may not have a choice as to what we hear, we do have a choice about what we pay heed to, what we trust in, what we follow. The question is, will it be far-fetched conspiracy theories and wildly imaginative theologies, or will it be about the grace of God who created the heavens and the earth, and all life on the earth, and saw that it was very good, and sought a relationship with all life on earth, and yearns for fairness for all? The choice is yours.