

Words and Deeds: Fake News
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 34:11-19; Matthew 5:10-12; Acts 19:21-20:1

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 19:21-20:1. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also." He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer.

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."

When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.

The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.

"If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today's events. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it."

After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly. When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-bye and set out for Macedonia."

Fake news. We hear about it all the time today. Who can you trust to give you the truth? Every network has its own take and its own bias. When you go to a news website and there are five articles on a controversial topic and not one of them presents both sides of the argument, you know there's a problem. The truth doesn't mean that both sides are right, only that both sides are out there and ought to be fairly represented. There are websites dedicated to finding out the truth about weird news stories that get passed around on Facebook and email...and yet they're biased too. In a world where even video clips can be altered, rearranged, and edited to mess with the facts, sometimes I throw up my hands and say, "I give up!"

Fake news is not a new thing, though. People have been making up stories to bolster their point of view since the Garden of Eden, when Adam said, "She made me do it!" and Eve said, "The serpent made me do it!" Today we're looking at what really lies behind fake news and how we can live in the truth of Jesus each day.

Paul has been in Ephesus over two years now. He makes plans to go up into modern-day Greece, visit churches he started in previous journeys, and then head back to Jerusalem. He sends Timothy and Erastus first – probably to help clear the way, making sure he had safe places to stay and teach and preach.

While his key helpers are out of town, this guy Demetrius decides to cause trouble. He's not happy. He makes household shrines to Artemis, the local goddess Ephesus is known for. Lots of craftsmen in the city earn a living this way. Business is down, and Paul is bad for business. That's a big deal – the temple of Artemis in Ephesus was so financially successful, it had become the biggest bank in the region.

Demetrius gets the craftsmen together for a sit-down and is upfront – there's a lot of money to be made selling idols and trinkets and shrines. But he's clever; he knows these men could find other jobs if they needed to. So he appeals to their sense of loyalty and devotion to their religion...what if there's no goddess to worship? What if Artemis is discredited and we get a bad reputation? If Paul has his way, "the goddess will be robbed of her divine majesty!" Demetrius is all about the cash, but he bases his plea on emotion around their religion.

So they go into town yelling, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" And everybody loves a parade, and you put civil pride behind it, add a dose of religion, all of a sudden, the city is stirred up in this groundswell of devotion to this goddess. The mob can't find Paul. They wind up taking his travelling companions instead. And while Paul would be happy to go talk to them, the other disciples are like, "It's a trap!" And they keep him from going.

Soon this looks less like a parade and more like a riot. They've pushed their way into the amphitheater that could hold about 25,000. A good chunk of the crowd has no idea what's going on; they probably think this is a town meeting or city-wide rally for Artemis. Alexander, a Jewish man who may or may not have been a Christian, gets pushed to the front to speak. But as soon as his accent is apparent, they yell all the more for a couple of hours. This has got to be crazy intimidating for Gaius and Aristarchus.

Finally the city clerk comes and settled down the crowd. He starts to sort out the real from the fake. First off, the status of Artemis among the Greco-Roman world isn't going to change; this is her city; we're the keeper of her temple. Nobody has robbed her temple or blasphemed her, yet you brought these gentlemen here anyway. If there's some wrongdoing that's happened, take it to the courts. If Demetrius or the metalworkers union has a beef, take it to the authorities. But there's no news here at all! (As we find several times in the book of Acts, nobody ever was able to make a legal charge stick against the Christians.)

And the city clerk brings up the truth – they could be charged with a riot. Rioting was serious business, one step away from death, anarchy, and chaos. Troublemakers were rounded up and punished; ringleaders were crucified as a warning not to follow in their footsteps. Their zeal for Artemis was about to cause the Romans to “restore order” – and they didn't want that. Ephesus could have lost its right to self-rule had the army come in.

Everything starts to return to order. The words persuade the crowds to go home. Paul's friends are released, and he makes sure to send for them, to encourage them. They stood in the face of real danger for the name of Jesus, and he's there to tell them, “Keep up the good work.” Finally, after all the hubbub settles down, Paul leaves for Macedonia like he'd always planned.

Now there are plenty of things we could dissect in this passage – the growing persecution of Christians, the emptiness of idol worship, standing for your faith when the crowds are against you. But today I want us to look at the root issues behind what happened in Ephesus and how quickly they can lead us astray today. I want us to see how we can stand firm and stand for truth in a world where truth is seen as relative and constantly shifting.

Here's our first thought: *power, money, and ultimately control are behind most fake news (and most sin in the world)*. Demetrius doesn't care anything about the goddess losing her divine majesty; he's been making big bucks selling his wares and getting more people to buy Artemis junk. He stirs up trouble because he sees his livelihood at stake. Maybe he's a “true believer,” maybe not. But what this guy does is a ploy to get rid of the competition – and to do it without government interference. It's kind of like the ancient Ephesian mafia. We'll get these guys preaching Jesus out of commission and then business will start booming again. Demetrius is well-known for bringing in a lot of work. I'm sure he wants to keep the power he's got.

Think about most of the “fake news” stories we hear now. Whether they are made up stories about kidnapers on the loose or how we're just one election away from the other political side destroying the country, they play on our fears. The message they send is that the only way we can be safe is to pay attention to them and do what they say. That's power in a nutshell.

And usually right alongside that power is money; somehow it's involved. There's a reason so many lawmakers don't pass the laws that are most important to their constituents – if they did, there wouldn't be the fear of voting for the other guy anymore! It transcends right and left; it's everywhere. It's part of business; create fear around the other guy's idea so that my idea will still make money.

Most of our sins come from a desire for power and control over something, and money becomes important as a way to get those two things. God built into us many good desires that were to be fulfilled by Him and through relationship with others who are a part of His family. Power and control short-circuit the process of relationship with Him. Instead of waiting on God's timing, we move on our own. We try to become God ourselves through using our power, our money, our personality and charisma to get what we want.

But Proverbs 21:6 tells us, "A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare." We think we're safe when we surround ourselves with the things we desire, but all of them can vanish in an instant. Ecclesiastes 6 tells of a man who has everything he could want from God but can't enjoy those gifts, and a stranger enjoys them instead; that's called a great evil. Control in this life is an illusion. Just as soon as it seems we have it, it's gone.

Instead of living that way, the Bible points us to something different. And that's my second thought for the day: *the more control we relinquish to God, the more like Christ we'll be, the more truth we will understand, and the more we will live in the moment for Him.* Philippians 2 is a passage I think of and quote often because it shows us Jesus' view of power and control – even though He is in very nature God, He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but instead made Himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. He became subservient even to death on the cross for our sakes.

Christ always had complete and total authority; John 1 tells us the universe was made through Him! He told His listeners that He had authority to lay down His life and authority to pick it up again. But unlike us, He never abused His power. He only used His power to help the weak, the sick, the hurting, the outcast. He didn't seek power from "the powers that be." He did not worry about control. In John 5:19, Jesus makes it clear that He can only do what the Father does. He always follows the Father's lead. He laid aside any claims to earthly authority. And yet through His life, death, and resurrection, we see that all power, glory, and honor are His. He set aside what was rightfully His so that we could become like Him.

But to become like Him, we have to start giving over control to Him. It's easy to love Jesus as our rescuer and redeemer, but it's harder to come to Him as Lord who has complete say over your life. Losing control is scary. When we lose control, we hit a tree. When we lose control, bills don't get paid. When we lose control, things get dark and grim.

But there's a difference between losing control and giving over control. Losing control of your car means you're already skidding on black ice. But giving over control of the car means you're not in the driver's seat any more...someone else is in control, but you're also not crashing. And here's the honest truth: the only way not to lose control of our lives is to give control over to Jesus. I know a lot of people don't follow Jesus, their lives seem pretty together, maybe more together than ours. But when their lives end, when they face eternity, they will realize that they have lost control. Give over control to Jesus now, and not only will we rejoice when we head into eternal life, we will find that the Kingdom of God is already here, now, and we can live in it.

A wise man asked me this week, “How much time do you spend on the past, present, and future?” Thought about it for a moment, and I said, “Probably 15% on the past, 35% on the future, and 50% on the present.” His reply to me was, and I’m paraphrasing, “You can’t change the past. You can learn from it, but also guilt and shame that you’ve given over to Jesus is there too, and it can hurt you if you dwell in it. You also can’t actually control the future, and the vast majority of things we worry about happening in the future never actually come to pass. But worrying about the future can lead us to decisions that we will later regret as part of our past. What would it be to live mostly in the present, in the here and now, following Jesus each day?”

That was a huge insight to me. How much of my life is spent on fake news? Not the kind you see on Fox or CNN, but how much do I worry about the headlines I see coming in the future that never actually happen? “Pastor loses job over simple mistake.” “Family disappears in rare mid-Michigan earthquake incident.” That anxiety not only does me know good, it can lead me not to live as Christ would have me live.

Not sure I’ll have enough money for retirement, so better not spend any money feeding the homeless guy who lives by the train tracks. I better not commit to another Bible study because what will happen if I don’t have enough personal time? And the list gets darker and deeper. And the only way to live for Jesus is to live in the present. He said so in Matthew 6:34 – “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

When we give control over to God, when our present is based in His desires for us, when our future is in His hands, when our past is seen through the lens of His love and forgiveness, we have a better grip on the truth. The winds of culture blowing this way and that won’t affect us like they once did. Everyone trying to get us on their side won’t matter because we will stand by the truth of God He has revealed to us in Scripture.

And when persecution or trouble come because of where we stand, it will be hard, but we will hold firm because we know our lives are in God’s hands anyway. Paul was willing to go into the hornet’s nest, to face death if he had to from this mob, because he had given authority over his life away to God. That wasn’t God’s will at the moment, yet Paul was OK because he knew that in life or in death, he belonged to God. When we know that our lives are safe and secure in God’s hands, no matter if we live or die, it changes our willingness to risk, to reach out, to do what would be impossible in our own power.

Friends, may we commit together to following the truth of God and not pursuing the power and wealth and control the world desperately seeks. Let us hand control over to God and let Him steer our paths. Because when we do, we will find His peace, not worried about the future, not agonizing over the past, not worried about the fake news that gets the world in a tizzy, but living each day knowing we are safe in the loving hands of our God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.