

Sermon draft

Text: 1 John 5:9–15

Sermon: “Fake News”

We just observed Christ’s ascension into heaven, trusting that he has given his people everything they need to rest secure in the ark of the Church until he comes again. There is great emphasis on the preservation of the saints and staying on course, as seen in the *First Reading*, where they **“with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers”** (Acts 1:14). Peter directs them in regrouping and choosing a replacement for Judas so they can continue to bear **“witness to his resurrection”** (1:22). Our *Gospel* reveals Jesus as the great High Priest, praying that the Father would **“keep them from the evil one”** (John 17:15), consecrating himself for the sake of the disciples, **“that they also may be sanctified in truth”** (17:19).

Therefore, it is appropriate, as we await the return of our Lord, to reject the testimony of men and look to the greater testimony of God (*Epistle*, 1 John 5:9).

The testimony of God alone is to be trusted, for it declares, ***“Whoever has the Son has life”*** (5:12). As we live, we have ***“this confidence . . . toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us”*** (5:14).

The *Introit* for today encourages us, ***“Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage”*** (Ps 27:14), and indeed, we are reminded of the Lord’s promise in the *Verse* for today, ***“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you”*** (John 14:18). Finally, our *Psalm* echoes the rejection of the testimony of men by confidently proclaiming, ***“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked . . . for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish”*** (Psalm 1:1, 6).

About ten years ago the headline was: “They’ve found Jesus’ bones!” Of course this raised the question for pastors, “What are you going to do now?” My answer then and now, “I’ll keep believing in Jesus and the resurrection. Ten years later, here I am still at it.

I hadn't heard the news of Christianity's imminent demise that morning, which was featured on NBC's *Today* show (February 26, 2007) and mentioned on CNN. It turned out that construction excavation crews in the Old City of Jerusalem had accidentally breeched an underground burial chamber that contained several ossuaries, carved boxes containing the bones of those who died and were buried according to custom at the time of Christ.

One of them bore the name "Jesus," another, the Hebrew name for "Mary." The other boxes had names written on them too. Well, well! Jesus must have had a wife and kids, so the news blurbs surmised.

This announcement was a perfect lead-in to the evening edition of CNN's *Larry King Live* that same night (February 26, 2007), which happened to have already lined up James Cameron, director of the movie *Titanic*, and another film writer and director.

It just so happened that both had come upon this fantastic discovery quite a while ago and agreed to produce "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," which was soon to be released (March 4, 2007).

It turns out that their explosive documentary was a rehash of a twenty-seven-year-old archaeological find that had long been debunked by archaeologists and scholars. “Don’t rush to judgment!” Cameron urged the audience after being challenged by a few callers. “Go and see the movie for yourself, and then form an educated opinion.” The story kept going for a couple of days, then, under the weight of criticism, faded away.

But even now, ten years later, you can still probably find many who didn’t get the memo, and, just like with *The Da Vinci Code* and Dan Brown’s other novels, they lapped it all up. I thought of the poor suckers who swallowed the whole story, just like my mailman.

Those who latch on to sensational stories regarding Jesus that appear to be breaking news are discovering nothing new. “Satan seldom tells new lies,” the old saying goes.

Gnosticism is an ancient heresy that shows up in recycled teachings and books and movies still today, all couched in the “discovery” that this or that writing has been suppressed for centuries by the church, and it needs to be revealed.

Cerinthus was a first-century proponent of Gnostic beliefs who attempted to undermine the teaching of the apostles. He claimed that Jesus was not the true and eternal God, and that a non-trinitarian god descended to teach through the man Jesus.

John addresses the false teaching that Jesus could not be God and man. In the verses just prior to our text, he reminds us of three things that testify to Jesus being the divine Son of God—the Spirit (who constantly points to Jesus as the Son), the water (from which he rose up at his Baptism), and the blood (shed for us for the forgiveness of sins).

John explains, *“If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a*

liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son” (vs 9–10). This is Good News versus fake news.

John realizes the confusion that the evil one relentlessly sows by various means, both then and now. The presidential campaign of 2016 popularized the phrase “fake news.” Both sides accused the other of trying to mislead voters into thinking that something was newsworthy and true enough to dismiss the other as a candidate for president of the United States.

It was confusing and took diligence to sort things out. But the casual observer, thinking that the latest report was true because they saw it on the Internet, bought it. Modern campaigns firmly believe that if a false narrative—a lie—is repeated often enough, it will be believed by enough people to make an impact.

Of course, it isn’t just politicians who sow doubt and confusion on purpose. It happens on the college campus, in the media, in social relationships, and religion. The devil is more than willing to share his tactics with all. They are time-tested, and they work!

They work so well that John urgently makes the distinction between the *“testimony of men”* and the *“testimony of God.”* On one hand, the testimony of men says there’s no God, that the Bible is just one big fairy tale made up by men, that abortion is not killing a human being, that marriage should be for couples of either sex who want to live together, that sin is simply an archaic idea that was introduced to control people.

On the other hand, some men try to pass off their testimony as being from God. Joseph Smith claimed that the angel Moroni guided him to discover hidden golden plates to translate, and thus reform the church. We could go on and on. All of this goes against the greater *“testimony of God.”*

The testimony of men calls God an outright liar and tries to confuse the casual observer and the weak in faith by either dismissing or twisting God’s own Word. All who promote these falsehoods do not believe *“the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son”* (v 10).

But John reveals that *“the testimony of God is greater”* (v 9).

This greater testimony is the direct opposite of the testimony of men, which keeps us bound in confusion and darkness, bringing nothing but eternal death. John speaks of the truth of God’s testimony that *“gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life”* (vs 11–12).

It’s a matter of life-and-death importance that we fight the “fake news” of men with the “Good News” of God.

As believers in the Son of God, we have inside of us this testimony of life in him. It was placed there in our Baptism, and ever since that time we bear his name. We, too, are God’s children who possess eternal life by the work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has delivered us from death to life through his resurrection victory.

Does this necessarily mean that we won’t get confused now and then with the testimony of men being forced upon us day and night?

Unfortunately, no.

Unfortunately, many Christians are reluctant to study the testimony of God or teach it to their children for a myriad of reasons. These reasons overlook a very dangerous situation. People say they don't have time. Or that they aren't knowledgeable enough to understand it and teach it to their kids. It clashes with the culture that they've come to enjoy and would put them at odds with friends or co-workers, should the topic ever come up. Life is too complicated to bring religion into daily activities.

When we find ourselves up against the devil, the world, and our flesh, we're going to fall for the fake news delivered by enthusiastic unbelieving professors, media, Jehovah's Witnesses, people who are "spiritual but not religious," Mormons, pop culture icons, the cousin who turned Buddhist, and all our hip friends. We'll be like the seed that grew up only to be choked by weeds. More often than not, these people are much more willing to talk about what they believe than we are.

We leave ourselves and our children vulnerable when we feel so uncomfortable about hearing or teaching the Good News that we do or say nothing. It's almost as uncomfortable as giving "The Talk" to your child about "the birds and the bees." We're afraid that we might sound old-fashioned; we may not say the right things about what's going on in the world today; we may not even *know* what's going on in the world today.

A while back, there was a series of public service commercials that featured someone gleefully saying, "If you don't want to teach your child about sex, I will!" That was followed by a succession of various types of people repeating, "I will!" "I will!" "I will!" The chilling reality is that's what we're up against when it comes to talking about, learning about, or teaching our children about the testimony of God. If we don't do it, somebody else is eager to engage them in the testimony of men—fake news.

But we are blessed to have ready access to the testimony of God. We assemble here around God’s Word and Sacrament to receive life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins. Throughout his three epistles, John frequently and lovingly refers to his congregation as precious “children”—children of God whom he did not want to see misled by misinformation and falsehood. He says, ***“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life”*** (v 13).

With this testimony inside us, we are confident to go in prayer before our Father in heaven for the sake of Jesus, asking anything and knowing he hears everything asked according to his will. It is definitely God’s will that the testimony we bear be a light, not only to our brother and sister in Christ, but to our neighbor who’s lost in fake news. And The Good News Is This: ***“Whoever Has the Son Has Life.”***

Amen