The Truth Shall Set You Free, Propaganda not so much

Psalm 25:1-5; John 1:14; 8:32; 14:6

Usually at Christmas, we read a passage from John 1:14 that describes Jesus by saying, “And the Word dwelt among us full of grace and truth”. Then in John 8, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever walks in my way, will not be in darkness, but will have the light of life” (v. 12), and later in chapter 8, Jesus amplifies the meaning of that saying with this. “Hold to my teaching as authentic disciples. For you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free” (v. 31-32)

These are beautiful passages that have many applications, but this being Pride Month, let’s not forget one of the most important, voiced by the great actor Ian McKellen. “I’ve never met a gay person who regretted coming out, including myself. Life at last begins to make sense when you are open and honest.” To all our spiritual siblings who had the courage to tell the Truth, many paying a tragic and bitter cost, our profound respect and honor to you. You didn’t just set the LGBTQ community free; you set us all free, and we are better for it. Thanks for leading the way towards a rainbow tapestry of diversity that harmonizes to make a stronger social twine. You have made us more beautiful and grace-filled.

That is our country and our people on our better days. But we are living through dark times with propaganda trending. It is a danger.

This week, the Russian journalist Andrei Zakharov had an op-ed in the New York Times, explaining that the Russian people are getting fed up with Putin. What has put them over the edge has been a series of government attempts to shut down opposition media, or the free media of the West, or what MAGA refers to as the Lamestream Media- like Twitter, like Facebook, like YouTube. Why is Russia shutting them down? They are critical of the Russian government. They are critical of the war in Ukraine. And Putin, the old Communist KGB agent, wants no criticism at all.

So the Russians shut down all these Western outlets that undermine blind loyalty and promote social criticism, and they directed Russian citizens to Russian apps like MAX that are owned

by Putin allies. The Russian apps allow Russian intelligence (the updated KGB) to monitor who says what and when (like the Russian app VK, which replaced Facebook, or VK video, which replaced YouTube).

What turned out to be a bridge too far was Putin's recent shutdown of Telegram, which is much like Twitter. Ordinary Russians are irate.

Why this censorship now? Well, the Ukrainians are deploying drones deep inside Russia, and the drones are doing a lot of damage. Reporting on these drones undermines Putin's official narrative that the Russians are winning the war. Like the old Communists before them, they prefer pure propaganda to the Truth.

As we turn towards the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we lift up the virtue of the Truth and the Open

Society. All of us will sing the words of Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" with its theme, "He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword: His truth is marching on." The noble idea calling our country to live up to the ideals in the Declaration, penned by our ancestors, so that not just men are created equal, but women also, not just Europeans who came to our shores, but former slaves as well." Truth looks back at our history with a critical eye and looks forward in constructive reform, like a sword that cuts through the BS.

Meanwhile, on the same day that a Russian journalist was extoling the free press, American leadership stormed off the set of NBC's "Meet the Press" because journalist Kristen Welker had the temerity to press for the truth.

Let's leave aside the childish tantrum that would have earned my 5-year-old grandsons a time out. Let's leave aside the

disrespect of women that would have earned my 5-year-old grandsons a lengthy lecture from Nana, their Mom, and then Papa and their Dad.

This was about basic facts and basic accountability. After the tired schtick about how the 2020 elections were ‘rigged’. Ms. Welker asked for proof. “All I have to do is look,” was the response. “That is not proof,” she countered, and she reminded us all that in 60 lawsuits, no actual proof was ever entered in evidence.

Then she asked him about the January 6th accounts, and was told the brazen lie that the rioters were ushered in by FBI agents. “The people were destroyed by dirty cops and by weaponization; many of those people should be compensated.”

No proof, just an attack on the free press-NBC, ABC, CNN, and all mainline news organizations deemed fake, calling Ms.

Welker either ‘stupid or corrupt,’ and storming off the set like American leaders ought to be above being accountable for making fact-based claims. That is not leadership that answers to the people. That is just arbitrary tyranny that does what it likes because it can.

It reminded me of the large number of lawyers who were disbarred for lying about the 2020 election: Rudy Giuliani, John Eastman, Sidney Powell (who was on TV every night for months), Kenneth Cheseboro, Jenna Ellis, Lin Wood, Jeff Clark, on and on. After bringing 60 lawsuits that they lost because there wasn’t any evidence to support their cases, our country moved on.

Or Fox News who settled a lawsuit against Dominion, the maker of our voting machines, for a record 785 million dollars because they never could produce one shred of evidence of wrongdoing, after months and months of allegations.

When we actually did an independent review of our voting process, the only actual evidence showed that U.S elections are the safest, among the least corrupted elections in the world. The 2016 election was reviewed, and we found just 30 incidents of suspected unauthorized voting out of 23.5 million votes, literally one out of a million.

For 6 years now, we've been subject to this 'big lie' about rigged elections. It looks a lot like something Stalin or Hitler would do. They both said that the 'bigger the lie, the more likely people are to be gullible enough to believe it.'

The concern, as you know if you read about authoritarian movements that degrade democracy, is that the American public is being manipulated by a time-tested technique of wearing the public down by repeating lies so often, so regularly, that you start to ignore them. Letting routine lying slide is actually the point of the

technique, as experts on authoritarian regimes remind us (like Ruth Ben-Ghiat at NYU, Zach Beauchamp, and Andrew Marantz- who all wrote thoughtful pieces recently- in Vox and in the New Yorker).

All of them study the techniques used to eclipse democracies around the world. The function of repeating propaganda is not to get you to actually believe it; the function is to make you passive. You just start to ignore it because it is so tiresome, so big that your little voice can't do anything to stop it.

Slowly, you start to normalize it by not standing up against it. You can't be outraged day after day, so you stop reading about it to prevent being outraged. That is what is happening presently.

Then you start to think that there is no objective truth, just the partisan perspective of interested politicians and their cronies. This

trend has been amplified by social media, which allows us to stay in the bubble of news feeds tailored to what we already believe.

At some point, when fascism has taken solid root and displaced democracy, the truth no longer matters. That feature was one of the things that Nazi Germany and Communist Russia had in common, despite being on opposite ends of the political spectrum. You no longer read the daily papers to understand objective reality; you just read them to know what the people in power were promoting.

And when the public stops being outraged, they stop noticing the violations of the constitutional process in favor of blind obedience to the movement or blind loyalty to one leader, which is also happening week after week after week.

This is what Hannah Arendt concluded at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1962, one of the last Nazi's captured after WW2.

Eichmann ran the train system that brought Jews to the death camps. His defense was that he was just doing his job. He was tried and hanged. Hannah covered the trial for the New Yorker in what came to be known as one of the most brilliant summaries of what we learned about how democracy degrades into the horror of fascism. This is what she said.

“My quarrel was never with the verdict. It was with the framing, with the political theatre that surrounded the trial, it was with the attempt to turn the trial into a lesson about the eternal persecution of the Jews, when what it actually revealed was something more universal and therefore more terrifying, that ordinary men functioning in ordinary institutions can perpetuate extraordinary evil not by becoming monsters but by ceasing to think. This is the question that (this trail) left open. Not how do we punish the guilty? But how does an entire civilization produce men

for whom obedience replaces conscience? How do we guard against that? Eichmann is dead, but the conditions that made Eichmann possible- the bureaucracy, the language rules (of propaganda rather than fact), and the release of personal judgment. Those are not gone. They are never far away."

Our text this morning reminds us that we follow someone who embodied 'grace and truth', who taught us that the truth shall set us free, who came that we might find the fuller truth and the abundant spiritual path.

On this, our 250th anniversary, I hope we can lift up the wonderful American way that we uphold that quest for truth, the quest that our grandparents defended, storming the shores of Normandy. It is safeguarded in the 1st Amendment that protects the freedom of the press and the freedom of religion.

Why did our ancestors make the First Amendment the most important? Why did they make it the keystone of all the other amendments? The Founding Fathers had wide disagreements on politics and religion, but they held a broad consensus that the truth is more likely to emerge when government does not control either religious belief or public discussion.

They believed that no ruler, no government could be trusted to be the sole judge of the truth, whether that be the Johnson administration minimizing the expansion of the Vietnam War, whether it be all these men in power hiding the Epstein files right now, or whether it be the voice of the government right now exaggerating our victory in Iran. They believed that citizens need access to competing ideas and information to govern themselves wisely.

Thomas Jefferson once said that if he had to choose between "**a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government**", he would choose the **newspapers without government.** By the way, Jefferson also complained bitterly in his day that the newspapers of Philadelphia contained inaccurate reporting, but he was sure that open debate and a free press were preferable to any official control of information.

We stand directly in this tradition here at Christ Church, and most of you do not know this history. But we trace our spiritual ancestry back to Roger Williams in Rhode Island during a period of time when religious conflict was so rife that almost all of our states wanted to declare one faith for the state, like Virginia should be Episcopal, Maryland should be Catholic. But Roger Williams, who was a true minority figure at the time, argued that religion is best served when people can choose where they go to church,

when they have freedom of conscience, not through one established church. And the minority opinion in his time became one of the most important American legal precedents for our time, holding that religion flourishes best not through government control but through a free-market exchange of ideas.

This is the American way, and it is a noble path. We believe that human beings are all fallible. “In God, we trust,” we put on our dollar bill. The rest of us are skeptical of each other, especially if they are political leaders with power and a vested interest to protect.

We believe that Governments are fallible, so we don’t trust a unitary executive authority any more than we trusted Mussolini, Franco, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pinochet, or a long, long list of authoritarians that wanted all the power for themselves because it was more efficient.

So we don't believe that any government should possess the power to determine political truth. We support a healthy, vibrant press, and we expect our political leaders to answer the questions posed to them, especially difficult questions, because we believe that they are accountable for their actions.

Because we believe that open inquiry, public debate, free worship, and a spirit of criticism actually provide a surer, more stable path to the discernment of the truth. The way is cumbersome, not as efficient as authoritarian rule. But as Winston Churchill once said, "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government… except for all those other forms that have been tried".

May we celebrate our anniversary, holding fast to the freedoms and values that our ancestors have given us, values that have guided us towards a fuller truth. Someone told me that Ken

Burns closed out his masterful PBS series on “The American Revolution” by giving the closing quote to one of my ancestors, Benjamin Rush. In 1787 he said, “The American War (with England) is finished…….. but **the Revolution is not over**”. Amen to that.

Our first reading this morning is a biblical hope for our spiritual lives. It juxtaposes the human way of deceit with the divine way of truth. “ I read from Psalm 25.

In you, Lord my God,
I put my trust.

2 I trust in you;
do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
3 No one who hopes in you
will ever be put to shame,
but shame will come on those
who are treacherous without cause.

4 Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.
5 Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.