

“Story-Telling Truth”
Luke 1:1-4
Andrew Foster Connors
Advent I – “Truth and Consequences” Sermon Series
December 2, 2018

The truth is decaying according a report released by the Rand Corporation at the beginning of this year: a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; a rapid expansion of the sheer volume of personal experience, delivered to our person on demand now eclipses the volume of fact; and a collapse of trust in what used to be respected sources of factual information. Truth decay. The Rand study pulls no punches offering critiques of people and institutions across the political spectrum. FOX News is critiqued, but so is MS-NBC. Even the New York Times is reprimanded for its use of “News-Page-Columns” that according to the Times’ own public editor makes it difficult for the public to distinguish between fact and opinion.

The consequences of truth decay affect people across the political spectrum. People who reject immunizations for their kids, for example, despite the fact that there’s more data to support them today that ever before, are as likely to be found on the left as on the right. So are people who complain that crime is on the rise – nationally speaking – even though crime rates – nationally speaking – are at an all time low. Fake news may be at an all time high, but the Rand Corporation believes more than just one side of the political spectrum is to blame.¹

That doesn’t stop some of us from trying to pin it on one group or sector. One author blames the rise of fundamentalism in this country for planting religious seeds of institutional distrust in the wider culture. While mainline church traditions were able to adapt to the rise of the scientific theory of evolution, fundamentalists rejected it, creating their own pseudo-science to protect their literalistic foundations. As academics began to apply the tools of historical criticism to our sacred texts, fundamentalists rejected wholesale these “methods, assumptions, and institutions of the expert elite.”² It’s the God gap, this author claims, that is the source of our truth decay.

But as one who spent some time on a university campus and still dabbles in philosophic thought and theory, I think it’s a bit disingenuous to blame the rise of skepticism of institutions and their elites solely on fundamentalism. The entire postmodern project – the soup that every university graduate is swimming in whether she or he knows it or not – is the project of *secular* institutions, not *religious* ones. It’s the academy that called into question universal notions of objective reality. It’s the academy that deconstructs notions of universal morality. It’s the academy that calls into question objective notions of social progress. We

¹ Jennifer Kavanagh, Michael D. Rich, “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” *The Rand Corporation*, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html.

² Christopher Douglas, “The Religious Origins of Fake News,” *Religion Dispatches*, February 23, 2017, <http://religiondispatches.org/the-religious-origins-of-fake-news-and-alternative-facts/>.

were all taught to question so-called facts, to suspect the agendas and powers lurking behind them.

In fact the consequences of both postmodernism and fundamentalism seem to me like houses of cards that cannot hold their own weight. If you push questions of truth far enough in postmodernism you are likely to conclude that there is no objective truth, that everything is relative. There is no real truth that we can cling to apart from that which we declare as truth and then defend with power. Similarly, fundamentalism relies on the construction of a whole host of beliefs cloaked in claims of truth – i.e. the world was created in six literal 24 hour days, or the earth is only 6,000 years old just to name a few. Rather than accept facts, fundamentalism has to create its own, build its own universities and museums to defend these pseudo-facts because one little admission of falsity brings the whole fundamentalist house caving down.

Luke begins his Gospel with a different kind of truth claim. Here's an orderly account of this Jesus he says to Theophilus who is probably not a historical person but a name that stands for you and me.³ Here's an orderly account so that you may come to know the truth of things that have happened. Actually it's a little different from the way it's written. Luke writes an "orderly account. . .so that you may be secure in the things you have been taught. Here's a story about Jesus so that you may be secure in the things that the church has taught you. The love of neighbor that's wrapped up in the love of God. The power of love to overcome the death working of tyrants and systems that beat us down. The special presence of God in babies and widows and orphans and aliens and poor people – God showing up among all the people who have been discounted and thrown away.

The church is not given closed systems of meaning, at least not toward its beginning. The church was given stories. It seems so obvious that we quickly skip over it, but hear me again. The first Christians weren't given proofs about Jesus, they were given stories about him. They were not taught doctrines about God – not at first! They were taught stories about God. And when the church got around to writing down some of those stories instead of just speaking them, the church in its wisdom gave us not one unified Gospel about Jesus, but 4 different stories about him – even more than that if you count Paul and the rest of the New Testament. The church isn't given a single book, but a library of them. Not a single cultural tradition, but a smorgasbord of them.

This reality drives some people crazy. It seems so insufficient, incomplete. A story doesn't always lay out simple rights and wrongs, good and bad. A story doesn't always attempt to interpret itself. Multiple stories offer contradictions and complexities to the community and says, "Truth is here. No go and find it."

Author Jonathan Gottschall argues that this human capacity for storytelling is what sets us apart from all other animals. According to research, human beings spent a great deal of our mental time in storyland – daydreaming, imagining the future, processing the past. Those stories are the way that we try on possibilities – good and bad ones. And they are the way that communities are knit together in

³ Theophilus means "lover of God." It could be an historical person or simply a reference to anyone trying to know God and follow God's call.

ways that bind instead of divide. We cannot understand our lives apart from the stories – large and small, personal and communal - that give them meaning. If Gottschall is right, then a real question for all human beings is not whether or not you are willing to believe in stories. It is rather, which stories are you living your life by already? And which stories are going to guide you into the future?⁴

Because while truth decay undermines our ability to honor facts, the stories that govern our lives determine what we do with those facts. And the dominant stories that seem to be on the rise right now have severe consequences if you play them out. The story that migrants require our fear instead of our hospitality. The story that my race and yours is anything other than racism’s tool to validate the domination of whites by anyone who isn’t. The story that might makes right, that wealth is a sign of blessing and value, that peace comes always through strength instead of through understanding and connection.

The miraculous thing about Luke’s story here in 2018 is the outrageous assertion by the church that what the world needs is a different story. A story that God enters history, enters the world in the last places where we expect; that God comes to save us not as a doctrine, or a disembodied spirit, or a savior wearing a suit or carrying a gun, but as a vulnerable baby. The ridiculous assertion that love is more powerful than fear, powerful enough to bring down tyrants and outlast kingdoms and nations forever and ever and ever. The outrageous claim that begins not with trumpets or military processions or blaring headlines, but in cradles and stables, noticed first by shepherds and teenagers and unwed couples fleeing violence back home.

Recently Rachel Held Evans, who left the evangelical Christian faith because she could no longer subscribe to many of its claims, was asked why she still calls herself a Christian when she has rejected so much of the institutional baggage that once weighed her down. At the end of the day, she told her conversation partners, “the story of Jesus is the story I’m willing to risk being wrong about. . . There’s something about the person of Jesus that remains compelling to me and that seems very true to me.”⁵ The story of God’s incarnation in a vulnerable human being, the story of death and resurrection, of love and justice that are woven all through this humble story that Luke claims can change the world and change your life and mine. It’s the first gift from God in the beginning of Advent, the first day of the new church year. This story offered in all of its contradictions and complexities to the community with the claim that “Truth is here. Now go and find it.”

⁴ A good review of the book is written by David Eagleman, *The New York Times*, August 3, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/books/review/the-storytelling-animal-by-jonathan-gottschall.html>.

⁵ Rachel Held Evans on *The Liturgists Podcast*, September 20, 2018, minute 9:00 – 10:00.