

Hebrew Testament Reading: Isaiah 40: 1-11
Gospel: Mark 1: 1-8

word count 1,708

John the Baptist is an old school, hard-news guy who delivers it straight. His is the first voice we hear in Advent, and he is hard to listen to, much less to look at, given the description of his clothing and personal habits. And here he is—right in your face.

Yet, given the popularity of bogus news programs, including those that pretend to be serious, do we even want our news straightforward and in our face? Has there been a shift in how we receive our news?

At one time, when 11 p.m. rolled around on a weeknight you had only a couple of options for tuning in to the news of the day, each of which involved the mix of news, weather and sports from a local network affiliate delivered by an inter-changeable cast of personalities—the winsome anchors, the jock sports guy, and the off-beat weatherperson with the weird personality quirk or great hair.

Now, of course, when you turn on the television, you can tune in to cable network news tailored the way you like it. Or, try CNN, which alternates between real news and the hyperventilations of Nancy Grace.

Keep clicking and you will drop in on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, whose motto is “When news breaks, we fix it,” and get a *sense* of the news, but with a heavy dose of funny commentary on how the news of the day is being reported.

On the internet, there are all kinds of blogs, each of which interprets the news to fit their “spin.” *The Onion* poses as a serious newspaper, with headlines like “*Myth Busters* Team Struck Down by Zeus,”¹ “Evangelical Scientists Refute Gravity with New ‘Intelligent Falling’ Theory,”² and “Study Finds Link Between Red Wine, Letting Mother Know What You *Really* Think.”³

Jon Stewart, who has been called the most trusted name in fake news, offers a tongue-in-cheek take on the day’s news, using satire and double-entendres to mine the week’s media mayhem for laughs. Stewart sits at an anchor desk, and has pretend “correspondents” in the field, reporting on news footage in deadpan.

But the connection to the “real” news ends there. Stewart and his team are lot more *National Lampoon* than *Nightly News*.

The political parody and “fake news” that was once strictly the property of *Saturday Night Live* has gone mainstream as comedians are jockeying with journalists at the forefront of our media consciousness.

Viewership of network news is down. The slide has been steady.

Interest in the phony is up. It is almost as if we have become so distrustful of our media that we are on constant watch for the spin—Jon Stewart becomes more “real” than what poses as real. How will the court jester poke at our rulers in truth and humor? How many people trust the Daily Show more than the real news?

The truth is that in the massive mix of media we’re exposed to every day it is becoming much harder to discern between real and fake journalism. That makes it much easier for us to ignore it altogether, particularly when most of it seems to have little bearing on our everyday

lives. Neil Postman wrote prophetically about this back in the '80s in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*:⁴

“How often does it occur that the information provided you on the morning radio or television, or in the morning newspaper, causes you to alter your plans for the day, or to take some action you would not otherwise have taken, or provides insight to some problem you are required to solve? For most of us, news of the weather will sometimes have such consequences; for investors, news of the stock market; perhaps an occasional story about a crime will do it, if by chance the crime occurred near where you live or involved someone you know. But most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action.”

Postman referred to this as the “information-action ratio.” A high information-action ratio encourages involvement—the more actionable information one receives, the more likely one is to respond to it—“news you can use,” in other words. A low information-action ratio, by contrast, results in complacency and cynicism—an overload of non-actionable information leading to a kind of postmodern paralysis.

Interesting acronym. Low information-action ratio = LIAR. When you put it that way, most of the news, bad or good might as well be fake because we cannot or will not do anything about it.

The satirical nature of “infotainment” vehicles like *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* gives us a safe way of talking about the bad news, making terrible information easier for us to digest because it’s wrapped up in gallows humor and delivered in sarcasm. Since there is virtually nothing we can do about most of the news we watch or read on a daily basis, the thinking goes, we ought to at least get a laugh out of it.

That might not be all bad. If we are laughing, then on some level we are listening; which is far better, said Postman, than completely ignoring what is going on in the world. The sad truth is that “there is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly—for that matter no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening—that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, ‘Now ... this just in.’”

Given the current cultural climate, the real question is about how you get people to engage the news—the reality of both the good and the bad that’s happening in the world—without either laughing it off or ignoring it. The other question has to do with how you perceive the truth of the story.

So, the *real* news of the season also involves a HIAR (high information-action ratio) calling.

Mark 1 provides a road map for real engagement with the news. The writer begins with a simple statement—“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” No spin there, it is actionable information! Some new way of looking at our world has begun.

The broadcaster of this particular news would not have been a candidate for a modern-day anchor desk. John the Baptist was not slick, and had a wardrobe right out of the Flintstones that no doubt malfunctioned every day of his life.

However, the man’s information was anything but shtick. In the desert, far from the spotlight, John was bringing news that was immediately applicable to and actionable by the people: “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” in preparation for the real Newsmaker who would be coming up next, the one who John said was “more powerful than I ... I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”

John the Baptist's real news was his calling for nothing *less than a complete change of heart for the whole community*. Massive cultural and spiritual change was on the horizon—the rough terrain of the status quo was about to be leveled in anticipation of the new way of looking at our relation to the world and to the cosmos as taught by Jesus. This was “breaking news” of the highest priority. The news was to be revealed not to the rich and powerful, but to the lowly and meek—to shepherds abiding by their flocks at night. The news was for them, and understood at the level of their hearts: *that love was simple and kind, unpretentious and almost stumbling in its earnest desire to be known*. This is what would represent the way of Christ. John is saying it to us today—stop. Turn around. Look at what you are doing. What is it really that you should be about in working for?

To a people who had longed for someone to change their world for the better, John's news was very personal. He was announcing a new world order in which they could participate—the realm of heaven, instead of slavish co-operation in the empire of Rome. So, out into the desert they went to be baptized by this holy man with the wild wardrobe, going into the river and emerging cleansed and changed by the promise of new life.

Advent is a time when we once again share the news of this birth—news that's often buried in the massive crush of holiday hullabaloo. The real focus for us needs to be on the action items of the realm, calling people once again to respond to the good news that love was born for us all.

John the Baptist's good news is a call to set our transformed minds on a different plane ... to turn down the static of a Low Information/Action Ratio (LIAR) culture and its trivia, and tune in to what really, at the core of it all, is truthful, speaks to the needs of the world, and to us.

Sue Monk Kidd, author of the incredibly beautiful, “Secret Life of Bees,” recalls her youth and how she would prepare for Christmas by sitting near the Christmas tree and thinking over the last year of her life. She would think deeply about Christmas and the birth of Jesus. Then one year just before Christmas, she visited a monastery. As she passed a monk walking outside, she greeted him with, “Merry Christmas.” The monk's response caught her off guard a bit. “May Christ be born in you,” he replied. His words seemed strange and peculiar at the time. What did he mean, “May Christ be born in you?” She was unsure of what he meant, but now all these years later, sitting beside the Christmas tree, she felt the impact of his words. She discovered that Advent is a time of spiritual preparation. It is also a time of transformation. It is “discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart.”⁵

Advent is a chance to smile at some “good news” for a change, and to bring that good news into each other's lives. Let us begin at this common table.

Sermon Resources:

1. *The Onion Web Site*, theonion.com. November 30, 2005 Issue 41-48
2. Ibid. August 17, 2005
3. Ibid. November 29, 2008
4. Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985. 68, 99.
5. Loosely quoted from King Duncan

Scripture for Sunday, December 4, 2005
Advent 2B

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

GOSPEL: Mark 1: 1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isai'ah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean country-side and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."