

The Power of News

Reflection Christmas Eve 2013 - Pastor Hubert Den Draak



News can change lives dramatically. To give you a documented example I have to take you back to 1944, to a Nazi-run Prisoner of War camp just behind the front lines. In this one camp, the prisoners are not well fed. They're abused and beaten. They're thin, starving, discouraged. They're wondering whether they can survive this nightmare, whether they will ever see their home again and hold their loved ones.

The Nazi guards watch them from behind the fences. They watch the downcast faces, the slumped-over shoulders, the empty eyes. They watch the prisoners lose weight and get sick, even die.

But suddenly, one morning, everything has changed. The prisoners are still behind the fences, they're still undernourished and slumped over, they're still sick. But the guards notice that they're... happy. They're smiling and excited, and sometimes there's even laughter ringing out from somewhere. Even prisoners who are seriously ill and dying seem transformed, their eyes filled with purpose again. Of course the guards have no idea what was going on.

What has happened is that a small radio has been smuggled into the camp. And the prisoners have heard the news of the invasion of the Allied forces in Normandy. They have been successful, and are now moving steadfastly inland. Liberation is happening, and it could be only a matter of days before liberation would reach them.

The point of this little story is the power of news. Nothing had changed, except - the news. News bringing out hope in a hopeless situation. "Behold, I bring you *good news*, which will bring great joy to all the people", proclaims the angel. "This very day in David's town your Saviour was born - Christ the Lord".

We are very much like the people in that story. We only have to look around to see the fences everywhere. Horrific things are happening, both in our personal lives, in our communities and all around the world. Everything reminds us that the camps are still there, with people inside who are starving, slumped over, dying. Sometimes we are the ones on the inside, and if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that sometimes we can also be like the guards on the outside, watching others as they suffer. The reality we live in is darkly complex, not simple at all.

But then suddenly, this *news* breaks into this hopeless situation! Nothing has changed - yet *everything* has changed. It's like seeing everything in a different light and through a different lens. Suddenly, everything feels and smells and sounds full of hope! Things are about to change!

The Polish-Jewish author Jurek Becker wrote about the power of news in his book "Jakob the Liar". Jurek was a Holocaust survivor, and "Jakob the Liar" is probably one of the most remarkable novels of the Holocaust ever written. It was made into a small, tender movie in 1999 it, starring Robin Williams. Given its dark subject matter it wasn't a box office hit, but it's a movie well worth watching (and a book well worth reading).

"Jakob the Liar is" set in a Nazi-occupied ghetto somewhere in Poland. The story centers on an unlikely hero, Jakob Heym. Jakob is a simple baker, who accidentally overhears a Nazi newscast from the camp warden's office radio. It is news of vital importance: the Russians are advancing and are only a few hundred kilometres away. Liberation is coming! At first he tries to keep it to himself, but then he is forced to use the news to help save a friend's life and give him hope again.

Faster than you can say "Peter Mansbridge", the entire ghetto is following him around for more news. Through all kinds of misunderstandings, people now think that *he* has got a radio that picks up BBC broadcasts from London. And so Jakob becomes the ghetto's unwilling prophet with a direct line to God - or in this case, to the BBC. And so he starts to make things up, trying to bring hope into a hopeless situation, saving people from despair and self-defeat. And it works! People change, they start making plans for the future again, they find their courage again, they dare to celebrate again.

That's when Jakob discovers not only the power, but also the *dangers* of news. He realizes that once the people have changed, you cannot go back. You cannot "un-change" people. And that news -even good news- can be risky, questioning everything you had taken for granted, questioning the status quo.

Some people in the ghetto can no longer accept the situation they're in; they start taking a stand against the injustice, the discrimination and violence that the Nazis inflict on them; they even start planning an uprising. And some get caught and ruthlessly interrogated for it, including Jakob...

All this terrifies him; never ever had he thought that this could be the result of his newscasts, his prophesies. He even desperately tries to turn things back to how they were before, to stop the risky changes that are happening, to stop people from making sacrifices. But he cannot stop what the good news has begun.

In a few minutes we'll be celebrating Holy Communion. We'll remember the Good News that started this Christmas Eve - and came to its conclusion on Easter morning. Only it didn't end there, it's still continuing. Christmas is only the *beginning* of this breaking news story that still fuels us; it makes us take a long and hard look at all the fences all around us and say: there is a better way; liberation is coming! We are not alone, we live in *God's* world.

No matter the horrific things that may be happening - the death and losses we experience, the pain of broken-down relationships, the crushing disappointments in others *and* in ourselves, the fears and tears and doubts: *we are loved*, warts and all.

May this good news break through our reality, may it wake you up and *shake* you up, and make you see everything in a whole new light.

And when you leave this sacred place tonight and return home with others or alone, be mindful that Christ is going with you, in love. And that all he's asking is to return that love in everything you do and to everyone you meet; he is asking you to be part of the liberation that is coming: God's reign of justice and shalom. Merry Christmas. Amen.