My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

As much as we think we know our history, on any level—family, ethnicity, nation, or religion—we should know that study after study proves that we are not very good at knowing our history and where we came from, much less trusting the narratives of what’s happening right now as we seek to understand what’s going on. In a Pew Research study done in 2019, half of all Americans say that made-up news and information is a problem, and that fake news impacts has an impact both on how we trust government and media sources as well as one another. In fact, 85% of Americans said that our ability to agree on basic facts and issues about events going on was a moderately big problem, including 42% who said that it’s a very big problem. And within all of this, we have to remember that without an agreement on basic facts, it’s pretty hard to write down histories that let us know what really went on, when, and with whom.

That’s the quandary we face in today’s text. We have one story which gives a triumphant account of the Ark of God coming into Jerusalem, and King David celebrating and giving bread, dates, and raisins to the people to mark the occasion as he blessed the people in God’s name.

But take a look at your order of worship, and what we read in the Lectionary. There’s a gap in 2 Samuel, isn’t there? We conveniently skip over verses 6-12a. What else is in there? Why don’t we read those words, too? OK, let’s take a look and see (reading those verses):

“When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Ussah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen had stumbled. The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act, and God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God. Then David was angry because the Lord’s wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah.

David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, ‘How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?’ He was not willing to take the ark of the Lord to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it aside to the house of Obed Edom the Gittite. The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed Edom the Gittite for thiree months, and the Lord blessed him and his entire household. Now King David was told, ‘The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God.’”

Oh, well, now, if we had read the whole story we would have a little different picture of today’s reading wouldn’t we? Instead of King David picking up the ark, dancing and singing into Jerusalem, we see instead see where the oxen stumbled, the ark was in danger of being overturned, and one of David’s nephews, Uzzah, reached out to prevent it from falling. And God killed Uzzah on the spot. Because everyone knows you don’t touch the Ark of the Covenant. But everyone also knows you can’t let the covenant fall out of the ark, either. But what happened, has happened, and no goin’ back on that.

If we didn’t read these intervening passages, we’d have a nice neat story comfortable for worship use. The official version, as it were—no dead here, all is well.

So what happens when we skip over difficult stuff and bury it from our sight? David carefully weighs the risk of bringing the ark to Jerusalem, and we see the very real human drama David feels in grief for Uzzah. Maybe he was hasty in wanting to brin the ark to Jerusalem to consolidate his political power and ambitions. It cost him a nephew and a human life. He’s so fearful, in fact, he decides that he’d better put the ark in someone else’s safe keeping lest the Lord get angry again, huh? Yup, he leaves the ark for a few months with a non-Israelite until it becomes clear God isn’t in a killing mood, and in fact David is missing out on God’s blessings. So he quickly recalls the ark and bribes the people with bread and goodies to make their tummies full and not think too hard about where the ark has been or what happened.

Omitting Uzzah’s death changes the story. We do that here in America, too, don’t we? We are the greatest country in the world, right? But not in terms of justice, as we have the greatest incarceration rate in the world and most of those persons are persons of color. Not in terms of equality, as money accumulates in ever-greater percentages to a few upper income households, almost all of whom are white. And not in terms of public health, as we saw actual declines in life expectancy during the pandemic, greater in poorer areas than affluent ones.

Maybe we, like King David, use our information sources to tell us that all is well, that there’s no bad news to know about, and we should be satisfied and happy in our lives. But if we take a critical, closer look at who we are in any era in the last century, we see the Tulsa massacre of 1921. The segregation of the armed forces who fought for freedom in WWI and WWII. A South which builds monuments to civil rights while fighting to keep Confederate symbols alive as the new Jim Crow comes in the form of voting restrictions aimed at blacks. People of color and immigrants have long been victims and witness to unacknowledged violence and injustice. It Those of us with a choice must not turn away but look at what is real. Had Darnella Frazier not taken video of George Floyd’s murder, there would have been a hole in that story, too. Another black fellow on drugs that got out of control, would have been the official version. And we would have taken the story as given to us. Even if it was fake news in that official version.

Mark’s Gospel sandwiches Herod’s flashback of John the Baptist’s death between two accounts of discipleship. The story is one of a capricious government threatened by a hero of the people, calling into question the King’s morality. But Herod knew in his heart John spoke truth. And yet, the King, rather than self-reflect on his wrongs, he killed John because he could not be embarrassed in front of people for doing the right thing. In fact, when the king was presented with the request to give John’s head on a platter, however gruesome and repulsive this request, he said OK.

And that request is even in our modern day syntax, isn’t it? What does it mean when something we don’t want is served up on a silver platter? Do we remember the details of the capricious and injustice actions, or do we just do it and forget about it?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

We spend time in the past year talking about Black Lives Matter and Extreme White Privilege, and some folks donkey kick back on that dialogue because it’s uncomfortable. So there’s another approach called critical race theory that’s another avenue for being honest with ourselves, and that, too, is being attacked. But the purpose of all of these terms is not to call you, me, or anyone racists as a permanent label of shame. It should, however, give us pause to acknowledge that we have this history of ignoring painful truths, confronting painful events, and we just can’t keep putting official versions in our history books that tell only half the story.

When we do that, we miss the humanity that’s needed for us to stop lying to ourselves and making up stuff. That’s the fake news. When we can’t admit, in the mirror of God, that we need to turn around and start fresh but with the full breadth of honesty in our hearts. And that means, first of all, saying we’re sorry. Sorry for the official versions that omit scores of human suffering for our own comfort. Sorry for not hearing that we can do better. Sorry for not acting on it sooner. But most of all, sorry that we don’t love as we should in the sight of God. The way to stop being a racist nation is for us to start acknowledging that pain, and begin real progress to personhood for everyone. Only then will the missing links of history begin to fill in.

Thanks be to God, Amen.