

Date: December 14, 2003

SUNDAY: Third of Advent (Gaudete)

SERMON: Bad News is Good News

Text(s): Luke 3:7-18

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A wife phoned her husband at the office. “Honey, I’ve got good news and bad news,” she said. “The good news is that my mother just called to say that she bought us tickets for a week-long Caribbean cruise for our 25th anniversary present.”

“That’s great! What’s the bad news?” her husband asked.

“The bad news is, she bought a ticket for herself too.”

Good news/bad news jokes are everywhere these days, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think that this whole genre of humor started with St. Luke. At least it seems that way from our gospel lesson today. Here we are on Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday during Advent when we are supposed to lighten up a bit, get away from the mood of penitence and sober reflection that are proper to this season and take a few moments to celebrate. Gaudete! Rejoice! We’ve got our Christmas decorations making our sanctuary festive; the choir is going to be singing the Christmas section of Handel’s *Messiah*, and there’s even a chance we may have a white Christmas, so some rejoicing would seem to be in order. Except that in our Gospel lesson, we run smack into this weird prophet from the wilderness, John the Baptist who, it has to be said, is a real “party-poopers.” How much joy is there in being called a “brood of vipers,” or in his warning that “the axe already is chopping at the foot of the tree,” or that we are in the process of being sifted by the divine winnowing fork to separate the wheat in our lives from the chaff.

And if this weren’t enough to cast a damper on our observance of Gaudete Sunday, St. Luke, with a fine ironic sense of humor, sums up the rantings of this prophet from the desert by saying, “*And with many other such exhortations, he preached good news to the people.*” Good news? Being called a brood of snakes is good news?

Being warned of the fire of God’s judgment is good news? If that’s the good news, I’m not sure we want to hear the bad news.

I’m reminded of the time the late Lord Donald Soper, the British Methodist clergyman and member of the House of Lords who spent many years proclaiming the gospel and debating sceptics from a soapbox in Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park and who worked tirelessly for legislation with a social conscience, was coming to the United States, and he was asked what he would say if he were asked to preach to the President of the United States. He replied, “I’d speak about the love of God. But I should have to speak so specifically, that I probably wouldn’t be invited to stay for lunch.”

I suspect that’s how many of us would feel about John the Baptist’s message. Prophets are OK in their place, but we wouldn’t necessarily want them to stay for lunch. Their message might spoil our appetite.

The good news that John the Baptist delivers is that the Messiah is coming; the bad news is that the people are not ready. They are not ready because their self-centered ways of living have blinded them to the needs of their neighbors. They have allowed their social consciences to be anesthetized by worldly concerns, by their love of luxury, by their fascination with their possessions, so that they no longer even have an expectation of justice. They can buy two or three coats for themselves without even seeing their neighbor who has none. Even if a just society were offered to them on a platter, they couldn’t recognize it or receive it, because injustice has taken such root in their own hearts.

In Paris, there’s a group called the Association of American Wives of Europeans— a kind of friendship and support group for American women in cross-cultural marriages. They put out a publication called *Free Speech*. A few years ago, Sarah Baldwin-Beneich wrote an article describing an experience where she gave some coins to a beggar on the street in Paris.

“*The friend I was with said, ‘I can’t believe you give them money.’ I cringed. ‘Who is them?’ I wanted to say. That was a person back*

there. . . What in the world can make you so cynical that when you find yourself face to face with another human being with so much less than you, you aren't moved to help just a little?

'That's just it,' they say. 'It doesn't help.' But does it hurt?'

The reaction of her friend, which is typical of the reaction of many people makes me suspect that Dr. Luke's diagnosis is right on target. Like an obstetrician who tells her patient that having a baby is going to cause her a great deal of pain, he understands the paradox involved. The pain will be severe, but it is a pain that will issue forth in the joy of a new life. Luke is saying that before we are capable of hearing the good news of Jesus, we must hear the bad news from John the Baptist. The good news that Jesus brings is only good news to someone who has already accepted the bad news.

I also suspect that down deep inside, we know he's right. I imagine that most of us from time to time, if we are honest, would admit that we have often felt trapped in a world of self-centered values, of unloving and unjust relationships. We are afraid of the kind of world we've created for ourselves to live in, and we don't know what to do about it. Just this week there was an article in the news about the rapid rise of the populist far-right party in Switzerland, the country with the highest per-capita income in the world. Faced with the move of Europe to become more unified with more economic integration with the poorer European nations, as well as an influx of immigrants from those nations, many in Switzerland are urging a withdrawal into Alpine isolation to keep the rest of the world out. And the feelings involved in that move are understandable if not particularly admirable. Sometimes, we do wish we could just cocoon ourselves in our material comfort and let the world, that chaotic, needy, hungry and tragic world outside our windows go on by.

But the bad news, hard as it is to hear, can be a liberating word of hope for us— can be a cause for rejoicing. Luke says that the people

were filled with expectation. John's announcement that the one who is coming after him will bring the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit to burn away the chaff of their injustice and self-centeredness sounds like a threat of judgment to those content in their self-centeredness. And to them, it is. Those who are not prepared to have new hearts, because they like their old ones will only hear the announcement of the Coming One as bad news. But for those who are filled with expectation, longing for a better world, longing to be better people, longing for justice, both within our own hearts and in the world around us, the announcement of that Coming One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas and whose coming again we await in hope, sounds like very good news indeed.

For John doesn't simply flog the people for their injustice and lack of compassion; he offers them a way out. To their anguished question, "*What shall we do?*" he gives a straightforward reply. "*Whoever has two coats, must share with anyone who has none. Whoever has food must do likewise. Don't be corrupt or defraud other people. Don't abuse your power and exploit others.*" In other words, act justly. Look to your relationships; care for the needs of your neighbor; build community.

The good news is that we can be transformed. The good news is that when we care for the needs of our hurting neighbor, by some strange alchemy, we find that our own needs are cared for as well.

So, perhaps after all, there is reason for us to rejoice, even in the bad news that we stand in great need of the purifying fire of the Spirit of God. For in that bad news about us, there is marvelously good news about God, and about the possibility of our own transformation and the transformation of the world. So lift up your heads! Gaudete! Rejoice!