

Dec. 4, 2011—Second Sunday of Advent

“The Good News and the Bad News”

Mark 1:1-8

The lawyer said, “I have some good news and I have some bad news. Which do you want first?” The client replied, “Well, give me the bad news first.” The lawyer said, “The DNA tests showed it was your blood they found all over the crime scene.” “Oh, no,” cried the client. “What’s the good news?” “The good news is that your cholesterol is down to 130!” On a more local note, I was sick last week. And the church board voted to send me a get well card. The bad news is, the vote was 12-11. Then I got the good news that attendance was up three weeks ago. The bad news is that was the Sunday I was on vacation.

Good news/bad news jokes are the rage. But sometimes the good news and the bad news are serious business. We get a little of this with today’s gospel reading. It is the second Sunday of Advent, when we prepare for the coming of the Christ child at Christmas...and for the *second* coming of Christ as well. Either way, Jesus is coming!

It’s good news and it’s bad news in at least a couple of ways. First, in this way: The good news is that *God is about to do something new that will change everything*. The bad news is that *God is about to do something new that will change everything*. It’s the same news, you see. Whether it’s good or bad depends on who you are. If you find that your life is convenient and comfortable and you’d really like for everything to stay as it is, well, the news of the coming of the Christ child isn’t necessarily going to bring you joy. Something is going change! The news that God is coming to be with us...isn’t necessarily going to make your heart glad if you like your heart just the way it is (thank you very much!). But if you are one whose life is filled with emptiness, who doesn’t like who you are...there is no answer to life’s hardships and sadness other than the one to be found in God’s tearing through the heavens to save you...this is good stuff. Advent will be a time of hope for you. Because, whether it is good or bad news, God is coming!

Good news and bad news...*second*, in this way: John the Baptist, with a stringy beard, locust body parts stuck like spinach in his teeth and fire in his eyes, calls people from everywhere to his little corner of the wilderness. God is coming, he says. He’s there to get people ready! He tells them that he baptizes with water, but the One who is coming will baptize with fire! His words make the people quake and shudder. The thing is, he tells them the truth about themselves, and the truth isn’t pretty! We are a contentious bunch, judgmental about others, seeing the world as it is and not willing to help. We are indifferent and sometimes even hateful and ugly! That’s the bad news! So...why is it, then, that people from everywhere are flocking to his river...coming in droves...from everywhere? What are they seeing that is such good news?

William Willimon sums up John's message to the people out in the desert this way: *Get washed up. Have your sins forgiven. Get ready. Messiah's coming!* When I hear it put that way, I can hardly wait! That is the news of Advent, and it brings joy! For those people making their way to the Jordan River, it's like the best news they have ever received. It is glorious to their ears! The bad news is, just as Tim Keller words it, "*We are more sinful than we dare imagine.*" The good news is, "*We are more loved than we ever dare hope.*" Why is it we need to be aware of the one before we can receive the other? Why must we hear John's bad news before we hear it good? And why do we need to understand the good news before we can take the bad?

The bad news: we need to change. The good news: there is time. It isn't too late to prepare him room. In Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge had to receive visits from his demons before he could discover how beautiful his life really was. He had to learn the truth about himself before he could be set free from its ugliness. But in the end he was free!

The good news is, company is coming for Christmas! The bad news is, the house is a wreck and we have to get things in order! The good news is, my, how clean it will be! There is still time! Did I mention? Company is coming! I can hardly wait! We must take note of where John the Baptist is standing. He has planted his feet by the River Jordan, the place where people cross from one life into another, at their place of baptism. Marie DeCarr placed her feet there along side John's this morning. And now she is free. John the Baptist had also planted his feet in the wilderness. The wilderness is always the place of renewal. In every story in the Bible where there is wilderness—a dry place—someone is finding renewal. Someone is discovering the truth. And in the despair of that truth one discovers good news: *That God has sent a Savior, and it isn't me.*

There is something about God that likes to work in a desert. God's best seeds are planted in dry, unpromising soil, because that is where faith takes root. The desert is the place where nothing lives unless God says it lives. It's where we learn the truth, that when there is no where else to turn, there is God. And did you hear the news? God is coming?

Barbara Brown Taylor, the great Episcopal preacher, once wrote, "No matter how hard we try in church, we will always mess some things up. And no matter how badly we mess some things up in the church, other things will keep turning out right, because we are not, thank God, in charge." What she meant to say is that God is in charge. That's the message of Advent! It's some of the best news I know! That is why we hear it good, the news of John the Baptist. Wash up. Have your sins forgiven. Get ready. Messiah is coming! It isn't too late! It will all turn out...because we are not, thank God, in charge!

The bad news is that we are all deeply flawed. There are some mornings when I can hardly face the man I see in my bathroom mirror. We are the faces of sin, continually messing things up in our families, our families, our churches, our schools, our work places, our places of recreation. The good news is that God is in charge! And God is coming. God's bent on saving us! God will not be denied! So let every heart prepare him room. Let heaven and nature sing.

The bad news is that we are deeply flawed. The good news is that, here at *this* table, there is a place set for you. There is a place even for me! Here, we are not in charge. The one who invites us is the one we are waiting for. This bread is the bread of life, the Body of Christ. The cup is for our forgiveness. It is for you. For all of us! Let us make room!