

December 10, 2006
Malachi 3: 1-4, Luke 3:1-20
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"Proclaiming Good News in a Bad News World"

Of all the characters of Christmas, John the Baptist is the one who seems the most out of place. His birth signals the birth of Jesus; his ministry opens the ministry of Jesus. He ought to be a part of things. Yet, we don't even include him as a figure in our manger scenes. His hard words and rough clothes don't fit in with our Christmas celebrations. Try to imagine him at the office Christmas party. What do you do with a guy who comes to the party dressed in coarse garments made of homespun cloth still smelling of camels? What do you make of his rude and ill-mannered words that accuse his neighbors of all sorts of things? He ignores the Christmas goodies for a special diet of locust and wild honey. Can you see this uneducated, non-ordained prophet, without the proper liturgical garb, flinging water all over the place in the temple and stirring up the people with wild claims about what God is doing? I can almost imagine him as an unwelcome witness, testifying at a congressional hearing and blasting everything and everyone around him. The head of the committee calls for security to throw the lout out!

We know he isn't there. He isn't at the office party, or in the pulpit or in the halls of congress. He is in the Judean wilderness, speaking to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, while the leaders and priests remain in their palaces and temples. Yet, the way Luke tells the story, he carefully situates the appearance of John in the political and religious reality of his time. When he begins his story, Luke names the movers and shakers of the day: from the Emperor, Tiberius Caesar, to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and from the sons of Herod the Great, Philip and Herod Antipas, to the chief priests, Annas and Caiaphas. They are the symbols of political and religious intrigue who resist the news of God. John is God's messenger, bringing good news in a bad news world. In its wisdom, the church calendar gives this second Sunday of Advent to John the Baptist. God sends this outlandish character to be the harbinger of Christmas amid everything that denies the truth of Christmas. God sends this messenger in the midst of the sleazy business deals, the religious hypocrisy, the brutality of war, the refugee camps and the broken hearts of ordinary people like you and me. God says in Malachi, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." He comes to all of us.

Even though we don't know quite what to make of God's messenger, we are grateful that someone comes to tell the truth. The first truth that John comes to proclaim is God's salvation, not some watered-down, self-serving, sentimental version of it. His role is to make the rough places smooth and the crooked ways straight so that "all flesh will see the salvation of God." God's messenger is not concerned with announcing that our fallen stocks will rise, that the rough places in our lives will be made smooth, that every mountain that stands in our way will be brought low or that our rise to the top will be made straight. No. God's salvation is about the forgiveness of sins, peace within the soul, peace with God and peace within the human family. God's salvation is about the triumph of life over death, of love over hate and of justice over wrong. God's salvation is about the reconciliation of

enemies - Sunnis and Shiites, Christians and Muslims, blacks and whites, husbands and wives, parents and children, and neighbor and neighbor. God's salvation is about the restoration of creation - the harmony of all things living, the end of the despoiled wetlands and rain forests and the clean up of polluted skies, rivers and land. God's salvation is about the new creation that has already begun in Jesus Christ. When you see people pointing to these things, you see the prophets of God. When you hear voices shouting or even whispering God's good news, you are listening to the messengers of God.

The second truth is that some things have got to change. That is why, when God's messenger speaks the good news of salvation, he has some hard, unwelcome things to say. John is God's prophet to prepare the people to receive Christ. God's prophet has the courage to speak the truth that runs against the grain. Sometimes God's prophets have to tear down before they can build up. God cannot build a new creation on a crumbling foundation. So, John the Baptist calls the people to prepare for Christ by repenting and by doing acts of justice and love. When John first speaks, he is way out in the wilderness of the Jordan. He is far from the center of power. God's messenger is not an agent of the Roman State, the Jewish nation or the Temple priesthood. God's prophet is a voice crying in the wilderness. This voice runs counter to the political and religious establishments' claims to authority. The good news of God questions those in authority and brings down the powers that defy God.

Only those who humble themselves can hear the good news of God. It is important to listen to those who tell us things we do not want to hear. Robert Parker is said to be the most influential wine critic in America. He is an unpretentious man who lives in a small, out of the way place in Maryland. Yet, what Parker writes about wines has tremendous impact on the worldwide wine market. At the office, Parker's mother handles the mail. She is unimpressed with her son's nose for wine. One day, Parker mentioned to his mother that for years he had only received complaining letters. His unmoved mother said, "That's because they're the only ones I've let you see." ("The Million Dollar Nose," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 2000). John tells us things we do not want to hear about ourselves so that we might be open to hear the good news.

Maybe the word that God has for us to hear this Christmas season is that some things need to change in our lives before we are ready to welcome Christ. Maybe our wandering and aimless way of life is going to get a lot more confusing before it straightens out to become God's way. Maybe the mountain of our greed has got to give way so that the valley of human need can be filled with our generosity. Maybe we are going to have to stumble over the rocky ground of our self-conceit before we can walk humbly in the smooth paths of the Lord. Sometimes, the good news sounds a lot like bad news before we can hear it for the great liberating word that it is. We are talking about God's salvation, not our own watered-down, self-serving, sentimental version of it.

The third truth is that there are always folks who don't want to hear the good news. More than that, there are always folks who try to stop the good news from being heard. Luke begins his story of John by telling us the names of all the people in power; he ends his story with how human power reacts to the liberating power of the gospel. The crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers receive John's harsh words as good news; but Herod hears them

as a threat. Herod wants a god who will bless the way things are, so that he can go on living the way he has always lived. Thinking he can silence the gospel, Herod locks John in prison. The good news of God is bad news for him. Rejecting the news from God, Herod dresses up the bad news of the empire and tries to pass it off as good news. The people need and want more than that.

It has been over twenty-five years since I was ordained to the gospel ministry. Over the years, I have often wondered if I still hear the gospel with clarity. Sometimes, I wonder if I have softened its hard, offensive edges, turned its impossible demands into a set of rules that anybody can keep. Have I confused its dreams with my foolish ideas or diluted its power to transform lives? At some time or another, maybe we all wonder if we have made so many compromises with the news of the world that we don't even hear God's good news anymore. No matter how hard we try to lock up the gospel, no matter how much we crowd our lives with other things, the good news is out. Thank God that there are always people around us who remind us of its liberating power.

This past week our congregation was stunned by the death of a 19 year old young man. It was the second 19 year old to die in our church this year. The bad news of such sudden and tragic deaths shakes us to the core. There is no way around overwhelming grief. The only way around it is to go through it. Yet, in each of the memorial services for these young people, family and friends testified to the beauty, grace, humor, faith and unique gift of these young lives. Those who spoke were God's messengers of the good news. At the service this past Friday, I heard the gospel truth that no matter how long or short our lives may be, each one of us is beloved of God and each one of us belongs to God. Friends testified that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The world cannot tell you that; only the gospel can. The news of the world is not that good; yet, the gospel is. It is the gospel truth that allows us to live as free, undefeated, loving, hopeful people in the bad news of the world.

John isn't just in the wilderness. He is at the office party, at the refugee camp, on the college campus, in the halls of congress and in the memorial service at church telling us what is true. No matter how hard an anxious and deceitful world fights against the word of God, the good news can never be silenced.