

“BAD NEWS! GOOD NEWS!”
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
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When you have good news, it’s hard to keep it to yourself. There’s something that compels us to tell somebody, to tell everybody! Most of us aren’t very good at keeping secrets, are we?

The good news about Jesus spread like wildfire in first century Palestine. It wasn’t long until folks started writing down some of the stories so that more people would be able to learn about this wonderful man and the message of salvation that he preached was available to all people everywhere. The oldest record we have of the story of Jesus is the Gospel of Mark, which is the Gospel we will be using this year of our Lord, 2012. Mark is not only the oldest Gospel story; it is also the shortest, only sixteen chapters long. I want to challenge each of us to read the Gospel of Mark between now and Christmas Day. During this season of Advent, this season of preparation for Christ’s coming, take the time to read the Gospel of Mark.

When you read this short book of the Bible, you will discover that Mark begins the story in a clear and straightforward way. He writes, *“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* I was taught in seminary to begin the sermon with something that will get people’s attention. Nothing attracts attention more than good news! We are desperate to hear good news! With so much bad news in the world, we yearn to hear about someone who helped someone else, a child that got rescued from a burning home, military troops that will be home for Christmas, things like that. And so Mark gets our attention when he says, *“The beginning of the good news.”* On these hectic days of Advent, we’re ready for some good news!

But then immediately Mark plunges into what sounds to me like bad news! He takes us out of the comfort of our homes and churches to the wilderness, where we meet wild and weird-looking John the Baptist, who dresses funny, eats a strange diet, calls people to repent, and predicts the coming of one more powerful than he. For those who may not think this is bad news, Matthew spells out a little of the content of one of John’s sermons. John the Baptist is not exactly complimentary. *“You children of snakes!”* he shouts. *“Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ... The ax is already at the root of the tree. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.”* (Luke 3:7,9)

The bad news is that John appears to be talking about us! He doesn’t say that the folks over there need to clean up their act. He points a finger at us and says, “You have not lived the way God intends you to live! God is upset with you.” No, upset is too soft a word. God is angry, God is furious with you.

John is not the first to share bad news. Way back in the book of Isaiah, six centuries before Christ’s coming, the prophet cried out in the wilderness. And what did he say? We have

been weighed in the balance and found wanting! We have fallen short. We deserve hell and damnation. Much Christian theology tells us that we all deserve infinite punishment for our finite sins. At the time of colonial America, Jonathan Edwards preached a famous sermon called *“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”* In that sermon he crafted a terrifying image of our souls poised on the brink of hell. God looks at us with a mixture of contempt and disgust, said Edwards. We are like spiders clinging to a rock, which God holds over the fire, and it is only God’s mercy that keeps all the terrors of this world and the underworld from collapsing upon us.

People fainted when they heard Jonathan Edwards preach. He borrowed language straight from the prophet Isaiah, who describes God’s wrath falling upon a wicked planet. Whole countrysides, including Jerusalem, would be turned into wastelands of burning tar pits. We’ve heard such sermons before. Televangelists tell us when national calamity or natural disaster falls upon us that it is because of our sins. So when Isaiah says he hears a voice crying out, we know what to expect: hellfire and brimstone. Judgment and destruction.

Now if Mark and Isaiah and John the Baptist are pretty clear about the bad news, they are equally clear that the story does not end with God’s wrath, with sinners in the hands of an angry God. We need to start out with what’s wrong. I had a splinter in my hand recently. It would not heal until I got the little piece of wood out that was causing my hand to become red and inflamed. Good news sometimes begins with an honest searching, sometimes a painful look at the truth of our situation. You know, as I know, in our truthful moments, that we have not lived as God intends for us to live. We have made mistakes. We have done wrong. We have not only done wrong, but we have secretly thought, felt and been wrong. In short, we have sinned. And we will never be able to live different lives until we first tell the truth about ourselves and our past.

But the good news, the reason Mark wrote his Gospel, and the reason people flocked to hear John the Baptist, was not to hear that we are sinners, which if we are honest, we would have to admit that we already know. The reason people came in droves to hear John the Baptist was because of the good news he preached that our lives can be made new. God has made a way, when there appears to be no way. God has sent Jesus, and that changes everything.

Seminary professor and author Tom Long tells the story of a minister friend of his in Atlanta at a downtown church who planned one evening to go out to eat with his wife to celebrate their anniversary. His wife met him at the church, and the two of them headed to the parking lot. But when they got outside they encountered a crisis. An elderly woman, with a desperate look on her face, was kneeling on the sidewalk beside a man, her husband as it turned out, who was lying on his back in pain clutching his chest. The friend’s wife ran back into the church to call an ambulance, while the minister leaned over to comfort the man. “We are calling for some help and they will be here soon” he began, but the man interrupted him.

“Charlie, forgive me,” the man said.

“I’m not Charlie,” my friend said. “My name is Sam.” What Sam did not know until later was that Charlie was the man’s son, and that years before, the man had, in a rage over something, disowned Charlie, and the two of them had not spoken in years.

The man looked up at Sam and reached out and touched his hand. “Charlie, please forgive me.” “Just relax,” Sam said. “Someone will be here soon and get you to the hospital.” But the man suddenly clutched in terrible pain, and it was now clear that he would probably not make it to the hospital. With his last gasping energy he pulled on Sam’s arm and begged, “Charlie, please forgive me.”

Sam followed his faithful instinct, and as a pastor, reached out and put his hand on the man's forehead as a blessing and said, "I do forgive you. I do forgive you." Those were the last words the man ever heard in this life.

Later, when he learned what the circumstances were, Sam wondered if he had done the right thing. "I am not his son. The relationship was still broken. What right did I have to grant forgiveness?" Sam wondered. Then it came to him that his whole ministry was about this, that the whole Christian faith is about this. The good news is that we have been given in Christ a restoration and a reconciliation that is already true, already whole. The good news is that God invites us to a future where we can live into what has already been given us as a gift. (1)

So what starts out as bad news, you see, becomes good news, for the story does not end in condemnation, but in restoration. The bad news is that we are sinners. The good news is that we do not need to stay where we are. We have been forgiven. We can change! We can move forward, with God's help.

Make no mistake about it, change is hard work. When John the Baptist preaches, he calls the people to **prepare a way for the Lord**. Anyone who as ever prepared for anything, be it a big meal or an exam, or a paper or a project, anyone who has ever prepared for houseguest knows that it takes work. In the days of the Bible, when a dignitary was coming to town, the government sent ahead a road crew to fix the highway so that the king's chariot would not get stuck, or the king's horse break a hoof in the uneven pavement. One of our members used to have an apartment in New York City. He learned that the President of the United States was coming to a hotel near his apartment. Before a President comes to town, the Secret Service comes ahead of time to make sure the area is secure. My friend heard a knock on his door. "Your apartment is a perfect vantage point for us to watch where the President will be going into the hotel," the Secret Service man told him. "Mind if we come in and look around?" What could he say?

The bottom line is that you and I have some work to do before Christmas. We have some preparations to make. I'm not talking just about the Christmas cards that need addressed, the presents we need to buy, the decorating we need to finish, the baking the family is expecting us to do. I'm talking about something far deeper and far more profound. I'm talking about taking a trip to the wilderness, the road back to God, the spiritual housecleaning that I suspect all of us need to do this Advent season. My backyard is overdue for a good housecleaning. How about yours?

The good news is that change and growth are possible. That's the wonderful word of life that the Gospel proclaims. We don't have to stay where we are. We don't have to continue what we're doing. We can change. From time to time someone will ask, "Do you believe in miracles?" The answer is an unqualified, "Yes!" My friends, I not only believe in miracles, I've seen some in my life and in my ministry. A man said to me, "Do I believe in miracles? I sure do, thanks to Alcoholics Anonymous, I've seen God take liquor money and turn it into food to feed my family." I was on a local television show recently and the host asked me, "What is the most rewarding part of ministry for you?" Without hesitation I said, "Seeing people change and grow." There is nothing more exhilarating and more energizing than that. And my friends, I see it happen every day.

John the Baptist was convinced that his calling was to prepare the way for Jesus, to encourage people to change. It seems to me, that's our job as well: to be agents of change in our world today. Did someone say change? How many United Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? Change? Why, my grandmother donated that light bulb! Yet God calls us to change,

and he calls us to share his message of forgiveness, that other people can change, too. In his book, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, Philip Yancey makes the point that the church is the only institution in the world that has been entrusted with the message of grace. (2) Our mandate from God is to declare this good news to the world. Our job is to shout from the rooftops: **“You are forgiven. You can change!”**

What needs to be changed in your life and what needs to be changed in mine? That's part of the work we have to do, isn't it? What needs changed in our church in order for us to become the community that God calls us to be? What needs changed in our community? In our nation? In our world? Do we really believe that we can change? Will we allow others to change, and to become the people that God intends them to be? That's part of the challenge this Advent season.

The bad news is that we have messed up, that we are sinners. But the good news is that God has sent Jesus to make a way, when it looked as if there was no way. Because of Jesus, we can be forgiven. We can be made new. That's the news God wants us to hear today. It's the best news we will ever hear anywhere! We can change! God has made a way!

Prayer: Dear God, amidst all the voices competing for our attention this Advent season, help us to hear the voice of Isaiah and John the Baptist and Mark reminding us that we are forgiven, that we can change, that we be made new. Open our hearts to this good news, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Notes:

1. Long, Tom. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 39. No.4., pp. 39-40
2. Yancy, Philip. Quoted in *The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2011*. Nashville, Tenn. 2010. p. 386.