

The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 13, 2015

*"Good News?"*  
by Mary Anne Biggs  
Philippians 4:4-7 ~ Luke 3:7-18

If this is John's idea of good news, I'm not sure I want to hear the bad news. Our readings ... this week and last ... center on Luke's description of the preaching of John the Baptist. And in Luke, pretty much like in the other Gospels, John comes preaching in the style of a fire-and-brimstone prophet, announcing eschatological judgment, calling for repentance, and heralding the coming Messiah. All in all, it's a pretty sober message, beginning with the less-than-endearing sermon-opener, "You brood of vipers..." and ending with the seriously ominous "...and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Yet Luke closes this grim scene by saying, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." Huh?! How is this good news? You would think that he might have considered opening with a joke. Maybe you have heard this one:

Once a parishioner was painting a small chapel. It was one of those small white picturesque chapels. As he began to get to the windows he noticed that there was a great deal of church left and not much paint. So he added some paint thinner to the bucket and proceeded on. As he reached the eaves of the church, he again noticed that the paint was running out. So once again he added some thinner. Well, by the time he reached the steeple, his paint was so watered down that it was not covering up the old paint. So he bowed his head in prayer in search of divine guidance. A clear, stern voice came to him and advised: "Repaint and thin no more."

We have to look hard for the good news in this passage, but comparing Luke's treatment to that of Matthew offers two clues. First, while Matthew describes John's audience as the Pharisees and Sadducees ... perhaps intent on contrasting John's ministry with theirs ... Luke describes the audience simply as "the crowds." As you read further, you realize "crowds" is a euphemism. He might just as well have called them the "misfits," or the "outcasts," or even the "losers." These are the "riff raff" ... the folks whose neighborhoods "decent" folk try to avoid. They are made up of, among others, tax collectors (persons who make their profit by squeezing their neighbors on behalf of occupying Rome) and soldiers (not to be confused with our men and women in uniform ... the soldiers Luke refers to are mercenaries, thugs who earn most of their wags by extortion and threat).

As is often the case in his Gospel, Luke turns his attention to those on the margins ... those on the outside of society. Just as Luke reports that it was the tax collectors and sinners (another euphemism for the socially and morally despised) who loved to hear Jesus' stories, here we learn that society's outcasts and ne'er-do-wells are attracted to Jesus' forerunner.

Why ... perhaps because John is willing to talk with them at all. You see, despite our best professions, many of us religious types come across as quite judgmental. No wonder then, that in John's day ... as in our own, folks who are down-and-out rarely feel welcomed at houses of prayer. Yet John honors them by noticing them ... speaking to them ... and giving them something to do.

This is the second distinct feature in Luke's account. Hearing of the impending judgment, the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers all ask, "What should we do?" And John tells them. Note, his instructors are neither complex nor spiritual. To the poor crowds ... share even what you have. To the tax collectors ... take only what is fair. To the mercenaries ... don't extort. Reduced to everyday language, these are the rules of the playground ... share, be fair, don't bully.

What John offers them is entirely within their reach. It may not be easy ... we get accustomed to getting what we want and hoarding what we have ... but it is still possible. John's words show that he views poverty neither as an accident ... nor as the fault of the poor. In his time, as in ours, the earth produced more than enough goods to feed and clothe everyone. The problem then ... and now ... is that the resources have been grabbed up by a very small percentage of the population. John called not only the wealthiest ... but also the barely comfortable ... to treat their accumulation of goods as directly related to the seriousness of their repentance. How we get money and how we use money exposes what we value. Economic issues are spiritual issues. If we ignore God's commands to practice social and economic justice, how can we claim that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? If we prioritize our pleasures above our neighbors' basic necessities, how can we claim to love our neighbors as we love ourselves?

John doesn't ask them to leave their current stations. The day after hearing John preach, presumably, the tax collectors are still collecting and the mercenaries still soldiering. But they are doing it better ... doing it differently ... doing it with the needs of their neighbors before them.

All of this is interesting, when you think about it. I mean, caught between eschatological judgment and messianic consummation, the crowds hear John speak of a role in the coming kingdom that they can play. It demands neither monastic asceticism nor spiritual pilgrimage. John invites them to participate in God's coming kingdom wherever they are and whatever they may be doing. All they need is just enough faith in God ... who is at work in and through ... the ordinary and mundane elements of our lives.

This is a promise that we are all invited into. Wherever we may be and whatever we may be doing. In business? Conduct it fairly and with the community in mind. At home with children? Raise them to love God by loving their neighbors. Teaching? Do so with patience and hope. Looking for work? Don't underestimate the good you can do for others even without a job. Studying at school? Learn everything you can and put it to work to make this world a better place. Caring for those with special needs? Remember that of such is the kingdom of heaven made (and give yourself a break when it's hard to remember). And the list goes on.

Yes, this is a promise that we are all invited into. Or, to put it another way, this is a promise for those living “in the meantime.” We too, you see, are caught between judgment and hope every day of our lives, even when we don’t name it that way. The judgment may not feel eschatological ... it may just be not living up to others’ or our own expectations. And the hope may not always be messianic ... it may just be the deep desire that things will get better. But wherever we are, John has a message for those living in the meantime ... struggling to be faithful in the time between the giving of the promise ... and its being kept once and for all.

I’ve known countless people who balance more than their fair share of responsibilities, all of whom, in my opinion, are united by the passion to be who they were called to be ... where they actually find themselves ... in the meantime.

So many of those folks are right here in this church ... actually, right here in this service. I know better than to name them because they always avoid the spotlight, but you know who they are. They serve as deacons and ushers and musicians and greeters and board members. They visit our shut-ins ... they volunteer at hospitals and thrift shops and food pantries. These are the very folks, who haven’t forgotten the rules of the playground ... share, be fair, don’t bully ... and who, while they may not get much attention ... they nevertheless merit it ... for their everyday acts of grace and mercy. All of us are still invited by John ... and by the One John heralds ... to lives of quiet and persistent faithfulness as we await the coming of the Lord. Because maybe, just maybe, twelve days shy of Christmas is the perfect time to remind us that faith doesn’t have to be heroic ... our celebrations don’t have to be ideal ... and we don’t have to be perfect in order to be faithful. And that should make us rejoice!

Today is Gaudete Sunday ... the Sunday of Joy. In contrast to the modern attempts at happiness, the Bible speaks of happiness as joy. The Apostle Paul writes from prison after a long illness ... uncertain of his future and cut off from his mission. He writes to his beloved fellowship of friends at Philippi who have themselves faced internal dissension and external persecution. He tells them:

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:4-7).*

Neither they, nor Paul, were facing circumstances which would inspire happiness as we think of it today. But he encourages them to rejoice, because "the Lord is near." It is an intentional play on words, because "near" can mean "near in space" and "near in time," and Paul probably means both. Joy depends upon our recognition of God's presence and trust in God's deliverance. By prayer we access the reassuring presence and promise of God. And once again, it is not merely an individual psychic experience, but an experience of relationship in the beloved community of God's people.

Joy is a good word for us to hear in this season when we long even more for happiness ... but will surely fail to find it by getting just the right presents or having our high expectations met by

what our friends and families will do for us. Happiness, or joy as the Bible defines it, is much deeper and more active than that. It is not found in what people do for us and certainly not in what we do for ourselves, but in what God gives us and what we do for others. Joy calls us to the happiness of trusting in God's care and hoping in God's future, playing and laughing and singing with our whole hearts because we know the Lord is near!

May we pray?

Lord, teach us to pray, not that you will make us happy but that we might make you happy.

Lord, teach us to work, not to make ourselves happy, but that we might be a gift to the joy of others.

Lord, teach us to lose ourselves in love for you and your children so that we don't even worry about being happy.

Then we will be happy in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.