

The Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2017

"GOOD? NEWS?"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 ~ John 1:6-8, 19-28

I received a great photo this week by email. It shows a green and white highway sign like the ones that name a small town on a back road ... a town too small to build one of those big Chamber of Commerce billboards that say "Welcome to Plover, the city with *Love* in the middle of it" ... or as a member of my former church liked to say, "Welcome to Nekoosa, the city with *Koo* in the middle of it." I especially like reading those signs that tout the glories of yesteryear ... "Hogville: Home of the 1921 State Champion Fighting Boars." Well, the sign in the photo that I received only said the name of town ... "Hell!" You can tell the founders weren't real happy to be there ... which may be another reason they don't have a billboard at the city limits. A big "Welcome to Hell" sign might give travelers pause and discourage them from stopping at the local diner for lunch.

The truly surprising thing about this photo of the city limit sign for Hell ... is that it's glazed over in ice with six-inch icicles ... hanging in a neat row. The caption read, "It finally happened!" Now I knew something about this beforehand because I caught an edition of the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, last summer which said the Pentagon had developed a special super-secret ice bomb they were going to drop on hell to rid the world of Satan and all his evil minions. I thought that was good news, since we all know the wonderful things we've been waiting for "when hell freezes over." So maybe it's finally happened ... but I don't see that the world is as different as we had hoped.

I like to read the *The Onion* once in a while because at least their headlines are funny ... whereas the headlines in the regular newspapers are no less absurd ... but not funny at all. They give me the shivers! I mean, read the headlines in the newspapers or listen to the nightly news. It's all bad news! And I'm not sure you can call it news, because it's really the same old stuff humanity has done through the centuries ... disaster, violence, suffering and the announcement of suffering to come ... war and rumors of war ... the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer ... the usual stuff. No surprises in it, really. I don't know about you, but I could use some good news for a change. I need more good news in my life.

Long ago when Israel was in exile and their news was all bad, God sent a prophet who announced: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn* (Isa 61:1-2).

Now *that's* good news ... and just the kind of thing God does when God acts. You want to know what God wants? You want to see some signs God is present? Look for the places where things are happening ... *to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.*

Justice and righteousness *is* the work of God, and I mean "is" and not "are" ... because in the Bible justice and righteousness are two peas in a pod ... two sides of a single coin. Justice and righteousness *is* the work of God ... not empire building ... not wealth amassing ... not even institution building ... unless those institutions serve the mission of justice and righteousness.

The same thing happened again a few centuries later when God sent this fellow named John ... whose name meant "God is gracious" ... to bear witness to the light. The Gospel writer of the same name emphasizes what John the Baptizer practiced ... and every preacher should follow: *"He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."* John introduced Jesus to the world, and announced the good news of God's salvation. The authorities hauled John in for questioning. "You think you're the Messiah?" they asked him. *"For heaven's sake, no!"* John answered. "Are you Elijah?" *"No, sorry!"* "Are you the prophet?" *"That would be somebody else,"* John said. "Who are you?" they asked him. How would you answer that question if somebody asked you? Who are you? John said, "I'm the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" Well, that's *our* job, too.

When it hasn't happened yet ... but just before ... God sends messengers to get everyone ready for those moments of Divine intervention ... to give everyone a chance to be on the right side at the defining moment. At the eleventh hour, a prophet or an angel or a preacher or just some ordinary person says "Look!" and points to God's in-breaking presence. Think of them as God's warm-up act.

Have you ever been to an event where someone is called upon to introduce the guest of honor? I usually think that the most gracious thing that person can do is just cut to the chase ... make a brief statement and then get out of the way. After all, you're there for the main act, right? But some of them seem to want to linger in the spotlight so they try to be clever and invariably nobody laughs. I always cringe at that moment because I feel badly for them ... and I realize that those announcers and emcees and warm-up acts that we usually ignore have a tough job.

How do I know this ... because that's is my job ... the mission God has given me and, I think, our mission together as Christians in this bad news world. We are God's warm-up act, announcers of good news. It isn't about us ... we don't point to ourselves ... we don't try to get attention to build our names and reputations and purses and power. Our main job isn't even to build this institution. Rather,

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John and I were driving in Colorado one summer with our kids. Well, John was driving and I was taking in all the gorgeous scenery. I spotted something you didn't see in the Texas hill country where we lived. "Moose!" I yelled, as we zipped past. But we turned around, and sure enough, there was a moose farm. There was a huge bull with dramatic antlers, and another dozen or so "meese" standing around him. I'm glad I saw it. I'm glad we turned around and stopped to look at it, because how often do you get to see a moose herd right there by the road? I bet that's happened to you a time or two. I don't mean the moose. I mean, you've been with a group when somebody ... maybe it was you ... noticed something unusual and said, "Look!" and everybody saw something special they might have passed because their eyes were on the road and they just weren't watching for anything out of the ordinary.

Well, that's *our* mission, beloved ... to bear witness to the light! *We're* the people that God has sent into the world to keep our eyes open for the in-breaking presence of God ... and to announce it to our fellow travelers. They're just dully going through their days, eyes downcast, carrying a load of the same old, same old bad news. But we say "Look! There's beauty in this world!" We say, "Look! There's kindness in the world!" We say, "Look! There's love in the world." And we show them. We say, "Look! There's a Savior who lives among us. He comes to us in surprising ways. But he cares for us and he cares about you and he's coming to help you. He's coming to set things right!" It's our job to be on the watch ... to see what others cannot see. Here and there ... now and then ... you catch a glimpse of God's approach ... a sign of God's promise of justice and righteousness for all people. And that's bad news for people who don't want the world to change because they gain advantage in keeping it the way it is ... but it's good news for the poor and sorrowing and suffering masses of humanity.

We are looking for signs. I have several friends who delight in finding unusual signs along the highway. My friend Mark loves a big sign for "Yahweh's Used Cars" in Chicago. He also told me about the sign in front of a tire company that boasts, "If it's in stock, we have it." One of my favorite signs in one I saw in a Lake Tomahawk motel room that said, "Don't clean fish in room!" And because we are trained to see the signs of God's presence among us ... we notice what most people overlook. Because we know God's commitment to justice and righteousness and God's love for all people everywhere ... we rejoice when we see these signs. Because we know God's promise not to abandon humanity to the bad news we keep making ... we can smile and laugh and celebrate still. And because we have been anointed by God's Spirit to announce the good news ... we can say, "Look! God is still at work among us. The dominion of God is on the way! God is still speaking!" And we ourselves become the signs of God's arrival ... we ourselves become the signs that say "Welcome to heaven!"

In her book on *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, Serene Jones tells about the urban congregation she attends, Center Church in New Haven, Connecticut, which sounds a lot like ours. They have a ministry of outreach to the needy. Their children put on a glorious Christmas pageant. But here's where they are a little different ... their whole congregation reenacts the Nativity story in the Gospel of Luke each year as well. Three special events happened at their worship in 1998. One of the women named Joyce, who struggles with mental illness and low self-esteem, was invited to participate. At first, she protested, but then she joined the group dressed in pipe-cleaner halos and shabby old white choir robes singing "Joy to the World" from the balcony. At the end of the song, she turned to the woman standing next to her. Connie was

used to seeing Joyce wear on her face her struggle with interior voices of hate and self-loathing. But tonight was different. Joyce had tears in her eyes and she was smiling radiantly. She whispered, "I never knew I could be an angel!"

Then the innkeeper played by Reggie, a homeless man, stood in the aisle to greet Mary and Joseph and tell them there was no room for them in the inn. But when they asked him for a place to spend the night, he said, "Come right on in!" That wasn't in the script! Mary and Joseph were confused, so they asked again, and again he said, "Come on in!" At first people were nervous. He didn't give the right response. But then they realized Reggie had caught the story in its deeper truth ... that it's not a story about the harsh "no" of homelessness ...s but the surprising "yes" that still breaks through from God.

And then, at the end of the service, another surprise came from Lilly, the seven- year old playing King Herod. The Pastor was about to give the benediction, when Lilly tugged on the pastors' robe and whispered audibly, "Pastor Patricia, I still have something to say." The pastor stepped aside and handed the microphone to this very serious looking child. In a loud, dramatic voice, Lilly said to the congregation, "I am King Herod, and I have been watching you. I am going to kill all your babies. I hate you." Everybody was uncomfortable again, but it was a good reminder that the Christmas story is not a sweet, sentimental tale about a tender newborn baby ... but the real life and death struggle of good against evil and God's intention to assert the good news against the drowning floodtide of bad news in the world.

We are the good news people. And at least part of the good news for us is that we can be God's angels, too. We can be the messengers who watch and wait, who see and announce God's in-breaking presence, the light shining in the darkness. We can announce the good news of God's "yes" to all the people shut out by the harsh "no's" of poverty and violence and class warfare, of sin and failure and self-loathing, of fear and hatred and evil. And we can stand with courage against the principalities and powers to tell every Herod who exerts power with outrageous disregard for human life ...you're going to lose. You're going to lose because you can't win against God!

Isn't it wonderful? Don't we have an exciting mission? My friends, it's the eleventh hour. There's a lot of darkness in the world, but rejoice. The signs of God's presence are all around us. Jesus is coming. Look! He's here! May we pray?

Good God Almighty, Gracious Lord and Savior, Spirit of sweetness and light, open our eyes that we might see, open our mouths that we might speak, open our hearts that we might be good news breaking into the bad news of this world, signs of good things to come. And we will rejoice even now in Jesus' name. Amen.