

The Gift of Good News Luke 3:7-19

INTRODUCTION

One afternoon an artist walked into the consignment gallery where he displayed all his paintings. The owner of the gallery rushed up to tell him he had some good news and bad news for him.

"What's the good news?" the artist asked.

"The good news is that a man came in here today asking if the value of a painting did indeed go up once the artist died. When I told him that was true, he bought every single one of your paintings," the owner replied.

"That's wonderful!" the artist answered. "What could the bad news possibly be?"

"Unfortunately that man was your doctor."

Fred and Sam had been friends for more than 90 years. They both loved baseball more than anything else in the world. One day they promised each other that whoever died first would come back to tell the other one if there was baseball in heaven.

Three months later, Sam died, and the next week Fred was awakened in the middle of the night by someone calling his name.

"Fred. It's me, Sam! I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is that there is baseball in heaven. The bad news is that you are pitching on Friday."

Just so you know, I've been cleaning out my library in recent months. In so doing I came across a collection of the world's cleanest jokes. It was a Christmas gift from my brother many years ago. We used it to irritate our parents for hours. Good news, bad news jokes were among my favorites.

All joking aside, Christmas is all about the GOOD NEWS. There is no bad news here. When the angel appeared to the shepherds on that hillside, he didn't say "I have some good news and some bad news." No, he simply proclaimed:

I bring you **good news** that will cause great joy for all the people. (Luke 2:10)

And in today's Gospel text we see that Luke uses that phrase again:

And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the **good news** to them. (Luke 7:18)

Our theme for this Advent and Christmas season is "Unwrapping Christmas." Often we think more in terms of what gifts can we bring to Jesus – like the little drummer boy or the three Wise Men. But it is important for us to understand that Christmas is mainly about the gifts God gives to us.

We are inspired by this short phrase in Isaiah 9:6:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is **given** ... (Isaiah 9:6)

Those 13 words are our theme this season. In each of these Advent services I have encouraged you to memorize the all of Isaiah 9:6, and to help in that memorization I ask that you say it with me now. Look at the screen if you need to:

For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

Last week the good gift that we UNWRAPPED was a gift of a good work.

... being confident of this, that he who began a **good work** in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

Today we will UNWRAP the gift of GOOD NEWS.

And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the **good news** to them. (Luke 7:18)

Now, we English speaking people have a grammatical problem here. For us "good" is at the low end of the quality index:

good, better, best

But the GOOD NEWS of Christmas is better than that kind of good. It's perfect. Let me show you what I mean. The Greek word that we translate as GOOD NEWS is:

eu-angelion

The "angelion" is the Greek word for news or message. You see the word "angel" in it. An angel is a messenger who brings news.

The "eu" refers to the ultimate and most perfect of all goodness. It gets no better than this kind of good. To phrase it in the most grammatically incorrect way possible what John preached and what the angels proclaimed was the:

BESTEST AND MOST AWESOMEST NEWS EVER

And that GOOD NEWS is God's gift to you. What is it that makes it so good?

#1: INVITATION TO A NEW HOME

When John started to preach his message of repentance and baptism, he knew his Jewish brothers and sisters would object, so before they could do so he told them:

Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. (Luke 7:8)

Baptism wasn't a new ritual when John started to do it. The Jews baptized every Gentile who wanted to convert. It was part of transforming them from "unclean" to "clean."

But John was not baptizing unclean Gentiles. He was baptizing Jews! And he was telling them they needed to repent – to clean up their lives.

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him ... (Luke 3:7)

Unheard of! Jews already viewed themselves as clean before God. They were the children of Abraham! The chosen people! What did they need to repent of? They were already "in." Or at least so they thought.

But in essence John was saying this:

Your heritage got you into the Promised Land, but it won't get you into the Kingdom of heaven.

They were able to cross the Jordan River because of the covenant God made with their patriarch Abraham. But the physical kingdom is different from the spiritual kingdom. To enter into the promised spiritual kingdom requires repentance, not a certain bloodline.

So here is what John is saying: Do you want to be a part of heaven? Then repent! Don't try to hide behind Abraham's tunic! I have GOOD NEWS: Heaven awaits you! But the path there doesn't flow through the veins of Abraham. It flows through the waters of repentance and baptism.

It is the same message that we continue to proclaim, because throughout the centuries – and even today – people have tried to rely on other ways to reach the new spiritual kingdom:

- Some rely on their own standards of moral goodness – I'm better than most people I know.
- Some rely on a checklist of good habits – I go to church when I can and put money in the Salvation Army Kettle
- Some rely on bloodlines – My grandmother was a good Christian

And while those things might make you into a nice person, they don't equate with the call to repent and be baptized.

- There is no other way to heaven except through the salvation offered by Christ Jesus, and that begins in the moment of repentance.

Not only does this BESTEST AND MOST AWESOMEST news include an invitation to a new home, it also includes ...

#2: INVITATION TO A NEW RELATIONSHIP

The really cool thing that John does in this text is introduce his audience to Jesus.

John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Luke 3:16)

You think my baptism is different, just wait until the Messiah comes! His baptism will bring the Holy Spirit and fire. He will really clean you up!

In this passage about GOOD NEWS, John talks about good fruit too. Fruit is the evidence all of the rest of us can see when we look at you. Here's what John says:

...and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Luke 3:9)

The people responded as expected ... with a question:

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. (Luke 3:10)

John gave them specific examples ...

- Give your spare shirt to someone who needs it
- Don't defraud people
- Don't make false accusations
- Learn to be content with what you have

But it's not really about "doing" those things. Those things are "fruit." Fruit is the natural consequence of a healthy organism. Apple trees produce apples. Corn gives us corn. And a godly life produces godly fruit.

Those examples John offered, though, aren't possible apart from the relationship. As Jesus changes us on the inside, the evidence begins to show on the outside. My fruit changes as I grow deeper to God.

APPLICATION

Down through the centuries the various Old Testament prophets preached messages of repentance. John wasn't new in that regard. But those Old Testament prophets didn't have anything else to offer their audiences. John did.

Why? Because the gift had come. The Old Testament prophets only had bad news. John had GOOD NEWS.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is **given** ... (Isaiah 9:6)

Amen.