

It Won't Be the Words You Expect

Luke 3:7-18

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday mornings, WDTN Channel 2 runs a feature called "Tell Me Good News." Their website says they "want to share the good news that happens in the Miami Valley."

Over the past several months, they have run stories about such things as:

- A local nonprofit that helps children who have hearing loss
- A group of veterans who are mentoring young people through hockey
- An engineering company that donated a huge 3D printer to an area tech school

These stories are a nice diversion from the normal news litany of murders, fires, accidents and politics. I think you would agree that everyone appreciates a bit of good news now and then.

"Good news" is a GREAT phrase for the Advent season. "Good news" is what the angels brought to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born:

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you **good news** that will cause great joy for all the people." (Luke 2:10)

In fact, the word "gospel" itself means "good story." And the Greek word that gets translated as "gospel" (*euangelion*) means "a good message" or "good news."

- The "good news" is one of the reasons we like this season of the year so much. It is a season full of "Good tidings of great joy!" Bring on the GOOD NEWS!

In our gospel lesson today, we read these words:

And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the **good news** to them. (uke 3:18)

If you had not heard read the rest of the passage, and you only me read that one verse – verse 18: What message would you expect John to be proclaiming? What is the good news you would expect to hear?

Our focus during these weeks of Advent is on the expectations people bring to the story about the coming Messiah. We are using as our theme: "Great Expectations."

- As I shared two weeks ago when I began this series of sermons, it has seemed to me that many of the Scriptures we have been reading this fall – along with many of the Scriptures we will read this month and in the months ahead – describe the faulty expectations of the Jewish people as they waited for the coming Messiah.
- What they expected was different from what they got.

And that is the core reason why the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah. He was not what they expected. They had a specific picture of what the Messiah would look like,

and what He would do, and how He would act. Quite simply Jesus did not match the picture. He didn't meet their GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

But that also got me thinking about my own expectations about God and my relationship to Him. I asked myself: Where have my GREAT EXPECTATIONS caused me to be like the Jews of old? In other words:

Where have my Great Expectations kept me from seeing what God is actually doing? What do I miss because I am expecting something else?

When I read that 18th verse in today's Gospel –

And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the **good news** to them. (uke 3:18)

... and compare it to what I read in the previous 11 verses, my first thought was "Well, that news doesn't sound very good to me."

As you will see in just a minute, most of what John has to say doesn't seem to fit into the definition of "good news." Good news is something I look forward to hearing.

- This week Karen and I received word that we have two more great nieces born into our family – cousins born one day apart. Their names are Carter and Hadley.
- That's good news!

John's message is sometimes harsh and usually confrontational.

- Yet our text calls it "GOOD NEWS!" What John says is not what I expect when I think about good news. But if the Bible says that it is good, I need to figure out why.

Let me show you what I mean ...

THREE PARTS TO JOHN'S MESSAGE

There were three parts to John's message in our Gospel reading today:

Part #1: Repent!

Look at verses 7-8:

(John speaking) You brood of vipers! ... Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. (Luke 3:7-8)

John's sermon reminds me of a sermon by another guy named John from our own American history. In the mid-1700s a Congregationalist pastor named Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

- It is one of the most famous sermons of all time.
- His sermon emphasized God's wrath on unrepentant people and it paints a very vivid picture of what Hell will be like for any who chooses to live life without God.

- Historians say that the sermon was so powerful people claimed they could feel the heat of Hell warming the floor of the church and smell the sulphur in the air. Women fainted and tough men cried.
- This sermon is credited with being the impetus for the First Great Awakening in North America.
- You can Google it. It is well worth reading.

Neither John the Baptist nor Jonathan Edwards were content with people who just played religious games... People who "talked the talk" but did not really "walk the walk."

- They wanted to see "evidence" that you were a Christian.

John the Baptist uses the phrase: "produce fruit." He wants to see a life that is consistent with an attitude of repentance. That's a lot of pressure! How do you do that?

- You don't. Fruit is the by-product of the repentance John sought. Jesus does that in you. That's the good news.

Part #2: Sacrifice!

Look at verse 11:

(John speaking) Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same. (Luke 3:11)

I read a story this week about two brothers worked together on the family farm. One brother was married and had a large family. The other brother was single. The brothers shared everything equally, both the produce and the profit of the farm.

- Then one day the single brother said to himself, "It's not right that we should share equally the produce and the profit. I'm alone and my needs are simple." So every night he took a sack of grain from his bin and crept across the field between their houses, dumping it into his brother's bin. He sacrificed what he had for his brother.
- The story of sacrifice doesn't end there. As it turns out, the married brother said to himself, "It's not right that we should share the produce and the profit equally. After all, I'm married and I have my wife and children to look after me in years to come. My brother has no one, and no one to take care of his future." So each night he too took a sack of grain and dumped it into his single brother's bin.
- Both men were puzzled for years because their supply of grain never dwindled. Then one dark night the two brothers bumped into each other. Slowly it dawned on them what was happening.

Sacrifice can be a scary thought. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught:

And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:40-42)

That's the scary part of sacrifice. Not only will I be shirtless, I won't have a coat. I will be two miles from home and every beggar in town will have my number. If I sacrifice, who will take care of me?

But the good news is that the coming Jesus takes care of all that. The blessing comes through sacrifice as you watch God provide.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

Part #3: Live Honestly!

Look at verses 13-14:

(To tax collectors): "Don't collect any more than you are required to." (To soldiers): "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." (Luke 3:13-14)

Tax collectors had a cushy job. Rome required them to collect a certain amount, but they could collect whatever they wanted and keep the rest. Soldiers were above the law and often took full advantage of their positions of power.

It is amazing how often we are given the opportunity to be dishonest! And even more amazing how socially acceptable dishonestly has become!

- One Sunday a pastor preached a sermon on honesty. The next morning he took the bus to get to his office. He paid the fare, and the bus driver gave him back too much change. During the rest of the journey, the pastor was rationalizing how God had provided him with some extra money he needed for the week. But he just could not live with himself, so before he got off the bus, he proceeded to give back the extra money and said to the driver, "You have made a mistake. You've given me too much change." The driver smiled and said, "There was no mistake. I was at your church yesterday and heard you preach on honesty. So I decided to put you to a test this morning."
- A salesman was waiting to see the Purchasing Agent so he could submit his Company's bid. While he was waiting, he couldn't help but notice that his Competitor's bid was sitting on the Purchasing Agent's desk. Unfortunately, the actual figure for the Competitor's bid was covered by a coke can. He got to thinking: How could it hurt if he took just a quick look? No one would ever need to know. So he reached over and lifted the coke can. But his heart sank as he watched thousands of BB's pour out from the bottomless can and scatter across the desktop. It was an honesty test set up by the Purchasing Agent ... and he failed it.

What John was demanding was a total reformation of the way the real world operates! That kind of change only happens from the inside out. It requires a change of heart.

- Good news! The coming Messiah changes hearts.

APPLICATION

John had a job. He was called to prepare people for the coming Messiah.

But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. (Luke 3:16)

And through words that were often harsh, he prepared his audience to receive Jesus. He gave them the Gospel – the Good News.

Amen.