

Good News

I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is, Jesus is going to come back again and he's going to gather up all the good people and take them with him and bless them, and the bad people he's going to throw into a lake of unquenchable fire. The bad news is, how do we know who's who? How do we know which we are? Do the Democrats get the fire and the Republicans the blessing, or is it the other way around? Do all Christians get blessed, even if they have done something awful, and non-Christians get the fire, even if they have done a lot of good? Where *is* the good news in this?

This past week I sent out a one-sheet study guide for today's Gospel reading, at the request of the breakfast Bible study group that meets on the first and third Saturdays at 7:30am. Lately that group has been using these study guides, and we thought that maybe a wider audience might be interested in wrestling with the text in preparation for today. One of the questions I asked was, does the preaching of John the Baptist really sound like good news? The Gospel of Matthew has the same litany of threats preached by John, but only Luke calls it "good news." It certainly doesn't sound very good for the chaff who end up in the unquenchable fire, nor does beginning with "you brood of vipers" make John very endearing. Maybe I should have started today's sermon that way. "You brood of vipers!" I'll bet you'd be paying close attention to what I said next.

The Gospel reading today is in such contrast to the other two readings. As Paul nears the end of a letter to his beloved church in Philippi, he can hardly restrain the joy he feels. "Rejoice in the Lord always," he says, and "again I will say rejoice." It's the perfect reading for today, Gaudete or Rejoice Sunday, when we take a short break from the rigors of Advent (and wear pink socks!). One can hardly believe that Paul is writing from a prison cell. Even there, he lives within the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keeping his heart and mind in Christ Jesus. If that phrase sounds familiar, that's because it is part of the blessing formula often given at the end of the Sunday service.

Zephaniah, too, can hardly contain his joy. Sing, shout, rejoice, exult! Unlike Baruch, from whom we heard last week, Zephaniah is not talking about a return from exile, but rather a time when all of the arrogance that he sees around him will be gone. That arrogance comes from the nation's leaders, and in the verses just before today's passage, those leaders will be punished and the humble and lowly people will be raised up. The tables will be turned. The shame of the lame and the outcast will be turned into praise and renown.

Zephaniah gives us insight into what Luke means by "good news." Luke is the Gospel of the outcast and the marginalized. For the lowest levels of ancient society, it is very much good news that those who have more than they need are told to share what they have. If we had heard more from Zephaniah, it would be clear just how political he was. He castigated religious and secular leaders who used power for their own ends rather than the good of others. John the Baptist would be right with him. He has no time for those who are comfortable.

Through John, Luke is warning us. When Luke has John preach about the unquenchable fire, he's telling us to look to our own repentance. John himself will struggle with understanding who Jesus really is. But at least John knows that he's preparing the way for someone better. He doesn't just straighten out the road; he straightens out people. It's not enough to rely on your pedigree, John says; you yourself have to bear good fruit. And he gives some very specific examples of what that fruit looks like. Rethink what you really need and give away what you don't. Don't take advantage of your position. "Be mindful of the needs of others," as an Episcopal mealtime prayer says. There's an economic implication to John's preaching. It matters what we do with our money and our possessions, both personally and as a nation.

As for the unquenchable fire, I'm quite clear that we have no business trying to decide who will be in it and who won't. That's God's business. And personally, I'd rather take the fire metaphorically than literally. But there's no question in my mind that actions have consequences, including eternal consequences. God gave us the free will to walk away from him, forever. It breaks God's heart if we do, because God is love and desires the reconciliation of all people with himself and with one another. Yet we have the freedom to refuse to come into the loving presence of God. To live without that love would be hell.

Paul and Zephaniah remind us that at the heart of faith is joy, joy that can erupt paradoxically in the midst of suffering. The source of that joy is the immense, immeasurable love of God. John the Baptist reminds us not to take love's presence for granted. If it truly dwells within us, it must bear fruit, living lives of integrity, sharing what we have, and seeking economic justice for all.

That *is* good news. No wonder the people were filled with expectation. We should be, too. On this Sunday of joy, let us pause, take a deep breath, and renew our commitment to making our own ways straight, preparing the way of the Lord. As we will sing in our closing hymn,

Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding.
"Christ is nigh," it seems to say.
"Cast away the works of darkness,
O ye children of the day."

Be children of the day. Walk in the light. Be ready for the coming of Christ.

[Advent 3: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18. The hymn is #59 in *The Hymnal 1982*.]