

December 4, Advent II –
The beginning of the good news

Three years ago, early Advent of 2008, our nation rapidly slid into a severe financial crisis. There was a growing sense of fear - would we face a depression? A pastor recalled two conversations back then that surprised him.

First after a church meeting he was talking with a man who told the sad news that his company, without warning, had just laid him off. At 59 he was without a job.

“Only three years away from when I could retire and they laid me off. It was really an unexpected blow”.

That same week he had a conversation with a young woman in her late 20s. She had also been terminated from her high-paying executive position. She too was surprised and devastated, wondering which way to turn next.

When you’re making a list of bad news that you don’t want to receive, surely the news that you are being laid off, fired, terminated from your job has to be toward the top of the list of bad news.

And yet (here’s the surprising part) both of these people reacted to this bad news in the same amazing way.

“You know,” said the older man, “I have to admit that I had really come to despise my work. My first morning out of the job, I didn’t mind not having to get dressed and go to that office. I’m beginning to think that maybe the company did me a favor. Sure, I don’t know what’s coming next, but *I feel strangely young, free, as if I’m sort of glad to be forced to be starting over and trying out new paths.*”

And the young woman said, “I think that my generation has had it too easy. We took all this for granted. I know that I am guilty of getting on a treadmill called the ‘American dream’ in which I got a high-paying job, worked all the time, accumulated more and more stuff, and thought that was life. *I’m learning that is not life at all. I think I’ve been given a chance to refocus, to put things in perspective, and I’m going to do just that.*”

Now I know that you may be thinking: sometimes people, in tough circumstances, try to put a happy face on things. But I’m thinking that sometimes, amid the bad news life sends our way, we are able to find good news. Sometimes good news begins with bad news that’s processed in a very special way that transforms bad news into good.

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I’m thinking about good news because here we are in Advent and “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” That’s the first verse in Mark’s Gospel. In fact, that’s what the word “gospel” means – good news.

And how does Mark begin that good news? With a “voice crying in the wilderness” named John the Baptist. What does John do? He was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

“Get cleaned up, have your sins forgiven, get ready, Messiah’s coming,” was John’s proclamation in a nutshell.

Does that sound like “good news” to you? In our time, “good news” is something like, “Good news, you just won the lottery and getting a million dollars!” More typically

around the church it's, "Good news, you are a wonderful person who has a heart of gold."

There are those popular TV preachers who don't preach, "Good news, you can repent and be washed of your sin," but rather, "Good news, God has got all sorts of gifts and rewards for a nice person like you." Those preachers draw the affection of millions.

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But is that really true? Is it what you need to hear?

One woman said: "Jesus is not only my savior but also my source of truth. I don't just come to church to be comforted. The church is one of the few places where I go during the week where there is likelihood that somebody will care enough about me to tell me the truth."

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After a very long and boring sermon, the parishioners filed out of the church saying nothing to the preacher. Toward the end of the line was a thoughtful person who always commented on the sermons. "Pastor, today your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God!"

The pastor was thrilled. "No one has ever said anything like that about my preaching before. Tell me why."

"Well," said the parishioner, "it reminded me of the Peace of God because it passed all understanding and the Love of God because it endured forever!"

John the Baptist preached a short direct sermon, leading to "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John stood in the line of the Hebrew Scripture's prophets who told the truth about Israel. God's people, though beloved and blessed by God, have sinned. They had strayed from God's ways and followed their own ways. They had not lived the lives that God intended for them to live. They were missing out on real life.

Time to refocus and put things in perspective.

That's "good news"?

The word "repentance" means turn around, change, even start over. John not only preached "you have failed, you have fallen short of what God intended," but also preached "you can change" – your life can be different. You can have a different, better future. And that is good news.

Good news sometimes begins with an honest, searching, sometimes painful look at the truth of our situation. In fact, it's hard to imagine true change that does not begin in truth telling.

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Take the two people I spoke about earlier. Both of them had received bad news – you are fired, the life you had is over, ended. And yet, in the mysterious workings of the grace of God (or at least that's what I think it is) both of them had that bad news transformed into good news – you can have a new life, maybe even a much more true, better life. They found themselves pushed, by bad news, to a new place where they saw new, liberating truth about themselves. The bad news was, for them, the beginning of good news.

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So here we are in church today on this 2nd Sunday of Advent. And what have you come for?

I think you have come for “good news,” but not necessarily as the world defines “good news.” You have come here for some truth about your true situation. You know, in your more truthful moments, that you have not lived as God intended for you to live. You have made mistakes and you have done wrong. You have not only done wrong but you have secretly thought, felt, and been wrong. In short, you have sinned.

Yet by the grace of God you have been given the wisdom to know that seemingly bad news is your good news, nothing less than a gift of God to you. You can hear the truth, tell the truth, and thereby you can change. You can have a new life.

In AA and CA step # 4 is “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” The first step in this process of "getting real" is to face the truth of my situation and start seeing things as they truly are.

This Step is the key to freedom -- and to the faith which really works in daily living.

We’ll never have different lives without first telling the truth about our present selves. And the good news is that God loves us enough to somehow get through to us the bad news about our true situation. God becomes the mirror of truth held up before us, and then God becomes the way that we can learn from the truth and move toward a different tomorrow.

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So we have Advent, the Winter Lent, to refocus our lives on Christ and His way - to tune up our spiritual life - revitalize it - and to get our walk with the Lord back on the right path.

It’s an opportunity to **begin to discern** the Lord’s purpose for you more clearly - and turn your life **toward His purpose, relying on His power.**

By God’s grace *you can hear the truth that you need to refocus and put your life in perspective* -- maybe even your life needs change and renovation.

Advent is a time when we **reflect on our future with hope,**

The future does not have to be a continuation of the past... your future not yet determined... We are able to imagine something better than merely a continuation of present arrangements.

Your life can be different, you can try a new path.

God can bring possibilities **into reality doing for us what we could never do for ourselves.**

If we imagine possibilities that **are God’s possibilities,** God then **empowers us to realize** them.

Imagine the possibilities.

Prayer

Lord, we would like to get on toward Christmas, toward that season of joy and light - yet, in countless ways, we seem to prefer darkness to light.

So you make us to sit here in Advent, to listening to John the Baptist, who calls us to repent.

Lord, we would like to rush on to goodwill and cheer, and you call us to weep for our

shortcomings, to grieve for our sin.

Lord, we would like to claim that we are basically good people who are full of peaceful feelings for everyone, but you make us face the truth about our lives.

Lord, give us an early Christmas gift this year. Give us honesty about ourselves and what we have made of our lives. Give us the gift of repentance so that we might be forgiven, so that we might be changed, and saved from ourselves. Amen.

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Christmas Eve Service at **7:00** pm

Christmas Day Service at 11:00 am