

Sermon "The Good News or the Bad?"

Sunday, January 23, 2011

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Christ Church, Shaker Heights

Epiphany III, Year A: Is. 9:1-4, 1 Corinth 1:10-18, Matt. 4:12-23

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom."

We are reminded in today's message from Matthew that the gospel is good news. The good news is what Jesus proclaimed in his ministry; in fact it was its singular purpose. The good news is the reason for Jesus' birth and it was the cause for which he died.

The word gospel derives from the Old English god-spell, meaning "good news" or "glad tidings". It is a word-for-word translation of the Greek word euangelion (eu- "good", -angelion "message").

We hear a lot about the good news in the Church. The good news is the reason for the Church's existence. In Mark (16:15) Jesus instructs the disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation." All of us who adhere to Jesus' teachings and who desire to be his followers are called to do the same; preach the good news. It's our job.

If I were to distill the definition of good news down to its essence I would use an event recorded in Luke (4:17b-21) as my plumb line. In this story Jesus goes to the synagogue and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. We are told, "[Jesus] opened the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In this passage, Jesus refers to Isaiah's prophesy of the coming messiah who would end the oppression of all peoples. And most crucially when he states that, "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" Jesus is saying that he is that long awaited messiah. So the good news is that all of humanity has been reconciled to right relationship with God, regardless of their ailments, their status, or their sins, real or perceived. All of humanity has been freed from those things that oppress us through Jesus' all embracing love for every person. And the only requirement to receiving that good news is to go and do likewise to others. Or in the words of the new commandment, to love one another as I have loved you."

But there is a gospel being proclaimed from pulpits and beyond that is not good news, it is a dysangelion, a bad news that is a falsification of the gospel announced in the New Testament. You don't have to travel far – or even travel at all – to hear this bad news.

Observe the hundreds of billboards and church signs that proclaim that we must accept Jesus as our Savior or we will go hell. There's a whole series of these bad news billboards right along interstate highway 71 going south between here and Cincinnati.

And then there is talk radio and cable television with preachers and pundits putting this "believe my way or fry" message out into the world 24/7.

And there is Pope Benedict who when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger wrote that Roman Catholicism was the only true path that leads to salvation; a belief that he has continually undergirded in one form or another as pope.

While there are many candidates in contention for being the poster boy (or girl) of the bad news gospel, my vote goes to Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. Phelps and his congregation have been around for a while. Their notoriety grew when they picketed the Matthew Shepherd funeral with signs proclaiming that "God hates fags." These days Westboro Baptist is renowned for bringing their hateful message to the funerals of members of the armed forces. It is their belief that our culture's growing tolerance of homosexuality has caused the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, ergo the deaths of our soldiers is God's wrath against us. Phelps and his folks protest on the sidewalks outside of places where military funerals are taking place. They carry signs proclaiming "Thank God for IEDS," "God hates fags," "Not blessed just cursed" and "God hates you."

A few years ago in response to this hatred, a God Hates Fred Phelps campaign sprung up. Yet as tempting as it is to line up behind that sentiment the truth is that if we believe the good news of Jesus then God does not hate Fred Phelps. God loves him and desires that he and his minion abandon proclaiming this bad news so that he can hear the authentic good news of Jesus Christ.

Closer to home we have plenty of pastors and preachers who offer the bad news message as a steady diet for their flocks. You may recall one such pastor of a megachurch in the area who this past spring wrote a column in the Plain Dealer in which he stated that people who did not believe in the Jesus of John's gospel were "dangerous and deluded." My subsequent rebuttal of this bad news theology in a letter to the editor became fodder for mockery in the conservative blogosphere and some pulpits, all of which I consider to be a badge of honor.

Some of the bad news gospel is put forward in pretty straightforward language, some is more muted, but it all proclaims the same message, hell is the reward for not believing or following this or that particular denominations or congregation's doctrinal or theological stance.

My friends, the only antidote to eradicate the infection of bad news in the world is to abundantly proclaim the good news.

What about us? Are we proclaiming the good news in the midst of the bad news gospel? Admittedly it's always easy to see the bad news being proclaimed in word and deed by others, especially when it's straightforward, obnoxious and in your face. But other than rolling our eyes, shrugging your shoulders, or offering a mild tsk, tsk, what do we do? History tells us over and over that those who are silent in the face of bad and evil events are culpable of enabling them to grow.

Do we proclaim the good news in our lives? Are we heeding Jesus' instruction to be in the world, preaching the gospel to the whole creation." And I don't just mean verbally. St. Francis once stated, "preach the gospel always, if necessary use words." Using that measuring stick can we with integrity look at one another and say that we are walking the talk of the good news as self-identified followers of Jesus?

People who are not Christians ask these very questions all the time when they observe we Christians. Show us the beef they say. Where can we see in you the positive results of this good news stuff you talk about all the time? Where in you can we witness the fruits of your faith so that we can be convinced it's really the good news you say it is? Sadly all too often people don't see it. And it is this disconnect between what we say we believe and what we actually end up doing and saying that allows others to see us as being at best hypocrites and at worst dangerous.

The Christian life calls us to engage in self-examination and reflection. So let's do that. Let's ask ourselves if our behavior reflects the good news of loving one another as Jesus loved us. This means identifying and purging those bad news elements of rancor, malice, envy, smugness, arrogance, self-righteousness, jealousy, vengeance, and hatred from our lives. It means seeking and praying God's forgiveness from these behaviors and desiring to be restored to right relationship with God.

What shall we say then? What will we do?

In the final analysis if we are truly the followers of Jesus that we say we are then we must announce the tidings that Jesus brought, that the gospel writers, Peter, Paul and other anonymous writers bore witness to, namely, that God is good, that God brings light into darkness, that God raises the dead to life, that God embraces all his children regardless, and that our Abba in heaven has a human face, the face of love in Jesus our Savior.

There is no other good news that surpasses that.

Amen.