

## **“Ain’t That Good News!”**

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

Good news for some people isn’t necessarily good news for all people.

- If you are celebrating the good news that your team has been victorious, at the same time those game results are bad news for fans of the opposing team.
- If your child is accepted to a selective, prestigious university, other families are dealing with the bad news that their child was not accepted to that school.
- If the value of your house has increased, that good news for you may be bad news for young families who are being priced out of the real estate market.

“Good news” is not always received by everyone as “good news.”

For Christians, *the “good news”* is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel is embodied in Jesus, whose birth we have again celebrated at Christmas as the coming of *Emmanuel* – “God with us.” The good news of Jesus Christ was proclaimed by the earliest Christians who were empowered by the Holy Spirit so that beginning on the day of Pentecost were able *“in our own languages [to] hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”* (Acts 2:11). As he begins his account of this Gospel message, Luke acknowledges that *“many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,”* even as this Evangelist presents his Gospel *“so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”* (Luke 1:1-2, 4). It has been the call of Christ’s Church through the centuries to be faithful in proclaiming this good news of Jesus Christ to all nations, for *“neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe in him and receive him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit.”* (Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*).

But from the beginning of the Gospel’s proclamation, it became clear that what we hear as good news is not “good news” for everyone. On the day when the Church remembers the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are introduced to John the Baptist, who Luke identifies as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah as *“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* (Luke 3:4; Isaiah 40:3). The Baptizer is *“proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (3:3) and calling on the crowds who came out to the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by him to *“bear fruits worthy of repentance.”* (3:8). John’s striking presence and powerful preaching led to the *“people [being] filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.”* (3:15). Expectation of a Davidic Messiah had emerged as a strong force in Palestinian Judaism in the last two centuries B.C.E. (Before the Common Era). But John cuts short such speculation by pointing to Jesus as one greater than he, the one who is truly the fulfillment of God’s promises concerning a Saviour of the Nations. While John baptizes with water, a form of ritual cleaning that purified a person of their sins, the one who is coming would be so much greater that *“I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.”* (3:16). Untying sandals was such a menial duty that it was expected only of slaves; disciples were not expected to untie their master’s sandals. John uses this extreme example to emphasize the radical difference between his baptismal ministry and the baptism of the one who is to come, the one who will *“baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* Fire describes the inflaming, purifying work of the Holy Spirit, an image used by Luke in describing the bestowal of the Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost:

- “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” – Acts 2:2-4.

Using the image of one who uses a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff, John proclaims that the Coming One will bring salvation for the repentant and judgment for the unrepentant.

In verses that are not included in our Gospel text this morning, Luke reports that *“with many other exhortations, [John] proclaimed the good news to the people.”* (3:18). John’s words are gospel because *“when repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news. The primary aim is to save the wheat, not to burn the chaff.”* (Fred Craddock). But what happens to the Baptist reminds us that even the good news of Jesus Christ, the Gospel that is to be proclaimed to all nations as *“Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:24), was not received as “good news” by everyone. Luke reports that *“Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.”* (3:19-20). Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BCE – 39 CE, the son of the despotic Herod the Great who was responsible for the slaughter of the Holy Innocents in an attempt to kill the child who the Wise Men had identified as the “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:16-18). Herodias was the daughter of Antipas’ brother Aristobulus and his wife Bernice. Herodias married a son of Herod the Great by another of his ten wives. When Antipas proposed marriage to Herodias, she consented on the condition that he send away his first wife. Such a marriage was an offense to pious Jews because it violated the law against such relationships (*“You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife; it is your brother’s nakedness.”* – Leviticus 18:16). Herod Antipas arrested John because of the Baptist’s condemnation of this marriage; Matthew and Mark report on Herodias’ complicity in John’s execution, a forerunner of the fate of the one who at his baptism will share the good news that is the light to all nations.

While all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) report on the Baptism of Jesus, in Luke’s account John is not mentioned by name (some speculate that this may have parried possible claims by the followers of John that he was greater because he baptized Jesus); the baptism itself is not reported, only the events that followed; prayer is emphasized; and the Spirit descended upon Jesus *“in bodily form,”* like a dove. The baptism of Jesus, reported after the arrest of John the Baptist, marks the succession: as John’s work has been completed, Jesus’ ministry is now beginning. As prayer is significant throughout Luke’s Gospel (Luke’s account of the teaching of the Lord’s Prayer comes when Jesus *“was praying in a certain place, and after he was finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, and John taught his disciples.’”* – 11:1), it is not surprising that Jesus was praying at the time that the Spirit came upon him. Prayer will also be emphasized at the disciples’ preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: *“All of them were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”* (Acts 1:14).

The opening of heaven at the baptism of Jesus signals that he is the Messiah and that the fulfillment of Israel’s eschatological expectations is at hand, in fulfillment of the prophet’s cries: *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”* (Isaiah 64:1). The coming of the Spirit upon Jesus commissioned and empowered him for his ministry with a voice that in Luke only Jesus hears: *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* (3:22). “Beloved” (*agapetos*) is used in Luke only on two other occasions, each referring to Jesus:

- “The from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him!’” – 9:35.
- “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’” – 20:13.

Being “well-pleased” (*eudokeo*) is also an attribute reserved only for God in Luke: “*Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*” (12:32). The voice at the baptism of Jesus commissions him at the beginning of his ministry as it also “*discloses both the identity of the Son and the character of the Father.*” (Alan Culpepper).

The message of Jesus’ baptism is truly Gospel – good news – for us, because it proclaims to us that the promises of God once again have been fulfilled, that Jesus is indeed the coming One who will abide with God’s people so that “*when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*” (Isaiah 43:2). As the voice from heaven declares that Jesus is God’s beloved Son, so also does God call upon us “*do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*” (43:1). As the voice from heaven proclaims who Jesus is as he begins his ministry, so also at our Baptism does God call us by name as we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.*” (ELW Baptism). As we are called by the name our parents give us when we are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, so also are all of us given a new name – *Child of God* – as God claims us as sons and daughters as we are “*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*” As Jesus served among God’s people every day in the confidence that he is God’s beloved Son, so do we live and serve every day in the assurance that from the day when we were called by name we are also God’s beloved children:

- “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” – 1 John 3:1-3.

For us, the Gospel is truly good news, for it is the story of the beloved Son of God who was born among us, lived among us, died and rose again so that we might also be God’s beloved children and share in that same inheritance that is “*imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*” (1 Peter 1:4). Because we live as children of the heavenly Father, we have confidence that “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever ... his the loving purpose solely to preserve them pure and holy.*” (ELW Hymn 781). In words sung by enslaved people who knew that the chains of their oppressors could not restrain them from reaching their heavenly home, those who knew that they were God’s beloved children sang “*I’m going to lay down this world, going to shoulder up my cross, going to take it home to Jesus – ain’t that good news!*”

That is good news for us – but that ain’t good news for all people. The Gospel message that Jesus Christ embodied, the good news that the apostles proclaimed to all nations, was not received as good news by those who had dedicated themselves to opposing God’s will in their lives. For those who sought to live by their own will and desires, the message that those who followed Jesus had to surrender their desires to God’s will was bad news. For those who became wealthy through oppressing other people, the message that Christ came as the Redeemer to break the chains of oppression was very bad news. For their Herods of the world who feared that the light of Christ would expose their evil ways, the message that God’s beloved Son is dwelling among us was not good news – and had to be eliminated by any means necessary. Even though “*the light has come into the world ... [many] people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*” (John 3:19). Jesus warns his disciples that those who hear the Gospel message as bad news will do everything within their power to silence this message: “*You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair or your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*” (Luke 21:17-19).

As John the Baptist proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ even though it cost him his freedom to one who heard the Gospel as bad news, we are called to be faithful to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ even when it is not a popular word or one that is received as good news by all. Many will ignore the good news of Jesus Christ;

others will reject it as foolishness, while those who have benefited from living in the shadows will actively oppose the light that exposes their evil deeds. Throughout the centuries, many have given their lives as martyrs because they have been faithful to our Lord's call to be witnesses (the word "martyr" comes from a word that originally meant "witness") to the good news that is meant as light for all people. At times, it may appear that the opponents of the good news are gaining the upper hand; but for us who are called to be faithful in sharing the gospel, we are reminded that *"as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth ... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that for which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* (Isaiah 55:10-11). In his ministry to proclaim to the good news of the God who loves all of God's children in the midst of a world in which equality was seen as bad news by those who benefited from segregation, Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that the God who called him to proclaim this Gospel would give him the strength to endure even as it would one day lead to his own martyrdom:

- "My experience with God has given me a new strength and trust. I knew that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life... When our days become dreary with low-hanging clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better men. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world."

*"I've got a Saviour in the kingdom – ain't that good news?"*

This Gospel may not be good news for everyone – but it is good news for us, because it is our assurance that God is with us, that we are God's children, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, God's beloved Son.

Ain't that good news! Amen.