

*A sermon given on Sunday, December 13, 2009,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Good News?

How many of you have your Christmas tree up and decorated?
Have your shopping done? Presents wrapped and mailed? Christmas cards addressed?
How many of you feel as if there is still so much to do to get ready for Christmas?

Advent is about preparation – preparation for the celebration of Christmas, sure, but also a preparation of our hearts and souls to welcome Jesus into our lives in new ways.

Our secular world reminds us of all the ways we need to prepare for Christmas. Our church readings and hymns remind us of how to prepare for Christ.

That's what John the Baptist's speech is about. Luke calls it good news.
Good news! Good news? Is the good news that we must change our ways?
Well...it is, in some ways.

John came preparing the way for Jesus – letting us know that the One who would come after him was greater, was powerful, and was going to save us. John tells us to repent, and reminds us that we cannot earn or inherit our own salvation, instead we must let go of our old ways and live the way God wants us to live.

I think it could be easy to hear John's message as either hellfire and damnation – we're all sinners and all going to Hell – or as a recipe for doing enough good works that we won't have to worry about such things. Neither of these messages feels true to John's role in preparing people for the Messiah and spreading the Good News.

I believe it is Good News because Jesus' coming is exactly what our hearts most desire. We think we want the stuff of the world – power, authority, wealth, objects...but deep down, what we most crave is an intimate relationship with God. And the Good News is that this is exactly what is being offered to us – if we can only realize it and accept the invitation to living God's way.

Part of what John is telling us is that words alone are not enough. It is not enough to say good things. The proof of our faithfulness is to be found in good action – sharing our resources, helping our neighbor. But these actions alone are not what get us what we want. They are a product of repentance and return to God's way. If we live according to God, then we will want to serve others. We will not be as possessive. It will be easier to share. Our neighbor's welfare will matter deeply to us.

It reminds me of that dilemma of working with kids (and some adults!) when there is conflict. When hurt feelings abound, and complaints of who started it fill the air, we are quick to demand words of apology. Tell your friend you are sorry! Right now! Do it! (Been there recently?)

Now it may be true that saying those words, “I’m sorry” is a first step toward reconciliation. But we all know how empty it feels when they are said without sincerity – when you say “I’m sorry” and don’t really mean it.

In order for reconciliation to take place, repentance has to occur on the inside as well. There must be changed behavior – attitudes and actions that take the welfare of others into account. We must begin to value the relationship over being right. Then, when we say, “I’m sorry,” it can mean something.

I think this is part of what John the Baptist was getting at. Stop saying the words you think God wants to hear, and start living out your faith – repent of the evil you know is wrong. Change your ways. Stop trying to save yourself. Let God in. Depend on God.

The recipe isn’t complicated. Much of it we heard in Kindergarten: Share. Be kind. Don’t cheat. Love each other.

But it isn’t easy stuff. And it doesn’t work to just go through the motions, or just say the words. We actually have to mean it. It is hard work – the hard work of faithfulness. Of discipleship. Of living together in relationship. Of submission of our egos to God’s way of love. This is the work that John the Baptist calls us to in preparation for the coming of Jesus.

Is it Good News? Ultimately, yes, it is. The Good News is that God is in control, God is coming, God will judge. The Good News is that God offers us exactly what we year for most deeply:

Not the new Xbox game, but deep joy

Not the cheery Hallmark message, but unconditional, sacrificial love

Not a promotion to a better station in this world, but eternal life in full union with God.

Big, scary, real stuff. Stuff that really matters.

And our work to get ready for this gift, is to take a good hard look at ourselves, acknowledge that we are not in control, that we are not “owed” anything, and that we cannot earn this grace. And when we really let that sink in, and work in our spirit, then repentance is natural, reconciliation is possible, and conversion is probable. We will be ready to receive the very gift we want most – a deeper relationship with God, a sense of purpose and meaning, a peace which infuses and transforms everything, a Love deeper than we can imagine or understand. That is the Good News promised to us. So for the rest of this Advent season, I encourage you to ponder what you really want for Christmas. Have the courage, the faith, to take a good hard look at yourself, and admit

where you come up short. Work for reconciliation, and mean it. Make some space for God to work in your life.

Let's get ready, the Messiah is coming! Amen.