

“Seeing the Good News”  
Malachi 3: 1-4, Luke 3: 1-6,  
Advent 2/C, December 6, 2009  
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*In the first year of the presidency of Barack Obama, when Rell was Governor of Connecticut and Lieberman was Senator, and Chip Beckett sat on the town council of Glastonbury, during the time when Lynne and Dick were ministers, the word of God came to the people of South Church. And they went out into all the regions, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Prepare the way of the Lord.*

You can picture a town crier making such an announcement, “Hear ye! Hear ye! In the first year of the presidency of Barack Obama....” Can you imagine going out into the region to proclaim *anything* in the name of God? I can assure you Luke has never been to New England. We don’t go out into the region to make a ruckus, not even for God. However, that is precisely what John is calling us to do. Set aside your worries about having the right words or what the neighbors will think or the notion that your story is not worth hearing. Set that all aside to proclaim the good news to those who are anxious to hear it.

John the Baptist is one of those peculiar figures in the Bible. John understands his purpose and mission very clearly. He is to point us in the direction of the story, but he is not the story. He is to prepare us to become a follower of the Way, but it is not his Way. He knows he is not the Messiah but he knows who the Messiah is. He has no desire to hone in on Jesus’ territory; he does not wish to have Jesus’ power. John is in fact, Jesus’ cousin, born just a few months before him. John’s parents, like Jesus’, were visited by the angel Gabriel and told that even though they were getting on in age, they would have a son. This son would be very important. John was present at Jesus’ baptism. In fact, he performed his baptism even though he did not feel worthy to do so. John had begun his own ministry and had quite a following when Jesus showed up to begin his public ministry. Many may have believed that John was the Messiah. Later John was imprisoned for standing up for his beliefs and was executed for his stand against King Herod’s immorality. However, this story is not about John. This story is about Jesus.

John had a special role to play and he took this role very seriously. He wasn’t called to be the Messiah, he was called to bear witness to the Messiah, and to help people prepare for the coming of this Messiah. He was a messenger of God. The messenger’s role is often a difficult one. You are sent to proclaim a message that people are not always ready to hear. You do not formulate this message, you merely transmit it.

The writer Sharron Lucas says, “If you happen to be a marathon runner or a student of history, you will remember the story of Phidippides, a professional runner who carried important messages between Athens and Sparta during the Persian/Greek War and the Battle of Marathon. He ran 280 miles, fought all day with the Greek Army, and then ran 26 miles back to Athens to carry a message of victory before dropping dead from

exhaustion. This victory was one of the decisive events of world history, and the messenger Phidippides played an important role in the event.

Messengers do play key roles as bearers of the communiqué with which they have been entrusted. If the news is bad,” she says, “then the messenger risks harm. In his play *Antigone*, Sophocles wrote, ‘no one loves the messenger that brings bad news,’ and Shakespeare is credited with penning a version of the familiar phrase, ‘don’t shoot the messenger.’”

Being a messenger is not always a glamorous job even when the news is incredibly good, as it is about Jesus. John invites us to prepare ourselves for this coming Messiah, but the preparation will not be easy. He warns that everything is will change, that everything *must* change for the Messiah to come into the world. The physical landscape will be altered, mountains will be made low and the rough places a plain. Our spiritual landscape will change. Jesus will bring change that is radical and life altering. This change will affect everyone, those who follow and those who do not. John calls for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is the act of repenting, of naming those things that have been a barrier to our relationship with God, and accepting the gift of forgiveness that prepares us to receive the Christ when he comes.

The news we hear is Good News even if it is difficult news. Repentance takes real commitment. It is not something we do lightly. This sounds more like a Lenten message than one for Advent. However, it is completely appropriate not only for Advent, but especially for a communion Sunday in Advent. The preacher Beth Quick says, “Repentance is never easy. It literally means a changing of the direction of one’s mind—a turning around of your life so that you are leaving the path you are on and taking a new course, a new direction, that goes in the direction that God is going with you.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to change course, we need to acknowledge how we have gone off course. We must admit that the path we are taking is not the path that God intends. There are many things that can lead us off course. They can be small and subtle things or they can be bigger things. Not signing up to serve the meal at South Park Inn when we intended to may be a small thing. Having an affair that threatens to tear your family apart is a bigger thing. Big or small, we all have something in our lives that we can admit to and relinquish to God, in order to get back on course and follow the path that God has for us. This is what happens every time we come to share communion. We have the opportunity to confess, sometimes in silence and sometimes as a community, to the times and the ways that we have shut out God, when we have thought ourselves beyond God’s care, when we have ignored God’s nudging prophetic voice calling us to leave behind our sinful ways to move in a new direction.

Repentance does not have to be frightening. In fact, John intends for it to be liberating. Once you have unburdened yourself of that which weighs you down, you are free to live in a new way, follow a new path. You are free to speak in a new voice a message that

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<sup>1</sup> Beth Quick, “The Promise: Preparing—Luke 3: 1-6” sermon for Advent 2/C. December 10, 2006.

comes directly from God. We are all messengers, just like John, and we have something to say that might change another person's life. John understood his role and his message. He understood that if we take him seriously, we could be in danger. Being a messenger and having a prophetic voice got John in jail and eventually executed. Many of the early disciples were martyred for their beliefs. There have been millions of people through the ages who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for their faith. Thankfully we are not at risk of death for proclaiming our faith. Why then do we keep silent? Why are we reluctant to engage in good honest debate about the issues of the day and stake a claim as to what our faith calls us to do? John's invitation is not to play it safe. He does not want us to stand on the sidelines watching while others take risks.

You are God's messengers. You are messengers in a long, strong tradition of God-bearers in the world. Sharron Lucas says, "As followers of The Way and adopted children of God, we are charged with being stewards of the Gospel and for sharing that Good News. We are to carry the message in our time and to the places where God calls us. The problem is that it is oh-so-easy to forget our role." Those of us who are trained to lead congregations or work in a professional capacity in the church are not the only messengers. This is a ministry for all believers. The church is more than a way station where you come to be filled and strengthened for life's journey. This is important, however, when we return to our lives beyond the church, we are to go and tell. Go and tell others how your lives have been transformed by the power of God's love, by God's amazing grace, by a peace that passes all understanding. Many of you speak the language of love and redemption in the way you live your life. However, many of you, when encouraged have witnessed in a different way to the power of God at work in your life.

It is such a joy when you share your stories. Every story is rich. Every story teaches me something, touches me in special way. We can get up and tell our stories because it feels safe here, we are among friends. It may not feel as safe when you are sitting at Daybreak sharing a cup of coffee with a friend. You feel intimidated, not because you are afraid that something awful will happen, but because you worry you won't know what to say, or the message will be rebuffed or you might come across as well, Christian. John is calling us to be evangelists, bearers and sharers of the Good News, and the thought of it makes us shiver.

We have nothing to fear. You need not worry you don't have what it takes to do God's work. You already show forth in your words and in your lives the story of Jesus. We carry on the mystery of incarnate love wherever and whenever we meet another person in this love. It is the season of Advent, and we are watchful and hopeful. We are waiting for God to break into our world again in radical and unexpected ways. Embrace your inner messenger. Trust in the word that has been made flesh within you. Do not worry as the mountains crumble and the road takes a new direction. All this must happen if the Christ is to come and dwell among us. Amen

Sources:

Sharron R. Lucas, "Among the Messengers," sermon for Advent 2/C, December 6, 2009.

Beth Quick, “The Promise: Preparing—Luke 3: 1-6”, sermon for Advent 2/C, December 10, 2006.