

Sheldon W. Sorge, Pittsburgh Presbytery, December 10, 2015
On the occasion of the installation of Ayana Teter as Associate Minister to Presbytery

All the News that's Fit to Tell

Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

The scene is electric – the preacher is so riveting that crowds travel for hours to hear him in the desert. It's not just the usual suspects most likely to be drawn to revivals – military and government officials, accountants, scholars, and more flock to hear him. Church leaders send a crew to check him out, nervous about what sort of counter-institutional foment he may be stoking.

No-one who comes looking for something extraordinary leaves disappointed. With long untamed hair, wearing animal skins, and eating locusts and wild honey, he is as wild as he is mesmerizing. He is so popular that rumors begin circulating that he is God's appointed one to deliver the country from its captors. He remains so popular that even after his death that nobody dares speak a word against him.

So what exactly is his message that has everyone so enthralled? "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?" Why in the world would people come great distances to hear *this*? Clearly he has not taken a course in pastoral care at a PCUSA seminary. Yet the story of his crusade gets summed up like this: "So, with many exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." If this preaching is "good news," what would "bad news" look like?

The details of his message vary somewhat depending on which writer is telling John's story. Luke's account that we read today tells his message in the most detail. Yet while particulars may not be the same, two aspects of his ministry are consistent across all the accounts – 1. He calls people to change their way of living, and 2. He points to Jesus as the one who *really* is the heart of God's good news. This is the essence of the "good news" – change is possible, and Jesus is God's instrument to make it happen. It's wonderful news for everyone, except for those who are determined to keep things exactly as they are. The news of a coming new world is wonderful for everyone who suffers and struggles in the world as we know it, but for those who resist change, not so much.

The good news is not that we are a brood of vipers, but that we can admit our perversity because God is committed to changing us. Through Jesus, God is able and sure to transform us so that we can become what God created us to be, and fully enjoy what God wants us to enjoy.

The psalmist describes the righteous person as one who has no fear of bad news. (Psalm 112:7) This doesn't mean that the righteous are shielded from bad things, but that they know that bad news is not the final word. This is true for the bad news around us – whether the calamities of nature or of terrorism – but it is especially true for the bad news inside us. We need not fear owning up to that which is askew within us because we know that God will take all that is broken in us and make it whole. The good news trumps the bad news every time; that is why we don't fear bad news.

Alas, the politics of fear have gripped us mightily. Politicians know well that fear and outrage are powerful galvanizers of popular sentiment, and many play on it to their advantage. Fixation on the fears of evils all around us renders us unmindful of the evils that lie within us. The Gospel proclaimed by Jesus is honest about the bad news both without and within, and it is

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Good News because it announces that such evil is already overcome by the in-breaking kingdom of God.

Our epistle lesson today is a striking companion to the Gospel lesson. Paul is in summary mode now, tying up all that he has said through his letter to the Philippians – “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.” “Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in this I rejoice.” “Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel, ...striving side by side with one mind for the faith.” “In humility regard others as better than yourselves.” “Do all things without murmuring or arguing.” “Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.” “I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.”

After all this, we arrive at his summary: “Rejoice always. Be gentle to all. Worry about nothing. The peace of God will guard you.” All this is possible because, he says, “The Lord is near.” Like John, he anchors his proclamation by pointing to Jesus. The following verses, not part of the lectionary, continue in the same vein: “Think only on things that are pure, pleasing, and commendable.” This is the sum of Paul’s burden – love, joy, forbearance, and confidence that God’s goodness is the final word in all things.

So how do we preach today? “Rejoice always,” or, “You brood of vipers”? Which message is truly fitting to the Gospel?

Both messages point to a single thing – the unfathomable grace of God revealed consummately in Jesus. Naming sin or proclaiming comfort without immediately pointing to God’s grace is unfitting to the Gospel. Whether calling out sin or comforting the saints, we do it all because of God’s great mercy revealed in Jesus. There is no earthly reason to “worry about nothing” and every reason to be consumed with worry, apart from Jesus. There is nothing to be gained by calling out sins if we do not in the same breath point to the one who is heaven’s antidote.

John Calvin thought that the church’s liturgy matters a great deal. It is far too important to make it up on the spot. Calvin borrowed heavily from ancient church tradition in framing Reformed liturgy, though with some notable changes.

Like many ancient liturgies, Calvin’s liturgy began with confession of sin, because we are never able to worship God rightly if we think too highly of ourselves. Beginning with confession puts us in the right posture for worshiping God rightly. But Calvin was disturbed by the way in which confession of sin had become something controlled by the clergy. In the church in which he was reared, penance was designed not only to help the penitent one make amends, but also to line church coffers. Church members believed that their sin could be forgiven only by priestly appeasement of God’s wrath.

So the Reformed liturgical tradition does something both counter-intuitive and counter-cultural – assurance of God’s pardon stands as the basis of our confession, rather than its consequence. This is why, in our *Book of Common Worship*, assurance of pardon is sounded already in the call to confession. Knowing that we have a great high priest who understands all our temptation, we approach the throne of grace with confidence that there we shall find mercy and pardon. We confess our sin not to appease an angry God, but out of gratitude that God’s merciful grace is far greater than the depth of our sin.

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The core of the Gospel is this – everything begins and ends with God’s grace, supremely revealed in Jesus. This is the only news that is fit for the church to tell. Because grace wins, we can freely confess our sins. Because grace wins, we can set aside all our anxiety over all life’s unknowns. Because grace wins, we can be gentle rather than harsh with others. Because grace wins, we can rejoice always. When we are persuaded that grace wins, peace displaces all our fears.

A message focused on guilt or self-actualization is not a Gospel message. It is easy to sell, but it’s not fit to tell. A message driven by self-protection is not a Gospel message. It is easy to sell, but it’s not fit to tell.

Our message focuses on One who builds up rather than tearing down, who gathers rather than scatters. For the minister of the Gospel, the only news that’s fit to tell is the news of God’s grace revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Today we celebrate that our sister Ayana has been sent by God to bear the good news among us. Like her forebears John and Paul, she will point to Jesus as the One who heals our sin and grants us abundant joy and peace. She will remind us faithfully that our hope and joy lie in God’s grace alone. For this wonderful gift of Ayana as God’s Gospel agent among us, I invite us all to say together, “Thanks be to God!” Amen.