

Long before there were blond jokes and elephant jokes, there were **Good News, Bad News jokes**. Remember that genre of humor? Allow me to share a few examples: A ship’s captain says to his crew “I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is that today we get to change underwear. The bad news is that Smith is changing with Miller and Lewis is changing with Campbell.” Or a banker says to a financially troubled car dealer: “The good news is that you’re the new owner of a foreign car dealership. The bad news is you’re selling Ford trucks in Tokyo.”

In every one of these jokes, the common thread is that as with many events in life, there is an upside and a downside. Freezing temperatures ruin the citrus crop in Florida; that’s bad news for the Florida growers, but it’s good news for citrus farmers in California. If we only have a little snow this winter its great news for municipal budgets and probably church budgets, but it’s not so good news for snowmobilers, auto body shops, and skiers. What’s good for the goose may not be good for the gander.

And now on this 3rd Sunday of Advent, the gospel of Luke describes John the Baptist bringing “good news” to the people of first century Israel that doesn’t exactly sound much like good news at all. Just listen to John’s words: “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*”

But then Luke closes this section with these words: “*And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*” Good news?!? What good news? Is it good news that God is coming to earth to judge and punish sinners? Is it good news that people who have many possessions, or whose jobs just happen to be tax collecting, or soldiers who have been less than compassionate, will have to stand before the king and face his wrath? What

John the Baptist should have done is told the people a joke! “I have good news and bad news; the good news is that the Messiah is coming, and the bad news is that he’s not going to like what he finds!” I saw that kind of message printed on a T-shirt years ago. The front of the shirt read, “Jesus is coming soon.” The back of the shirt said, “But he is really ticked off!”

I think that John was a public attraction for several reasons. First, there had been no prophecy in Israel for about 400 years, not since the prophet Micah. I’m sure that in this time there was no shortage of would-be prophets, but nobody listened. God was silent for four hundred years as far as speaking directly to his people through a genuine prophet. But they believed that prophecy would return when the Messiah was about to come. So, all of Israel was waiting for one who might be that true prophet. John fit the bill and throngs of people came to hear this man who might prove to be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Not only that, but John was also saying hard things, usually an indication of a real prophet. Somehow, we intuitively know that those who speak for God do not come peddling easy discipleship or cheap grace. Only things that are personally very costly are ultimately most worthwhile. The Revolutionary War soldiers stayed at Valley Forge throughout a brutal winter with no pay, no rations, and no chance of victory, because they believed so strongly in their cause. When Jayne and I visited Valley Forge with our three grandchildren just a couple months ago, the thing that stuck with the children was that some of the soldiers had no shoes or boots; that instead, they had to wrap their feet with what they had—old rags of clothing. Jesus himself warned those who listened to him that discipleship would be difficult—that while foxes had holes, he had no place to lay his head.

John demanded something of his hearers—repentance, change, belief, and good deeds. Such demands honor people because one assumes they are capable of doing this. Peter Drucker, one of the most brilliant time management experts, held seminars all over the country, primarily for business, but for churches as well. Drucker said, “Leadership is not magnetic personality; that can just as

well be a glib tongue. Leadership is not making friends and influencing people; that can be flattery. Leadership is lifting a person's vision to higher sights, and in the process raising a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations." Sounds like Peter Drucker is talking about John the Baptist kind of leadership.

John came baptizing, and because of this unusual emphasis, he was called John the Baptist. John's essential message was simply stating that we are what we seem to be. If we want to seem godly, then we are godly, with no pretending or sham. He spelled out what that meant. He specifically addressed the ethics of his time. He said to soldiers, don't intimidate and coerce; to tax collectors, collect no more than is your due. To the whole crowd, John spoke of sharing with those in need. But this was not a new ethic. The rabbis had been saying these things all along. But John preached that these ethics were to be a way of life. The crux of his message was, "God has told us what to do and be. Do it, and don't pretend to be something you're not."

But John raised another issue having to do with the old question of faith versus works. It is the same issue which touched off the Reformation. Our faith is rooted in the mighty acts of God; the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, his presence with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. But if those roots are genuine, they will bear fruits of goodness, generosity, compassion, and love. John was calling for a faith rooted in repentance and belief which would bear fruit in our everyday ordinary affairs. I'm sure he did not urge his hearers to join holy orders or become a Nazarite, as John was. There was no need for more long-haired prophets praying all day and eating grasshoppers. He was asking them to return to their everyday lives, to where they were planted, and to bear fruit.

Bruce Larson once preached a sermon titled "Holy Horticulture," and upon hearing the title, a botanist in his church was intrigued. He asked what Bruce planned to say, so Larson told the man, "I'm going to talk about you. If somebody hires you to plant a garden, would you ask them if they wanted all roots or all fruits? The faith versus works issue is that kind of crazy question, because God is engaged in holy horticulture." We are God's creatures, and God

wants us to be whole people with strong roots AND healthy fruits. One of the tragedies of the last 60 years of church history is the gulf between the roots and fruits people. One side of the church focused almost exclusively on “roots,” the Bible, commitment, Jesus, and prayer, without social concern, showing little involvement with the pain of the world around us. On the other side were people who said doctrine and personal piety were incidental to a commitment to the poor and to social justice. Those folks were and are the “fruits” side.

Now if all you have is “roots” with nothing visibly growing from them, you have missed the point. But the “fruits” emphasis is like what I would call cut-flowers Christianity. When the heat is on, those cut flowers are going to wilt. It’s been a tug of war in the church that’s gone on for far too long. John’s message, the clear and simple gospel message, is that we do not have the luxury of choosing sides. **We need roots and fruits!** We need to be people with deep roots who bear fruits of generosity, caring, sacrifice, and love.

Some say John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets. What he didn’t know, what he couldn’t know, is that Jesus would come to be both Judge AND Savior. What he could not yet say is this: “I bring you good news, and bad news, but then some amazing good news.” It was indeed good for the long-awaited Messiah to come; but it was bad news to hear that he would have the authority to point out the darkness and sinfulness of every person of every generation. The wonderful news John did not yet know is that he would judge us “not guilty” because of his great mercy. It was surprising news that Messiah would offer his grace to sinners as a gift, undeserved and free, and that everyone who believed this promise would live forever—the ultimate Good News of Christ’s coming.

But what is often lost in all of John’s fire and brimstone is the sincerity of the people who heard his message and wanted to change their ways. They asked, “*What then should we do?*” He didn’t answer them with an impossible list of do’s and don’ts, or should and should not’s. He offered a simple and practical description of how the people of God ought to act in the world. Here are the three examples from today’s Scripture:

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” I must have at least twenty-two shirts in my closet! What am I thinking? He told tax collectors, *“Don’t collect any more than you are required to.”* Most people don’t object to paying less in taxes. And when the soldiers asked him what to do, he replied, *“Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”*

So. **What should we do?** I’d suggest making the same kind of simple changes in our lifestyle, and in our attitude. Like the people of John’s day, we don’t need to live perfect lives; we don’t need to change the world. Do this: Love God and show God’s love in the way that you live. That was John’s message.

It’s been 2000 years, and it’s still a good question: **“What should we do?”** The problem is, few people are asking it today. We are busy working our jobs and raising our children and maintaining our homes and enjoying our friends, and it rarely occurs to us to ask, “What should we do to prepare for the coming of The Messiah?” **NOBODY** is asking the question “What should we do?” **NOBODY is asking the question “What should we do?”** (Someone in the congregation finally asks the question.)

Here’s the answer: **If you** have two coats, give one away. **If you** have more food than you can eat, share it. **If you** are a businessperson, be an honest person. **If you** are a soldier, be a compassionate one. **If you** are a truck driver, drive the speed limit. **If you** are a pastor, be a truthful pastor. **If you** are a husband or a wife, be a faithful one. **If you** are a parent, be tender and fair. **If you** are a child, honor your parents. **And if you** are a follower of Jesus, be real.

Love God and show God’s love to other people and remember that the Savior has forgiven us. **The surprising, good news that we all need to hear is this:** The Savior of the world has come, and he forgives us. Glory be to God! Amen.