



Good News that Steps on Toes

Luke 3:7-18

December 17, 2006

I must be weird, but honestly, there are some scriptures that make me laugh out loud, while around me no one else is laughing. This scripture is one of them. I mean, here is John the Baptist stepping all over the toes of his listeners. He calls them a bunch of snakes. He dangles them over the fires of hell. He says the Messiah will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. And then, the narrator concludes, “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news...” Hah!

How is the coming of the Messiah’s judgment good news? By what stretch of the imagination can judgment and burning chaff and unquenchable fire be good news? Here is one clue from our Baptist brothers and sisters from around the world. It’s in how they pray to the God of justice. Now when you and I and most North Americans pray, we usually start with “O Lord of love,” or “O God of all mercy,” or something like that. We want God to show up with love and mercy for us. But when Christians in, say, Asia, or Africa, begin praying, they usually start with “O God of justice...” They want God to show up with justice for them. Their lands, exploited by colonial powers, or ransacked by “lootocracies,” cry out for justice. They want God to show up and clean house of all those that have been enriching themselves and impoverishing others. “O God of justice, we long for your coming,” they pray. Considering that you and I are among the 4% of the world with 80% of the resources (or something like that), no wonder we pray for “O God of all mercy.” Deep down, we know we may be needing a lot of mercy when the Lord comes again.

The coming of the Messiah will be bad news for some, but it will be good news for anyone that can say yes to three conditions:

1. Messiah’s coming will be good news for us IF we do expect change and are filled with expectation
2. Messiah’s coming will be good news for us IF we are truly willing to change
3. Messiah’s coming will be good news for us IF we do in fact change.

1) THE COMING OF THE LORD IS GOOD NEWS *IF* WE DO EXPECT CHANGE, for expectation can lead to preparation. Think of it this way: if the Lord were to come, but nothing changed as a result, and the old world kept on limping along as it has, then there would be no good news to speak of. Some people like to speak piously of Jesus’ coming, but are quite satisfied with this world as it is. The Lord’s appearance and

judgment may be bad news for them. Judgment means burning away the wrongs that we do to one another, and restoring a world in which all are fruitful grain. (*Martha Moore-Keish, Lectionary Homiletics, Dec/Jan. 2006-7, p. 23*) A gospel that soft-pedals judgment against evil is not good news. (*Sally Brown, p 26, LH*)

But if any will be honest and face the truth about themselves, and admit that they need to change direction, then they will bear good fruit, and then the coming of the Lord will be good news. When God confronts evil in our personal lives and our corporate societies, then God will bring new life to those who have been ground down by evil.

2. MESSIAH'S COMING WILL BE GOOD NEWS FOR US *IF* WE ARE TRULY WILLING TO CHANGE

When John the Baptist stepped all over the toes of his hearers, they responded in good faith (in Baptist lingo, they were *convicted*). “What should we do?” asked the crowds, and the tax collectors, and the soldiers. They all were willing to change

John heard their willingness and therefore moved from conviction about their sins to education about their alternatives. He gave them some straight talk about alternatives to unbridled consumption. Now, every December, you poor pew sitters out there have to listen to us preachers rant about the consumer culture and the materialism of an American Christmas. If we were more like John the Baptist, we would get off that old horse and move on to give you some practical alternatives like John did, such as...

- Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none
- Whoever has food must do likewise
- Collect (or charge) no more than the amount prescribed for you
- Do not extort money from anyone by force, and be satisfied with your wages.

John's advice was so practical that it's still a very relevant word for today: share the basics of life! Live out the command to love your neighbor as yourself! Those who change their lives in these ways will be ready for the coming of the Lord Jesus

But if you listen to how the media explain Christmas today, you will hear no mention of change. The popular Christmas is just the bland season of having a lot and getting more, punctuated by bursts of token giving from our excess. You will hear no call to change in any TV Christmas special.

But the coming of the Lord Jesus is good news if we are willing to change. John the Baptist gives us no alternative but to change. It's as if he comes to our house, but instead of coming to our front door which we keep nice for company, he goes around through the back yard, where he can see all the clutter of our lives, all of our unfinished

projects, all of the garbage in our lives that we haven't cleaned out yet, all that we had so hoped we had hidden away from all our visitors. (*Robert Elder, LH, p. 28*) He knocks on our back door screen, and bellows, "Merry Christmas you bunch of snakes! When are you gonna change and straighten up your lives back here?" Come clean, and come empty, so you can receive the gift of God. Come and change your lives, and you will be ready for the coming of the Lord."

Finally, there is a third way by which we will be ready for the advent of the Lord: MESSIAH'S COMING WILL BE GOOD NEWS FOR US *IF* WE DO IN FACT CHANGE. John calls, not for apology, but for action. Real repentance is not superficial piety that wants to be baptized but shows little evidence of change. Real repentance is not change some day, but change here and now.

That truth runs head on into a common American malady: wishing for change some day, but making no change today; wishing one's life away, but not making the best of the present moment. Robert Cueni puts it this way:

If you want to get ready for the coming of the Messiah, you don't have to move to Jerusalem, or move to the desert, or quit your jobs, or join a monastery. Instead, make the most of the present moment. (*LH, p. 25*)

Truly repentant people will share their abundance *now*, not just think nice thoughts about the poor at Christmas. This season we have witnessed some remarkable acts of sharing abundance in this church: in November, \$14,000 to the Children's Homes; at the Baptist Men's Christmas Auction, \$18,000 for local and global missions; and now our goal for \$4000 to the global missions efforts of either Cooperative Baptists or Southern Baptists. And before that, over \$9,000 was given to put a DVD of the Gospel of Luke in every home in the county. On the one hand, that is really impressive. On the other hand, if we were to brag about all that to John the Baptist, he might just say something like "I don't care how much you've given to your projects, you're still a pile of snakes that need to repent."

That's his idea of good news. But it really can be good news, IF...

- If you expect the Savior's coming to change your life,
- and if you are willing to become a generous, honest, and loving person with God's merciful help,
- and if those changes actually occur in your life.

If all that is true for you, then the message of John the Baptist will really be good news for you.

-- Douglas E. Murray