

Isaiah 52:7-10

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2016, Christmas Eve

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WANNA HEAR SOME GOOD NEWS?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Bob and Joe were buddies. They played baseball together for years, first in high school and then in college. Bob pitched and Joe caught. They were a very effective battery. When they graduated from college, Bob and Joe settled down in their hometown, which had a major league club. For years, they bought season tickets. One day Bob asked Joe, “Do you think there’s baseball in heaven?” Joe said, “I sure hope so. It’s hard to imagine heaven without baseball.” Bob said, “It sure would be nice to know.” Joe thought for a minute and said, “I’ve got a plan. Whichever one of us dies first, if at all possible he will try to get a message to the other guy about whether or not there’s baseball in heaven.” “Deal,” said Bob.

Wouldn’t you know it? Not too long after that, Joe died. Although he was sad and it was hard to do, Bob went to the season opener, just like he and Joe had always done. When he settled into his seat just behind first base, Bob remembered the deal he and Joe had made. He realized he hadn’t heard anything from Joe, so he guessed their deal had just been wishful thinking.

In the bottom of the fourth inning, with their home team at bat, all of a sudden Bob thought he heard Joe’s voice. “Joe, is that you?” he asked. “Yeah, Bob, it’s me. I finally figured out how to get a message to you. I’ve got some good news and some bad news.” Bob excitedly asked, “What’s the good news?” “Well,” said Joe, “the good news is there’s baseball in heaven. It’s great – the stadiums are beautiful, you can play year round, I feel like I did in college, and all of the greats are here – Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio – you get to play with them.” Bob said, “That’s great, Joe. What’s the bad news?” Joe said, “You’re scheduled to pitch tomorrow.”

“I’ve got some good news and some bad news.” It’s a great set-up for a joke, but you might actually have been told that, with the follow-up question, “Which do you want to hear first?” Some psychological experiments indicate that depends on whether you want to change your mood or your behavior. If you want to change your mood, it might be better to hear the good news last. However, if you’re motivated to change by hearing something challenging, it might be best to receive the bad news last.

In 2005, country singer George Strait released a duet with Lee Ann Womack called “Good News, Bad News,” which the Country Music Association named “the musical event of the year.” He sang the first verse, she sang the second, they harmonized on the third. It goes like this:

*I’ve got some good news, can’t wait to tell you.
I realized I missed you, since we’ve been apart.*

*I just needed time, to make up my mind,
But I'm in love with you with all my heart.
I've got some good news.*

*I've got some bad news, I don't know how to break to you.
I found someone new since we've been apart.
I had too much time, and he took you off my mind,
And I'm in love with him with all my heart.
I got some bad news.*

*And I guess all is fair in love and war . . .
Someone wins, but someone wins more.
You never know what time will do.
All I know is I've got some good news.
I've got some bad news.*

I don't have to tell you the bad news tonight. It's all around us. You can't turn on the TV or read a newspaper or watch the news online without being overwhelmed with bad news. Tonight, all I know is I've got some good news. Wanna hear some good news?

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah.’” (Luke 2:10-11)

This is the gospel – literally! The messenger who brings “good news” is an evangelist. Really, the angel says to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am evangelizing you! – I am bringing you good news!” Notice that the angel doesn't say to the shepherds, “I have some good news and I have some bad news. Which do you want to hear first?”

When Jesus was born, there was a man whose birth was also hailed as “good news” (but in hindsight). Luke tells us, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” That wasn't his real name – Emperor Augustus – those are titles that mean “great or venerable Caesar.” His real name was Gaius Octavius. Archaeologists have found in the ancient city of Ephesus a gate that was built around the time of Jesus' birth that has an inscription that dedicates the structure to Caesar Augustus, who is identified as “son of God.” Two stone tablets from around 9 B.C., found in the marketplace of the old town of Priene, Turkey in Asia Minor, tell of a decree of the Greek Assembly in the province of Asia that hails Augustus as “a savior who has made war to cease and who shall put everything in peaceful order” and says that “the birthday of our God signaled the beginning of Good News for the world because of him.” In Augustus' honor, Greeks in Asia began to reckon their calendar years from September 23, the birthday of Caesar.

Emperor Augustus was hailed as the father of a new era and the divine son of the god Julius Caesar. His rule was known as the Augustan era of peace and prosperity. The great Roman poet, Virgil, said of Augustus, “Behold, at last, that man, who was foretold . . . Augustus Caesar, kindred unto Jove, who brings with him a golden age . . . His sway shall extend into India and Africa, and he shall stretch the dominion of the Romans beyond the sun and stars.” Virgil described an age under Augustus “in which nature provides its bounty unaided: cows bring milk uncalled, soil puts up grain without sowing, and even sheep grow their wool in purples and yellows to spare the man the effort of dyeing them.”

But the “good news” of Emperor Augustus’ birth and reign was really bad news for the many, many people who were killed or put into submission so Caesar could rule with an iron fist, especially the people who lived in the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, in the land of Judah. Augustus consolidated his power by being ruthless and by distracting his subject people from his ultimate power grab with his grandiose building programs. Of course, those buildings were financed by the taxes that crushed the ordinary people.

How ironic and radical and dangerous it was for Luke to begin his story about Jesus’ birth telling us about Emperor Augustus, whose own birth was hailed as “good news,” ordering everyone to follow his will, only to share a few verses later the starkly contrasting message of the angel: “I am bringing you great news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah.”

Wanna hear some good news?

The heavenly host praises God and says, “Glory to God in the highest heaven . . .” This is the eternal “glory of the Lord [that] shone around [the shepherds].” This is not the fading glory of the Roman legions marching off to conquer other peoples, a glory that, as great as it was at the time, now lies in the dust of history.

Wanna hear some good news?

The angel proclaims good news of great joy for all the people. This Jesus will save his people from their sins; he is the Savior for all the people. He is not like Emperor Augustus, who demanded total loyalty under threat of death.

Wanna hear some good news?

This Savior, **this** Son of God, brings peace, the peace of God that passes all understanding. This is not the Pax Romana of Emperor Augustus, who kept the empire on an even keel by brute force and sheer domination.

What a contrast! One writer puts it this way, “If it were up to Caesar, you would not dare to: think of responsibilities to any Lord other than Caesar; glorify any Lord other than Caesar; even hint at challenging Caesar’s authority. If it were up to Caesar, the tables of the powerful would never be overturned. When Caesar hears a story like [the Christmas story], he knows only to crush it, to crucify it. Yet in the starlight of those Palestinian hills and in the candlelight of a [Christmas Eve communion service], we can glimpse a new reality: where peace comes not from armies, but from justice; where sin withers in the face of truth; where mercy rules the arena of human society; and where love conquers fear.”¹

In 1534, Martin Luther wrote a kind of Christmas pageant for his family's Christmas celebration. He adapted a medieval folk song to tell the story of Christ's birth. The original folk song portrays a traveling ballad singer coming into a marketplace, bearing good news from afar, which he offers to share with the people: "Good news from far abroad I bring, Glad tidings for you all I sing. I bring so much you'd like to know, Much more than I shall tell you though."

Luther's Christmas pageant song is known now as a hymn called "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come." Luther took that first verse and shaped it according to Luke's story about the shepherds and the angel. The angel takes the place of the traveling ballad singer, and share these words: "From heav'n above to earth I come To bear good news to ev'ry home; Glad tidings of great joy I bring, Whereof I now will say and sing."

With verses two and three, the angel begins to share the good news: "To you this night is born a child Of Mary, chosen virgin mild; This little child, of lowly birth, Shall be the joy of all the earth. This is the Christ, our God and Lord, Who in all need shall aid afford; He will Himself your Savior be From all your sins to set you free." The song ends with our response to the angel's message: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, Who unto us His Son hath given! While angels sing with pious mirth A glad new year to all the earth."²

In a world where bad news seems to be the order of the day, all I know is I've got some good news. Wanna hear some good news?

A Savior is born to us, Jesus the Christ! Glory to God in the highest!

Let us pray: Glory to you, God most high — you have given us a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord— good news of great joy for all. Make us messengers of the gospel and shepherds of your people; guide us always in paths of peace; through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

NOTES

¹Paul Bellan-Boyer, "Whose Story Would You Rather Believe?" December 17, 2009 at www.citycalledheaven.blogspot.com.

²Information about the hymn from an article by Rev. William H. Otto, "From Heaven Above," December 1, 2009 at www.blogs.lcms.org/2009/from-heaven-above-12-2009.