

**+ Matthew 11:2-11 + Prepare for Some Good News + 3rd Sunday in Advent + 15 December 2013 +**

With only a little more than a week until Christmas, you've probably started noticing them in your mail. No, not the flashy ads pleading with you to fight crowds and bad weather to get that perfect last-minute gift. No, not the spiraling credit card bills that make your checking account go thud.

What you've probably seen in your mailbox already is something far better and more enjoyable—Christmas cards and Christmas letters giving updates on friends and loved ones, each one sharing some good news. A child shares how he got a new toy or what sports she played. A parent shares how the family made a big move or had a great trip or even grew by one with the addition of a child or a pet. There's good news about family and jobs and homes and retirements and surgery. In a small way, it gives you the opportunity to rejoice with a loved one or friend.

That time-honored tradition is one way that we do something we all love to do—share good news. Sometimes that good news is pretty minor, but still brings a smile. Sometimes it's life-changing. Sometimes we rejoice right away, while other times the good news has to sink in a little first.

So it's only appropriate that on this Third Sunday in Advent, a Sunday once known as *Gaudete* or "Rejoice" Sunday, we rejoice at good news that comes from our Savior Jesus. Yes, this news is even better than Aunt Mabel's successful surgery. So are you prepared to hear it? Are you prepared to share it? Let's **PREPARE FOR SOME GOOD NEWS.**

There's not much reason for joy in a prison cell. There's not much good news when you're under the threat of execution, but that's where John the Baptizer found himself. John had boldly proclaimed his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to young and old, to rich and poor, to the weak and mighty, even the local puppet king named Herod. Sadly, Herod didn't take kindly to John's call to repent. He wanted John silenced because John bothered his conscience. So he had John tossed into prison with the threat of execution constantly hanging over his head. John needed some good news, but where was he going to find it?

You see, John had actually come to bear good news, to prepare the way for the coming Messiah—God's Anointed. That Messiah was to come baptizing ***"with the Holy Spirit and with fire"***. He was to come with glory and judgment ***"clearing his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire"***. (Matthew 3:11-12) When Jesus of Nazareth appeared at the Jordan River to be baptized ***"to fulfill all righteousness"*** (Matthew 3:15), John had no problem pointing him out as ***"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."*** (John 1:29)

...But where was the purifying fire? Where was the cleansing of the world? Where were the judgment and the glory? Why were things getting worse for God's people (he was in prison, after all!) when they should have been getting better? Why was Jesus engaging in a ministry of mercy and healing and forgiveness, when John expected him to judge? John knew that Jesus was really ***"the Lamb of God"***, but doubt was trying to creep in. Despair and resignation weren't far behind. It was even affecting John's followers. "Is Jesus really the Christ? Should we wait for someone else to show up?"

John knew he needed some good news and he knew his disciples also needed to be reassured after all those times he had pointed to Jesus as their coming Savior. Perhaps if he sent them to Jesus with a question, it would push Jesus a little closer to being that glorious Judge he foretold, but even if that didn't happen, surely Jesus could provide the good news they all needed to hear. So ***"when John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'"***

It was no secret that Herod had thrown John into prison, but as the almighty God, Jesus knew how bad, how low things had gotten with John. Jesus knew why doubts were creeping into John's mind. Jesus knew how badly John and his disciples needed some good news, so Jesus gave them a response. ***"Go back and report to John what you hear and see..."***

What kind of response was that? Jesus doesn't formally say, "Yes, I am the Christ", but that's not what John and his disciples needed to hear. They needed to hear the fulfillment of the prophecies. They needed to see the Christ in action pouring out God's merciful grace on the hurting and the weary and the dying and the guilty. They needed to hear this: ***"The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."*** They needed to hear that Jesus was overturning the effects of sin in our world, that he was overcoming the consequences of sin in every

life, that souls with nothing to offer the Lord were receiving the good news of forgiveness and unconditional grace in the person of Jesus Christ.

If John thought he could push Jesus into skipping grace to go to glory, Jesus had a gentle rebuke for him too. **“Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”** “John, there’s no reason to be offended by how I’m going about saving the world. Of course, I am the Lamb of God, but I have to live and suffer and die and rise again to do that. That good news has to go out into the world first. Then and only then will glory and judgment come from me.” John’s disciples left with no more doubt about Jesus.

So are you prepared to hear such good news? There’s just so much bad news in our world. Yesterday was the one-year anniversary of the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook. There was a school shooting in the Denver area. Lawlessness and violence are breaking out in Ukraine and elsewhere, and those who oppose Christianity keep increasing in number and strength.

There’s so much bad news in our lives—another death of a loved one or a friend, another divorce, another door of opportunity shut, even another bad season for your favorite team. There’s even bad news in God’s Word, because it reminds us of who we really are by nature—dead, hostile sinners.

So then how often aren’t you and I like John? No, we’re not in prison, but there’s plenty of doubt and despair and resignation to go around, even for the most optimistic Christian. Why didn’t Jesus make that loved one better in this life? Why didn’t God keep that marriage together? Why didn’t God keep that door of opportunity open? Why? Why? Why doesn’t Jesus do something about all this bad news? Like John, we’re tempted to challenge Jesus with “Why?” We’re offended by him, because he doesn’t seem to be as effective as we expect him to be.

...But he is effective, isn’t he? He does do something about the bad news in our lives. Perhaps he doesn’t provide healing to a believing loved one, but he does provide heaven. Perhaps he closes one door of opportunity because he has something greater or unexpected in store. Perhaps he has plans (and surely he does!) to use that bad news experience for our blessing or the blessing of others, even the blessing of generations after us. Who are we to ask God, “Why?” or to demand that he prove himself to be who he truly is?

That’s why we need to hear that same gentle rebuke, **“Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”** Before we get offended by our Lord and his Word, by all the bad news that he seems to bring us, here’s some good news. **“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”**

Consider what you have heard and seen! You were spiritually blind, yet Jesus through his Gospel gave you sight to see his glorious grace. He picked you up. He cleansed you of your sins. He opened your ears and hearts to hear the sweet message of the Gospel. He raised you to new life, and he continues to bring you the good news you need to hear for your daily doubt and despair—good news that’s not truly good until you realize how desperately and completely you need to hear it. You have nothing before the Lord. Yet the Savior comes for you—as a child, as a man, as a sacrifice, as a Savior. He comes to you through his Word, through the waters of Holy Baptism, and in, with, and through the bread and wine of his Holy Supper. Blessed are those who are not offended by such a Savior, but instead realize the need to not only hear that good news, but proclaim it.

As John’s disciples went away, Jesus praised this final prophet of the Old Testament. John had accomplished exactly what the Lord had sent him to do—to prepare the way before him with the good news of the coming Messiah. In spite of his looks (which were pretty wild) and his location off the beaten path, John had come to be the bearer of the best news of all: “Prepare the way for the King!” **“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptizer; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”**

What was that? What does Jesus say there? Even the **“least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”**? Who could that possibly be? It’s you and me and every other believer since the coming of Christ 2,000 years ago. How are we so privileged, so honored, so blessed?

John had been sent to prepare the way for Christ’s coming, but we’ve seen Jesus. We’ve seen him go to the cross for our sins and conquer death for us and countless others. We’ve seen what Jesus has done in our own lives, and we’ve seen what he can do in the lives of others. John had the task of pointing people ahead to Jesus. We have the task of proclaiming the good news that Jesus has come, does come, and will come again. Rather than send one prophet, Jesus sends his entire Church to proclaim that good news to young and old,

rich and poor, weak and mighty, people we know, people we love, even people we don't so they can enjoy his grace forever.

If good news in our lives is worth sharing, why not share the good news of Jesus this Advent and Christmas? Why not invite that struggling loved one or that hurting neighbor or that grieving friend to learn about the Christ-child who was born to save us? Why not tell others why Jesus is so important to you? If they don't hear it from you, you can't assume that they'll hear it from anyone else. You don't have to be impressive or give a perfect presentation or even be as theologically trained as your pastor.

***“Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”*** You've seen Jesus. You know who he is and what he's done and why he came. Even little ones know that, so why hold back in telling your adult friends or your teen friends or your kid friends who is most important to you? Instead tell them some good news about Jesus. Proclaim it. Preach it. Speak it. Sing it. Shout it. Whisper it. Share it. Let's tell others what we've seen and heard. Let's give them some good news in a bad news world. Let's tell them of Jesus. Amen.