

Four Blessings:

2. Good News

Second in the 2017 Advent sermon series
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Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
December 10, 2017—Second Sunday of Advent

- Luke 2:10 The angel said to them, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.” (Good News Translation)
- Hebrews 1:1-4 In the past God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end. ³He reflects the brightness of God's glory and is the exact likeness of God's own being, sustaining the universe with his powerful word. After achieving forgiveness for the sins of all human beings, he sat down in heaven at the right side of God, the Supreme Power. ⁴The Son was made greater than the angels, just as the name that God gave him is greater than theirs. (Good News Translation)
- Theme: Although good news can be fleeting, rare, or deceptive in our daily lives, God's gift of unconditional love shown in the birth of Jesus is eternally good news for everyone.

Let us pray: Everlasting, Ever-loving God, as we hear and consider and reflect on the old and familiar words of scripture let us hear the new word you speak to us today. We ask this blessing through the power of our Master Jesus. Amen.

“The Rule of Seven is an old marketing adage. It says that a [potential customer] needs to see or hear your marketing message at least seven times before they take action and buy from you.”¹ It strikes me that the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews seems to be aware of that “Rule of Seven” phenomenon. Hebrews opens with the reminder that “In the past God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son.”²

Indeed, the Bible tells us that God spoke to humankind through Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and David. God spoke through Miriam and Deborah and Esther. God also spoke through Isaiah and Daniel and Ezekiel, through Habakkuk and Amos and many, many others numbering far beyond the number seven. All those servants and prophets and kings spoke of their experiences with God, in hopes of convincing us to accept God's gracious love and steadfast care.

God far exceeded that so-called “Rule of Seven” in reaching out to us in loving-kindness. But still humankind didn't get it. Instead, we convinced ourselves that we had to earn God's love. We told ourselves that accumulating things would give us more security than trusting God could. We believed that we had to look out for “Number One...,” and guess who that was? (Us.)

So at a point in human history God tried a different approach. As the opening verses of Hebrews so plainly pointed out, “in these last (i.e., recent) days [God] has spoken to us through his Son.” In other words God tried something new. God has news for us.

¹ “What is the Rule of Seven? And how will it improve your marketing?” Posted on December 7, 2015 by Andrea J. Stenberg at <http://www.thebabyboomerentrepreneur.com/258/what-is-the-rule-of-seven-and-how-will-it-improve-your-marketing/> accessed 12/5/2017.

² Hebrews 1:1-2a Good News translation

The very term “news” comes from a Middle English word meaning “novelties.” In its most basic sense, the word “news” means “what is new.” There are different kinds of news:

- “Bad news” is something we always hope to avoid.
- “Fake news” has been “in the news” lately. I can think of two kinds of “fake news.”
 - Some folks intentionally create what you might call “fake news” for satirical purposes like *Saturday Night Live’s* weekly news spoof segment “Weekend Update” or the tongue-in-cheek magazine-turned-website called “The Onion.”
 - To be sure, others create “fake news” in an attempt to purposefully deceive.
- You’ve probably heard someone say, “Oh, such-and-such is ‘old news.’” But based on the definition of the word “news,” the term “old news” is an oxymoron.
- And then there’s good news. Who doesn’t enjoy receiving “good news”: you’re getting some money back, the cat won’t need an expensive operation after all, your child earned a strong report card.

You’re all familiar with the old “Knock-Knock” jokes. There’s a similar category of jokes called “Good News, Bad News.” Perhaps the most famous one involves a doctor telling his patient:

Doctor: I have good news and bad news.

Patient: Wow. Well, go with the good news first, Doc.

Doctor: You have 24 hours to live.

Patient: What!?! I don’t believe it! What’s the bad news, Doc?

Doctor: Um... I’ve been trying to reach you since yesterday.

(I came across another one involving a church and its pastor:

Good News: Pastor, church attendance rose dramatically the last three weeks.

Bad News: You were on vacation, Pastor.)

Sadly, reports of news – what’s happening in our world – often contain little “good news” and are filled with “bad news:”

- On October 31st a group of middle-aged people from Argentina celebrated their 30th high school reunion by vacationing in New York City. As they walked along the Hudson River, a deranged terrorist driving a rented pick-up truck randomly and intentionally struck and killed five of them.³
- Earlier that same month a young engaged couple traveled to Las Vegas to celebrate an anniversary in their relationship. Attending an outdoor concert, he was shot and killed by random automatic gunfire sprayed across the crowd by a gunman with no known motive.⁴

When you hear that, where is there any good news? Sometimes good news is hard to come by. Other times, good news can be so fleeting. We had an instance of that right here recently.

Our church had booked a Senior High retreat at a church camp. A week before the retreat, when we checked with the camp manager to work out the final arrangements we discovered that they had booked us for a different weekend, and the week we were planning to go wasn’t available. We had to scramble but were able to find another retreat center that could accommodate us. Good news!

But before we could even notify the kids of the changed location, that second retreat center called us back. “Oops!” They had read their calendar wrong, and as it turns out, they *couldn’t* accommodate us for that weekend either. Fortunately, even after “Plan A” and “Plan B” failed, we succeeded with “Plan C.”

Sometimes good news is hard to come by. Sometimes it’s fleeting. And sometimes what seems like good news isn’t all that good. For instance, school children might be excited to hear that a Snow Day has been declared... until they realize that it means they don’t get to go on their field trip. Or we’re thankful for a winter with lighter-than-usual snowfall... until we realize the next year that the reservoirs aren’t as full. What at first seems like good news may not turn out that way after all.

³ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/new-york-city-attacker-found-himself-a-corridor-of-death?via=newsletter&source=DDMorning>, accessed 11/1/2017

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/02/us/las-vegas-shooting-victims/index.html>, accessed 11/1/2017

In my sermon series for this Advent season I'm having us focus on one verse from Luke's story of the birth of Jesus. It's spoken by God's messenger or angel to shepherds camped out on a hillside guarding their flocks. In Luke Chapter 2, verse 10 the angel said, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people." Within this one simple verse we hear four blessings. Last week we heard the blessing "Don't be afraid...." Speaking to those shepherds and to us all, the messenger promised that we can trust God to provide and to guide us as we make our way through the uncertainties of life – "No Fear." Today the second of the four blessings in this verse is the angel's announcement that he brings "Good News."

We've seen that some good news is fleeting, like the joy from a victory by your favorite sports team, or finding \$5 from last year in the pocket of your winter coat, or a sale on salmon at Heinen's. Some good news is longer-lasting, like hearing from your physician that your lab results are improving, or securing a lower mortgage rate, or being accepted by one of your preferred colleges. The angel's blessing was that it was announcing news – good news – eternally good news the likes of which had never been heard before... anywhere... ever.

Each of us probably knows what particular piece of "good news" we'd love to hear.

- Maybe you long to hear the good news that employment is secure.
- Maybe you want the good news that health insurance *will* be there after all.
- Maybe you hope for the good news that global tensions raised by Islamic extremists and North Korean saber-rattlers and our leaders will be eased.
- Maybe you pray for the good news that the anxiety of worry or the pain of grief will not always be as hard for you as it is right now.
- Maybe you hope for the good news of progress in trying to restore a strained relationship.

But the greatest possible "good news" has already been announced. And you know, good news travels fast. God's good news came to a scraggly group of itinerant shepherds on a remote hillside in Judea, who shared it with a temporarily homeless young family huddled in the little town of Bethlehem. The news traveled to Herod's palace atop the hills of Jerusalem miles away, and thanks to some wise men traveling afar and later some itinerant preachers and inspired missionaries it went to Asia and Africa and Europe and around the globe. An angel's announcement of "good news" one quiet night near Bethlehem has enveloped the earth for thousands of years.

Even now, that familiar good news still offers hope-giving, life-guiding, soul-comforting assurance: God loves you, and me, and "them" (whoever "they" are). God loves you forever – in this life and in an eternal life that awaits us all. And lest we have any doubts about what God's love means in our world, in our lives, God came to live in our midst in the birth of Jesus. In Jesus God embodies divine love in human form.

That good news is a blessing not just for a moment, and not just for our lifetime, but for the eternity that God holds for us. By the angel's announcement we are blessed with "Good News" that never grows old. The "Good News" of God's love shown in Jesus Christ is news we're called to share... with loved ones and friends, with neighbors, with the world which longs for truly "Good News."

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