

"Good News... Bad News"
Revelation 1:4b-8

November 25, 2018

Last Sunday of the Church Year

The head elder came to visit the pastor of his congregation who had been in the hospital for several days with a serious disease. The elder said to the pastor, "Pastor, I have good news and bad news." The pastor, although a bit startled, said, "Go on." The elder said, "The good news is that the board voted to pray for your full and complete recovery at last night's meeting." The pastor replied, "And the bad news?" The elder said, "The bad news is that the vote was 3 to 2."

You've all probably heard jokes like that in the past – the "good news/bad news jokes". The humor (or alleged humor depending upon your evaluation of the joke) comes from finding a single set of circumstances which can be interpreted in two ways – either as good news or bad news for the people involved.

One of the most important and urgent messages which we have to proclaim as a church and to hear as individual Christians, especially on this Last Sunday of the Church Year, is the imminent return of Jesus Christ to judge the world. Is this proclamation and is this judgment good news or bad news?

I believe that many people will understand this proclamation as being all "good news", but for nonbiblical reasons. Many refuse to believe that Jesus Christ is coming again and so there is nothing to fear or worry about. They don't believe in Jesus or judgment. Many seem to think that when the end of the world or the end of their time on this world ends, they will all go to some vaguely described "better place." Whether it is reading obituaries in the newspaper or talking to people face-to-face about this, I am truly amazed that many people believe in this vague "better place" without any scriptural argument, religious argument, any argument at all, other than they wish for it to be so.

Some claim belief in God or, at least, a Higher Being will think the same way. If they will acknowledge that Jesus is coming again, they still fear nothing and see it as only good news without any bad news. Since "judging" is the worst possible sin anyone can commit in our world today, people believe that Jesus would never judge anyone. They also can't possibly believe that a loving God would condemn anyone to hell. So, Jesus' return is all good news because everyone is going to heaven, they think.

Others may see Jesus' return as being all bad news. They believe in the end of the world, but not as a result of a deity's judgment or punishment. They think our future is hopeless and this world will simply end badly. There is no outside force, no God to be our Savior, so things look really bad. Since there is no outside force to save us, then it is up to us to save the planet through radical ecological action, the control of global warming, etc. If we do die, then it is our own fault for killing the planet, not the result of divine judgment. If we are going to be saved, then it is up to us to save ourselves by saving the planet and the environment.

How do we respond to all of this? First of all, the return of Jesus Christ at the end of time is, according to the Word of God, a reality. People may not like this. People may not agree with it. However, God's Word declares it to be so. In our text for today from Revelation, St. John says this, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him." One can't be clearer than this. Jesus is coming.

Second of all, the coming of Jesus Christ is not all good news and it is not all bad news. I could actually begin the sermon by saying, "Jesus Christ is coming at the end of time. I have

good news and I have bad news.” Actually, this is not a joke nor is it anything to laugh at. However, it is the truth.

Let’s start with the second part of that first: I have bad news for you. In our text, St. John, after speaking of Jesus coming again, says this, “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.” The return of Jesus Christ is not some sort of schmaltzy promotion to a “better place.” It is a frightening experience which will cause wailing and weeping in terror. For creation, it means destruction. For humanity, it means judgment.

St. Peter writes in his second letter, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” (2 Peter 3:10) The day of the Lord will be more devastating than the horrific fires, destructive floods, huge hurricanes, and other destructive weather which we’ve seen recently. It will be more destructive than all of the nuclear weapons in the world combined. The destruction will not be local, like some of the storms we’ve experienced. The destruction will not be regional like some of the fires, floods, hurricanes, and others. The destruction won’t even be global. It will be universal. That is truly frightening.

The judgment of all humanity who ever lived will be massive. Those who have sinned against our holy God, the Creator of all the universe, will be judged and condemned. Those people who are conceived and born in sin, apart from God, will, by Jesus’ judgment, remain apart from God forever in unimaginable circumstances. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us exactly what that sentence will be. Jesus, the Judge of all, will say to those condemned, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew 25:40) Jesus concludes his teaching by saying, “And these will go away into eternal punishment,” (Matthew 25:46)

It is no wonder then that people want to ignore or try to do away with the message of God’s word. It is very frightening. It is bad news. But it is not the only news. There is also good news – extraordinary, exciting, and tremendous good news for you and for me.

In our text for today, St. John gives us the good news which gives us joy, strength, and hope as we eagerly await the return of Jesus Christ, rather than dreading it. John writes, “To him [Jesus Christ] who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

You may have been concerned when I said earlier that all who have sinned will be judged and condemned. You may have been uneasy at those words, knowing that you and I have sin. Are we any different than the ones who are sent off to hell? The difference between them and us is not that they have sin and we do not nor is it that their sin is judged and condemned and ours is not. We are just as sinful as anyone who is in hell. The difference is that we have been freed from our sin by Jesus’ blood, shed on the cross. God did condemn and punish our sin, but not in us. He judged, condemned, and punished our sin in Jesus on the cross.

Since Jesus already experienced the pangs of hell on the cross, we don’t need to, nor will we. Since Jesus rose from the grave to life everlasting in heaven, we, too, will rise from our graves to life eternal in heaven with Him. The day of the Lord, when Jesus returns to earth in visible form, will not be a time of fear and dread as it will be for those who are judged, condemned, and sent to hell. Rather, it has become a joyful and highly anticipated event for all who, by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, have received new life in Holy Baptism; received

forgiveness for all their sins in the Holy Supper; received everlasting life in the promises of the Word of God.

This is the “good news” in all of this “good news/bad news” way of looking at things. The “bad news” of judgment day – sin, death, and hell – has been overcome for us by the “good news” of judgment day – the forgiveness, life, and salvation – which we have received by faith.

This is not the “devil’s faith” which merely acknowledges the existence of God and the truth of His Word. This is not the “dead faith” of which James writes which only believes in God but does nothing with it or by it. This is not the “get out of jail free card” faith which uses faith as an excuse for sinning freely.

Rather, this is the faith which entrusts everything to God regarding the day of judgment and from which flows good works and a holy life in service to God and our neighbor in our present life. To those, Jesus will say at the judgment, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matthew 25:34)

Since the day of judgment is coming, St. Peter asks the very logical question – how do we live until then? St. Peter writes in his 2nd letter, “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:11-13)

How do we live “lives of holiness and godliness” in these final days? We do so by gathering around God’s Holy Things – the Word of God and His Sacraments – Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper - and encouraging others to do the same. In these end times, we are in need of God’s means of Grace more than ever and we are in need of each other, as well. The writer to the Hebrews says this, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10: 23-25)

So, live that faith confidently outside the four walls of this church here. Share the “good news/bad news” with those around you in your lives. Live as you say you believe, especially as the world grows worse and worse and suffering and death, including ourselves and loved ones around us, increases. This is no joke. This is no funny line of, “I have good news and bad news for you.” We have the explanation for the bad news. We have the joyful promise of good news for all eternity. Live as though you believe that. Speak of it as though it is important to you.

Sometimes, conveying a message all depends on how you hear it. For instance, if you tell a child his father is going to come home soon, how will he hear it? A child who has done wrong and anticipates punishment will hear, “just you wait! Your father is coming home soon.” A child who is afraid and needs comfort will hear, “Just wait. Your father will come home soon.” As we wait for Jesus to return, we do not do so in fear and guilt, but in faith and anticipation. So, we always hear, “Just wait. Jesus is coming soon.” Amen