

Monday, December 19, 2011

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2: 11-14

Psalms 96

It can sometimes seem to be a curse to think things through. To think things through brings up paradox and contradiction. It exposes questions with seemingly no easy answers. Thinking things through can often run head-on with a popular belief or fad. This is the case when talking about philosophy, politics and even religion.

Thinking about, “What is it really, that constitutes the good news?” is one of those questions, but one which cannot be avoided if we are to move beyond a children’s Sunday School developmental level. Now, the gospel is good news right? (That’s what gospel means—good news.) So for years, I was troubled by the question, “If it’s good news, why does it work out so poorly for so many people?” “If it’s truly good news, shouldn’t the goodness of it depend on something more solid than whether we respond to it correctly?” “And by the way, which is the ‘correct’ way since it seems to be so important?”

Our epistle reading today seems to imply no such conditional good news. It does not emphasize our role, and our propensity to mess things up in the mission of Jesus to bring us good news. In other words, maybe whether Jesus’ gospel is good news or ends up being bad news is not up to us as much as common teaching would have us believe.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Titus 2: 11-13

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. . . . perhaps what is needed to read this passage aright is to take our understanding of “salvation” and make sure that we are thinking of salvation as being made whole. Salvation is not about where we go after we die. . . at least it is not exclusively about where we go when we die. Salvation is about being re-made—made whole—healed—sanctified—loved into completeness.

So, just for today, let’s take a break from thinking about salvation as conditional and certainly let’s take a break from thinking of salvation as being about a final resting place. Let’s think about salvation being now. . . salvation being for everyone. . . salvation being a real possibility every day for everyone. How would that change things for you?

Last year, a popular preacher stirred up a real fire-storm when he wrote a book called, *Love Wins*, in which he implied that God truly does plan to save everyone, even if they do not do the “right steps” and employ the “right actions” here. I am including a link to the trailer for his book that he put out pre-publication.

I do not work for Rob Bell; I don’t get any points for selling his book or recommending some of his tenants. I do not even know if he is correct or not. But I do know that when I think about “the grace of God appearing, bringing salvation to all,” some interpretation akin to Rob Bells makes it through my

“thinking it through” process easier than the popular belief in Christian circles today that although God in Christ brought good news, it really is not going to be good news for most people. Really?

Think about it and tell me what you think.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODUvw2McL8g>

cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org

Tuesday, December 20, 2011

Luke 1: 1-17

Luke 1: 18-25

Psalm 113

We have today the story of Zechariah who found himself speechless and unable to communicate because he was unable to receive and believe the good news the angel told him. And what was that good news? That in his old age, he and his wife would have a rather extraordinary son who would play a role in saving the people.

It got me to thinking—I wonder if part of the reason so many of us seem to be struck mute when it comes to talking to people about the good news is because we have misunderstood what that good news is. It seems to depend upon who you are talking to:

- If you are talking to a Baptist, you need to make a decision and ask Jesus to be your personal Lord and Savior. THEN you’ve got good news. Before that. . .well, not so good.
- If you are talking to a Church of Christ, then you need to follow the steps of salvation—1. Hear, 2. Believe, 3. Repent, 4. Confess, 5. Be baptized (by immersion only.) If any of these steps are done incorrectly, then the news you’ve got. . .well, it could turn out to be very bad news.
- If you talk to a Methodist, then. . .well, what WOULD you tell people the good news was?

It would be my sincere hope that your concept of good news includes the word, “grace” quite often and that it would focus on the work that God does and not so much on how we might achieve or fail the reward through our actions, decisions or blunders.

Now you KNOW that I am not saying our actions are unimportant. But I am saying that God’s actions are ever so much more important than ours. . . .and THAT is what I consider to be good news! It is my prayer that neither you nor I will be struck dumb in our capacity to share that good news with others.

God has come in the form of Jesus. God has been shown to be far more compassionate and loving than we could have imagined. God is for us. . . on our side. . . .within us. . . it just doesn’t get much better than that, does it?

Why don’t you see if you can’t work that into a conversation somewhere today. And then write me and let me know how it felt to speak gospel to someone. Have fun sharing good news!

cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org

Wednesday, December 20, 2011

Hebrews 10:35-11:1

John 20:24-29

Psalm 126

I sincerely hope you are reading the scriptures before each devotional and not just picking up on my reflections. The reflections alone may seem rather random and scattered, but they actually do come from my reflective reading of the day's lectionary texts.

Today's readings all seem to focus on the theme of faith and the path of living by faith. Christian people have heard this so much that I think we don't even listen half of the time. Added to that, faith is so often confused with rational, analytical believing that I think "faith" has gotten short shrift in 21st century Christian life.

Macy's has a campaign this season called, "Believe." The image is on believing in something magical and something wonderful without describing just too clearly what that might be. There is a children's book and subsequent movie called *The Polar Express* which emphasizes the role of believing if you want to see good things happen. I happen to love the notion that believing opens up possibilities that would not be there without the belief. But I don't think when Hebrews talks about "the righteous living by faith," that is exactly the kind of faith it is referring to.

The kind of faith that Christians are called to is so darn ACTIVE! It just isn't meant to stay in our heads as a belief system. It is not meant to comfort our intellectual cogs and wheels as its chief end. The faith by which followers of Christ are to live requires action—simple and seemingly insignificant at times and risky and dramatic at others. This is the difference between FAITH and BELIEF. Belief is rational—faith is often times anything but rational.

Today is the feast day of St. Thomas, and our gospel reading tells about his need to see before he could believe. He is not that different from us is he? Don't we all need to see in our natural state? And yet, the goodness of God calls us out of our natural state into a more real, expanded state . . . which requires faith to enter.

Just for today, let's allow God to support us as we live guided by faith rather than pure rationality. As with all things, it's a mix—we are not called to throw all caution to the winds and live life like a psychotic. But we are called to stretch—to believe that things might be grander and fuller than we might imagine. We are called to let our guiding principle be faith. And when we do, the passage in Hebrews makes sense: For we are, "among those who have faith and so are saved," (Heb. 10: 39b.) May you live your life today guided by faith in something beyond yourself—something so grand that you can't grasp it or explain it or make it happen, but you can trust it. And in that faith, you WILL be made whole, (i.e., saved.)

cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org

Thursday, December 22, 2011

Luke 1: 26-33

Luke 1: 34-38

Psalm 40:1-11

So where are you today? At work? At home with children that are usually in school? At home fixing up last minute details for the coming holidays? Wherever you are, you are no doubt living with a sense of expectancy. For all of us, there is something coming. There is something on the schedule. Even for those without big plans, there is no avoiding that the next few days are set-apart and special. It is both the joy and the despair of the holidays that they cannot be avoided. There they are—what are you going to do with them?

So today, just on the off chance that you might not be sparkling with expectancy and delight, I am going to cast a vision for us all. The Psalm reading today speaks of singing a new song. The gospel reading is of the angel talking with Mary, bringing her a “new song” for sure!

I believe that the whole biblical witness is an effort to get us to see a new vision—to sing a new song and live a new life. Although I enjoy the “up close” look at various texts and I love the study of the different genre of biblical writings, I really am most uplifted when I back away and look for the broad picture. Why in the world do we have this ancient book with history and poetry and gospel and letter? Is it just so we have a “cookbook” or a rule book? Is it a task-master or is it a light to our path?

To put it in agricultural terms, I believe the scripture in its entirety calls us to leave behind living like drones and start living like queens. Look up! Listen! Be alert! Don’t miss it! There is a new song in the air. There is a new way of life possible. There is freedom from chains, release from captivity, sight for the blind, hearing for those who have been locked away in silence.

This freedom and release comes to us with very daily activities. With rare exception, we don’t “sing the new song” on the Carnegie Hall stage. We sing it in our workplace, with our families, in our comings and goings—in exactly those places in which it would be easy to get stuck and sing the same old song. To whine, complain, be overwhelmed and feel stuck. How in the world will the Lord place a new song in our hearts if we refuse to let go of the tired old dirge to which we have become accustomed?

Will you dare to sing a new song today? Will you risk having faith that there is something better out there. . . but you just might have to look up and become someone new? The angel’s words speak to us in times like this: “Nothing will be impossible with God,” (Luke 1:37.) Risk! Turn loose! Sing a new song!

Watch this video. . . .what if we dared to live like this? (It’s worth copying and pasting if you have to!)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qc8ZbVcdHpg&feature=player_embedded

cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org