

Good News!

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Sermon for November 26, 1995

Lessons for Advent 2 in Year A

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

The prophet Isaiah gives good news:

There will come one upon whom the spirit of the Lord will rest. He will judge with righteousness and destroy the wicked by the breath of his lips. He will make everything right, and set the world at peace.

John the baptist gives good news too:

Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand! The one Isaiah spoke of is coming!

This is definitely good news. It was good news to the people of his time...a time of crime, disease, and injustice...a time not much unlike our own. It's also good news for us. The kingdom of God is at hand. All the horrible things we read about in the newspapers and hear about on TV and radio are not the last word. The kingdom of God is at hand, there will be justice, there will be peace, the evil will be destroyed. Everything will be just fine.

Yes, it's definitely good news, but do we really understand what it's all about? Do we really understand what John and Isaiah are saying? I'm not sure that we do. I suspect that there's just a little smugness in our looking forward to the arrival of God's kingdom.

Smugness? Us? To borrow a line from the old Warner Brothers cartoons, "Mmm now...it's a possibility." In looking forward to justice, to peace, and the destruction of evil, whose perspective are we looking at it from? Perspective makes all the difference in the world. Do we really understand that our perspective is probably not the same as the person

sitting next to us. Do we really understand that our perspective is most likely not the same as God's?

We are smug if we look forward to the arrival of the kingdom of God as the time when all those who have done us wrong will finally get theirs...without considering those whom we might have wronged. We are smug if we look forward to the destruction of those evil people over there...without considering that we may rightly be considered evil by others...and by God. If we have any real understanding of exactly what's going on here, then we won't smugly look forward to the arrival of the kingdom of God as the time when our side wins and we finally get what we think we deserve. Rather, we would look forward to it with fear and trembling as the time when God wins, and we have to face the possibility that we will be counted among the unjust and the evil.

But wait a minute. What happened to the good news that I was talking about? How can I say that a proper understanding of the coming of the Kingdom of God requires acknowledging that we may be counted among the unjust and the evil, and call this good news?

Very easily. I can say this because of something else that John said, and that the Pharisees understood. And let's talk about the Pharisees for a moment. For all the bad press they've received in the New Testament, they're not the bad guys we've come to think of them as. Of the four major movements with Judaism during Jesus's time, he was probably the closest to the Pharisees. So then why do we read so much about the arguments Jesus had with them? For the same reason we read about the few plane crashes and not the thousands of safe arrivals...the disagreements, like the crashes are few enough that they stand out and grab our attention.

But let's go back to what the Pharisees understood. They understood another piece of good news that John had. A piece of good news that lay in one very important word. That word is "repent." John said, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!"

What's such good news about being told to repent? There's much good news in it. We've been given a warning. We've been told what is needed for us to enter into the kingdom of God. We have a chance to change. We have a chance to try to change...to look at ourselves, see where we have been unjust, where we

have been evil, where we have been obstructions to peace. We have a chance to be honest rather than smug.

John is saying "Repent and God will accept you!" "Repent and you won't be counted among the unjust and evil." You have a chance to get in on this deal, but you must face the fact of your own sin and then try to turn away from it. The Pharisees understood this, and that's why they went to John for baptism.

The kingdom of God is at hand! This is good news. Rejoice...and repent so that you might enter into it.