



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JANUARY 21, 2018
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

It Is Good News!
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

There is an ancient Taoist story of an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his only horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to share his sorrow. "Such bad luck," they said. The farmer replied, "Good news, bad news—just the same."

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed. "Good news, bad news—just the same," replied the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathies at his misfortune. "Good news, bad news—just the same," answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "Good news, bad news—just the same," said the farmer.

I have to wonder, if the story were changed and the old man was a fisherman named Zebedee instead of an unnamed farmer, what would the neighbors have said upon hearing that this fellow named Jesus had come along and Zebedee's sons had left their nets and their father and followed him. Would they have rushed to offer congratulations that James and John had joined up with this man who just might be the Messiah? Or would they have offered sympathy that his two sons had walked out on the family business and abandoned him? Would Zebedee have answered, "Good news bad news—just the same?" Would you?

We do not always know the ultimate outcome of the things that happen to us. When bad things happen, we do tend to look hard for the silver lining which might make some sense out of what happened. On the other hand, we know that what appears to be good does not always remain so. Most of us think that the best thing that could happen to us would be to win the lottery.

In fact, many of you have promised that if you do win, you will give a sizable gift to the church. That would make us all happy, but you might not be in such good shape. A CNBC report last year indicates that many lottery winners file for bankruptcy within a few years and are not generally happier as a result of their winning. Don McNay, whose book *Life Lessons from the Lottery*, recounts some of the hardships brought on by big lottery wins is quoted as saying, ". . . many winners struggle with suicide, depression and divorce. 'It's the curse of the lottery because it made their lives worse instead of improving them.'"¹ Good news, bad news—just the same?

Even the calling of God on our lives is not always understood as good news. A familiar testimony among some ministers is that for years God called them into ministry and for years they wrestled with God over that call. Finally, after God dragged them kicking and screaming down the aisle of the church, they “surrendered” and gave up the fight to become a minister. These folks remind me a lot of Jonah who jumped overboard rather than have to deliver God’s news to the people of Ninevah. Not to be outfoxed, God employed a rather large fish to scoop up Jonah and deliver him to his divine appointment.

I have known parents—good, faithful, regular church people—who discouraged their son or daughter from entering ministry because they thought they could “do better” in another career. I have also known parents who pushed their children right into ministry against their protests because deep down they thought it might somehow benefit them. Good news, bad news—sometimes just the same.

Biblical ministry, of course, is not reserved for the so-called “professionals.” In fact, the Gospel places a calling on all people to rise up and follow Jesus. As we heard from one of the earliest stories of the Church, when it became necessary to have certain people attend to the needs of the people, the first deacons—servant leaders—were chosen. Their task was to be servers at the daily meal to make certain that the most vulnerable and needful people were served. Two thousand years later we still ask our deacons to serve us in special ways to make certain we are living the Gospel as God calls us to do.

We cannot forget one very important factor of our faith: we are all called to serve the Gospel. And what is the Gospel? It is the Good News? And

¹Abigail Hess, “Here's Why Lottery Winners Go Broke,” *CNBC* (August 25, 2017); available online at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/25/heres-why-lottery-winners-go-broke.html>.

what is the Good News? Certainly it is the news of our salvation which is truly good news. But saved for what? We are saved from self-destructive lifestyles to a better, more authentic life. We are saved to focus on something more significant than ourselves. We are saved to live out the kingdom of God which has come near to us in Jesus Christ. That means that we are saved to build a community of compassion in which the needs and concerns of other people are just as important—sometimes more so—than our own. Each and every one of us is chosen by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of all to meet the needs of people around us. Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” That is good news. It is good news that we are loved by God. And it is good news that we are to love one another. No longer can the ancient saying hold—“Good news, bad news—just the same,” because it is all good news. It is good news!

It is true that circumstances in our lives that may appear to be bad often turn out for the good. And it is true that some things that happen to us which seem good may actually turn out to be bad. Overarching all of life, however, is the love of God which is manifest in Jesus Christ. And the Good News which Jesus brings to us all is always the same . . . and that is very good!

January 21, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How often we are like Jonah, O God, hearing your call but running away, as if we can flee far enough to hide from your presence. We convince ourselves that we are inadequate for the task; that surely someone else could serve you better; that we are too busy, too uncertain, or too afraid. But our faith teaches us, O God, that out of your great love for us and for all your creation, you send us out with the task of sharing that love with others. You sent our first fathers and mothers in the faith into new lands in order to be a light and a blessing to the nations. Your followers in many generations have been called to participate in your work of reconciliation and peace. We, too, know what it means to be called by you, to respond to your commandment to go to our community, our nation, and our world sharing the good news of your love and mercy for all your children and believing that even through the fragile vessels of our lives, your Holy Spirit can accomplish the work of making all things new.

But even as we recognize that your call to love and serve is still much the same as it has been for believers of every age, we know that much in our world has changed. To show compassion to those of various languages and customs and faiths no longer requires that we cross oceans because the world has come to us. We need only to look around our own schools and markets to notice the colorful shades of your creativity in the faces we see. We need only to listen in our own neighborhoods and businesses to hear the beautiful chorus of accents that reveal the complexity and diversity of the human family. But we need only to turn on our television sets to see horrific images of violence because of ancient divisions and ongoing conflict. And yet you have called us to live together in harmony rather than discord, to seek peaceful ways of doing and being rather than emphasize those differences which distinguish us one from another, to respond in love and mercy in order to honor your image that we find in each one we encounter.

Give us ears to hear the beauty of your promises in the voice of each person we meet. Give us eyes to see the gifts you have placed within them. Give us minds agile enough to imagine justice for those who have known oppression. Give us hands strong enough to accomplish your work. Give us feet courageous enough to follow you wherever your children need to know of your light and life. As we go out from this place, give us hearts open enough to extend hospitality to both friend and stranger, recognizing that in so doing, we welcome you into our midst. And in all circumstances, O Lord, give us spirits bold and unwavering enough to believe that our worship here and the compassion we extend to those we meet can make evident your kingdom among us.

Bless these who have answered your call whom we set apart this day to lead our congregation, and bless each of us, we pray, that when we hear your call, we, too, will have the courage to respond, "Here am I; send me."

We pray in the name of the Christ who calls us and by the power of your Spirit who dwells with us. Amen

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