

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC

Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2009

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"Good News?"

"So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."

[Luke 3:18 (NRSV)]

Good news? Where in the world is the *good news* in our lesson for today? First John accuses his listeners of being a "brood of vipers!" Then he says they will be "cut down and thrown into the fire." Then he gives some tough rules to three different groups. Next, he denies being the Messiah himself, but paints a "fiery picture" of his coming. Luke the Physician, the writer of this Gospel, must at this point have gotten tired of all this, for he summarizes the rest of John's preaching by saying that there were "many *other* exhortations!" Good News? Where?

It will be twenty years next month, but it seems like just a short time ago that I was right there where John baptized the crowds that came out to hear him preach. I even dipped a small container in the river Jordan and got some water to bring home, right there where tradition holds that John baptized our Lord Jesus. It was all very peaceful and beautiful, especially there at the end of the lake that we have come to call the "Sea of Galilee." Everyone could easily picture Jesus going down to that waterfront and calling those fishermen to follow him. You could almost hear John the Baptist, shouting those words of exhortation and challenge, calling the people to repentance. It was a perfect setting for *good news*.

But then, we boarded the tour bus again, and within minutes we were into what is called the "west bank." Suddenly there were miles and miles of barbed wire, fencing off "no man's land," an area heavily mined and protected by check point stations, tanks, missiles and bunkers equipped with heavy machine guns. Overhead flew regular patrols of heavily armed jets. Israeli soldiers, all carrying guns, were everywhere! Somehow it didn't fit with the peaceful scenes back at the lake, or along the Jordan where John had preached the "good news!" There was no *good news* in *this* place!

Back in the bus it was, for the long trip south to Jerusalem. Jah-ru-Shalam, "city of God's peace"; surely we would find it there! But as we entered the area, our driver was stopped and informed that there was a "disturbance" in Bethlehem. It would be better if we returned to our hotel and tried again tomorrow! It was not *good news*; there was no peace!

The next day we were advised not to go into the "Old City," for the Arab merchants had called for a strike. Some of us, however, foolishly rejected this advice and went alone or in small groups to see the sights. We did not realize it at the time, but it was the beginning of the "hostage-taking" period that thankfully concluded without incident. I suppose one could see *good news* in the fact that all of us are safely back in the U.S. today!

It all came "home" to us a few days later, when we were returning from the "Holocaust Memorial." We rounded the hill above the Mount of Olives. The bus stopped and we all got out to view the city as Jesus had done many times when he returned from visiting his friends in Bethany. As we had done in each of the places visited, someone was assigned to read the appropriate verses of

Scripture, in this case, from Luke 19: 41-44: "*As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'*" (pause) It didn't sound like good news at the time, nor does it now.

"If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" This is a question for all God's people, and for all time. Do we know what really is needed for peace? Do the Arabs and Jews who have met at "Peace Talks" time and again really understand what they *must do* in order to bring about peace in their ravaged lands? Do our national leaders really have *any idea* of how to restore peace, in terms of "economic" tranquility, to our capitalistic system? Does *anybody* have any idea how to combat crime in a peaceful way, without resorting to the violence that we witness daily on our TV screens? And what about you and me? Do we know (or remember!) what we can do to bring a little peace into our own lives and relationships? Where in the world do we find *that* "good news?"

The answer is found in the consideration of another question: "What would you give up for a little peace in your life?" It's a perfectly natural question, and one that all of us here at Christ Church have probably been asking ourselves, and each other, many times over the past few weeks. What would you give up to see conflicts resolved and to feel the spirit of peace among us?

The answer for Christians *should be* obvious, but somehow it isn't. The answer, and the lesson we need to learn, is that you don't have to "give up" anything! The "Good News" is that "Peace" is already here, and it is a gift given unconditionally! The reason we don't accept it, the reason we can't feel it, is because we think we have to "give up" something in order to "get" something. What's more, we think we ought to "get" something in return, *every time* that we "give." That's just plain wrong! It's the *exact opposite* of why Jesus came in the first place. The Prince of Peace came not just to teach, but to show us that this gift is *unconditionally given*. We don't *get it* because of anything we have done, and we don't have to *give* anything to get it. It's so simple, and it's such "good news!" And yet....

Perhaps it's the reason for Advent; it certainly is the challenge of Advent! It's the challenge that says that we might *never* see the hope and good news in a message such as John's, at least not until we understand the truth contained within his words, that we must purge our lives of the attitude that connects "give" with "get", and prevents "peace" from reigning in our hearts.

Perhaps that's why today's collect pleads, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and *with great might* come among us...." It would seem that God's mighty power is needed because of the ramparts we have built around our lives that won't let God in! In terms of the season of Advent, the *good* news is that we have yet another opportunity to tear down those ramparts, those blocking, selfish attitudes, and allow the Prince, nay, the *King* to bring a little "peace" into our lives. The *bad* news is that we only have eleven more days in which to do it! [Let's see, did I get it right this time?]

O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind.