

*Do You Want The Good News First – Or the Bad? – November 29, 2009 –
1st Sunday of Advent
1st Kings: 19: 9-18; Isaiah 10: 20-23; Matthew 24: 36-44*

I own a little refrigerator magnet; and there is a picture of Jesus on that magnet - and underneath the picture of Jesus are these words: “Jesus is coming... Look busy.”

Now... while that magnet is, in fact, on the refrigerator – and while it is used to hold up receipts and reminders from time to time, out of respect for some people’s sensitivities and out of a genuine concern that some people may find the sentiment on that magnet confusing or perhaps even in questionable taste, it is not a magnet that I prominently display.

Years ago, I purchased a bumper sticker with a similar statement and sentiment that read: “Jesus is coming... and He’s mad as hell.” I never even **considered** putting that sticker on my car – and for much of the same reasons and concerns that I have had with the refrigerator magnet.

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And yet I made both of those purchases – the combined cost for both was about 2 or 3 dollars - because both of these items and the sentiments expressed on them serve for me – and I hope for you – as a **note of caution** that perhaps we maybe need to not take this Jesus so lightly... or to take our salvation for granted... or to assume that both the birth of Jesus over two thousand years ago and the coming of Jesus whenever that may occur has as little significance as Santa arriving at the end of the downtown Christmas parade.

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We need to come face to face with what is both a faith statement and a historical fact: **the birth of Jesus changed the world... changed all of creation... once and for all.**

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In the play *Antony and Cleopatra*, William Shakespeare explicitly spells out what are indeed the earth shaking consequences of the birth of this vulnerable baby Jesus in the small town of Bethlehem.

In this play, kings and queens... emperors and generals... are able to wallow all that they want in their private romantic dramas and indulge in their political ambitions. And yet, all the while, throughout the play, there is a sense and there is talk and there are rumors about this birth in a place called Judea.

And all the characters in that play – the emperor Caesar Augustus, undisputed ruler of the world at the time of Jesus’ birth; the famed general Mark Antony; the Queen Cleopatra, even the lesser characters - everyone seems to know that **their** world as they know it is ending and a new one is beginning with the birth of Jesus Christ

.The birth of Jesus changed the world - once and for all. And the world and all that is in it - and all who are a part of this world - and that is you and you and you and me... and our neighbors... and our co-workers and bosses... and perfect strangers... and the people we see on local and national TV – the news readers and the newsmakers – all who are a part of this world are called to respond faithfully to that change.

We have a choice. We can be participants in God’s Kingdom - or not. We can follow Jesus - or not.

Actually, we have another choice in this matter. We can be full participants in God’s Kingdom and we can become faithful followers of Jesus. Or we can participate when it suits us. We can be faithful when it’s convenient; and we can follow Jesus but only so far.

We can give ourselves fully to God who was revealed to us in Jesus’ birth, ministry, the healing, the miracles and signs and wonders, his teaching, his death on the cross, and his triumph over death. Or we can decide that we will set aside a little time for God... **when we have the time...** perhaps every other day... or on our good days... or when the mood suits us.

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Jesus warns us in Matthew’s Gospel that we cannot serve two masters; **but we still try.** And in the book of James we are told that a person who is double minded and divided in every way cannot expect to receive grace from God. **But still, we continue to want our cake and our religion too.** We will talk about love and loving others with one breath and then speak spitefully and judgmentally about others with the next breath.

And we simply can’t do that. That’s having one foot in and one foot out in our decision for Christ.

We would rather that Jesus would come to us when we call, fixing us when we fall, forgetting entirely that it is Jesus who is **making a call on our lives** - and not just some of our lives - and not just for some of our time but **all of our lives, all of the time.**

The birth of Jesus changed the world - fully and for the good; and that change can and needs to happen within each of us - fully and for the good.

This is not merely about who’s going to heaven and who is not. None of us here are in on that decision. **But it is about us living faithful lives.** It is about not taking our faith commitment lightly or our relationship with Jesus for granted,

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In the passage that we heard from Matthew’s Gospel this morning, Jesus speaks words of judgment and finality. **His message is unsettling...and it should be.**

Jesus paints a picture of some people being saved, being invited into God’s Kingdom and others... well, **not.** The people in this prediction by Jesus are doing the exact same things: working in the fields, doing household chores. There is not a dime’s worth of difference between one and the other... **and yet.**

In this story, Jesus refers to the time of Noah and describes how the people of that time were simply going about their business – “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” is how Jesus describes it... **until the flood swept everyone away.** Jesus referred to the time of Noah intentionally. In the book of Genesis, God’s relationship with people at that time is described in this way:

“The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was very great and that every inclination of human hearts was evil” – “and God was sorry that he ever made humankind”... “The earth was corrupt in God’s sight and the earth was filled with violence.” And God said, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them.”

The nature of Jesus’ warning to the people then – **and to us – now** – is for us to get serious about this stuff, that even if we are not convinced about hellfire and brimstone, **we need to at least consider that there are - and that there always will be – consequences for our actions...** for both what we do and for what we decide to not do... how we decide to go about our lives...

That we don’t get do-overs... that our relationship with God is not even remotely like that of some public school systems **where everyone wins because no one is keeping score and no one fails simply because every one is present.** Jesus wants us to know that it just isn’t like that... that God doesn’t work like that... that guess what, Jesus really isn’t Santa Claus; that if you are sort of nice and mostly civil some of the time it doesn’t gloss over the many times you are mean spirited and unkind....

And we shouldn’t really be surprised by these words of Jesus. It is, after all, Jesus who said, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword, for I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother.” And how many times do we hear Jesus speak throughout the Gospels of people being thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?

There are, my friends, consequences to our actions; and we simply cannot afford to be so blasé about our relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now, then again, maybe we are all going to heaven. Maybe no one in the end is being thrown into the outer darkness. I don’t know. None of us really does...

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So let me offer a vision of salvation proposed by one of the earliest Christian writers and thinkers – Origen of Alexandria, who got himself in trouble when he proposed just that – that **we all get to heaven.** He was called a heretic for his ideas and was expelled from the Church.

But Origen’s idea of everyone being saved had a hitch to it.

It goes like this... Everyone goes to heaven... **and yet,** every day, every moment, everything that we do, every encounter that we have with another person **counts. Every moment counts.**

At any particular moment, were we kind...or rude? Did we make a joke or a remark at someone’s expense? Did we find or make up some excuse to refuse to help to someone in need? Did we draw away when someone needed our presence?

At any particular moment, were we moved and motivated mostly – or solely - by our own pleasures? Or by our comfort? Was money our god on a certain day? Were we lazy or cynical or greedy or full of envy? Did we covet that which was not ours? Did we indulge in anger? Did we trade in gossip?

We still get to heaven, despite all that... No one burns in hell; **but - and here's the catch** - what you did every day in your life determines how close you will get to God when you are in heaven. The consequence of your sins will not result in hell fire and brimstone - **only in a great impossible to bridge distance between you and God... and, as a consequence, a deep loneliness...an unrelenting sense of forsakenness in the midst of heaven.**

There are consequences to what we do; and, as we begin this the very first Sunday of Advent, we need to prepare our hearts and minds for the return of Christ in our lives and the return at some day of Jesus in this world as if we were preparing for Lent.

We need to ready ourselves. We need to commit ourselves more deeply in our faith walk. We need to prayerfully and seriously reflect that the birth of Jesus changed this world – fully, and for the good – and that Jesus Christ can change our lives – fully and for the good – if we let Jesus into our hearts – if we stop keeping him at arm's length – and then allow that change – **we call it being born again** – to happen to us.

If we don't do this... if we don't get serious about this... if we continue to have one foot in and the other foot out in our relationship with Jesus, we will surely be lost. There may - or may not - be fire; but we still will be lost. We will be somehow and in some way and in some measure separated from God. And what is the Hebrew definition of sin? **Separation from God.**

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The title of this message as listed in the bulletin is “Do You Want The Good News First – Or the Bad?” I just gave to you the bad news - all four pages of it: that Jesus is coming and that we better not only look busy but get busy - that Jesus is coming, and He is not very pleased.

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Many of you may be thinking... hey, this is not a cheerful message, particularly during this time of good will and good cheer cheer. But I gave you the bad news first. So now the good news... There's a lot of it.

- Jesus promises life and life abundantly – John 10, verse 10
- Jesus has given us grace upon grace - John 1: 16
- God so loved us that God sent us and gave us his only Son, his Beloved One, the one who was with him at the dawn of creation so that we who believe in Jesus will not die but shall have eternal life – John 3: 16
- God provides – God provides for our needs – God does not forget us nor does God neglect us... Jesus is the Lord of the harvest and the master of every storm and the source of all of our peace... Look just about anywhere in the Bible and you will know that.

- God is merciful, full of grace, slow to be angry, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and forgiving every sin – Exodus 34, beginning with verse 6 and see that good news repeated throughout the Scriptures.
- Through his death on the cross and the resurrection from the dead, Jesus has defeated death and sin and despair.
- Jesus will never leave us – Mathew 28: 20
- Jesus will carry our burdens – if we just give them to Him – Matthew 11, verse 28.
- We are connected to each other through Christ Jesus; and nothing will ever separate us from the love of God - Romans 8

Shall I go on? I could... and I can.

These are just some of the gifts from God to us the people of God. All that we need to do is to reach out and receive these gifts: to accept God's grace; to grow in God's love; to trust in God's goodness; and to hear and to heed and to do God's Word.

These are just some of the gifts from God for us the people of God. All we need to do is to say yes to God's asking that we be God's people – to let God change us fully – and for the good - to draw near to God and to invite God to draw nearer to us as we begin this Advent season... **Amen.**