

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Communion Service February 26, 2012
Lessons: Isaiah 35:1-10 and Mark 1:14-15

THE NEWS IS GOOD

Several times recently people have asked me what Presbyterian is. The name was unfamiliar to them, and one even asked me what religion it is and whether we believe in Jesus. It seems that nondenominational Christianity has taken over the name “Christian,” so that to Americans these days the names of traditional Protestant denominations sound strange, as though they might identify sects of Christianity or of other religions altogether. Some people even seem to think there is Catholic and there is Christian, which is mind-boggling, since the Roman Catholic Church is the largest body of Christians on earth, but such appears to be the level of public ignorance of church history. As we learned to the dismay of some in a presbytery meeting not long ago, church developers now recommend that new congregations refrain from using the name Presbyterian but use the word “community” instead – that is, call it a “community church” and hide the name Presbyterian until people come in, get to know the new congregation, and feel comfortable there. Then disclose the church’s denominational identity and history.

Anyway, yes, the Catholic Church is Christian, and so are the Presbyterian churches. And the Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, etc. We Presbyterians belong to the family of churches in the Reformed Tradition of Protestant Christianity. As Christians, we date our faith back to Jesus of Nazareth and, indeed, all the way back to the Middle Bronze Age when God called Abraham and Sarah to become the first ancestors of the children of Israel. As Protestants, we date our branch of Christianity to the Protestant Reformation, commonly said to have begun on October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses for discussion leading to reforms in the church. Instead, as you know, the calls for reform split the church, and Protestant Christianity was born as something distinct from Roman Catholic Christianity. The Reformation spread from Luther’s Germany across Europe and eventually, in various ways, around the world. In the second generation of Protestant Christianity, our Reformed Tradition was born in Geneva, Switzerland where John Calvin held sway. It spread to other European nations and to Scotland from which it migrated to the United States.

Now, we are celebrating the Lord’s Supper, Communion, on the first Sunday of the church’s season of Lent which culminates in Holy Week with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. Traditionally, Lent is a time of the year for turning anew to Jesus

Christ and having our faith in him refreshed, deepened, and strengthened. It is a time for learning, for leaving behind habits and attitudes that weaken our faith and diminish our lives. It is a time for personal growth and renewed engagement with each other in the community of faith, the church.

Why do we need a special season for any of that? Our ancestors in the Reformed Tradition were quite suspicious of special days, times, and seasons in church life. They saw every day as special to God and every hour as the right time to respond to the call of Jesus to follow him, trust him, and serve the redemptive purpose for which God sent him. So, why do we need Lent or Advent or any other holiday or season on the church calendar? Christian faith is not a cyclical myth. Jesus is not born every December. He was born once, and we don't know the date or time of year. He is not crucified again each Good Friday; neither does he rise again every Easter. Jesus of Nazareth was as real a human being as you or I.

There is, however, a sense in which he is crucified anew every day, and he tells us how that happens. "As you have done it," he warns, "to one of the least important of society's people – my sister, my brother – you have done it do me." I believe God sees the crucifixion of Jesus in every cruciform event in our world, from the death of a child to the rape of woman to the humiliation of any person to the greatly horrible events such as the Holocaust or the slaughter of millions in the Republic of Congo. How could God possibly see otherwise? Jesus suffered and died in unity with us. For this reason, his resurrection will include us. As he promises, "Because I live, you will live also."

Any day is a good day to hear more deeply and personally God's good news, and what Jesus announced, taught, put into action for the sake of people, and died for is good news. For me, the virtue of having the season of Lent is that it reminds us Jesus was a real person who actually did the suffering and dying for us at a specific time, in a particular place. In short, he was a human being, a person like you or me. His life story is a life story, not a myth. So, when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are taking into our bodies, minds, and hearts the realities of his suffering, humiliation, and death for our sake. He did it, and, yes, it was done to him, but he gave himself to it because God loves us and is unwilling to go forward and live on eternally as God without us.

It is very important that we understand why and how Jesus came among us to represent and embody God's truth for us. It is good news, not bad news. He did not come to judge us and assign blame. He did not come to compare us for the purpose of giving rewards to some but inflicting punishments upon others. He did not come to include some while excluding others. He declared none of us hopeless cases. Neither did he grant any of us God's stamp of approval or give us a pass on facing up to God's love for us. His very presence said in many ways, *God loves you and won't stop loving you and go away; so deal*

with it! You are created to be a daughter or son of God, a sister or brother to the rest of earth's people, and you are now called to change your ways – to start thinking and living as a daughter or son of God. He calls us out of the isolation that is the nature of sin. That's what sin is – not just wrongdoing, although it does plenty of harm, but alienation from God and each other.

I just said Jesus calls us now, and the “now” is important. The good news he came to announce is not a philosophy, a theory, or an ideology. It's not a doctrine to consider but a message to receive and respond to. It's an announcement that interrupts the course of our lives with its good news. Something has happened, and something will continue to happen until it is completed. God has come, and God is coming. Why? God's motive is love, and God's purpose is redemption – meaning God's desire is heal, restore, and give real life, not only to individuals, but to the human community as a whole. So, God's love is inseparable from God's justice, which we learn from Jesus is restorative rather than punitive. That means Jesus came, not to blame and condemn, but to heal and liberate.

Now, is God's coming good news or bad? My answer depends upon how I see change. Here's what I mean. Suppose a school manages to put in place new policies and practices that reduce bullying among the students. Many and probably most of those students will be quite happy with the results because a lot of children get bullied. Some, however, may not be pleased. They are the ones who have found power and enjoyed prestige of a sort by bullying their schoolmates. Can the new policies and practices not help the bullies, too? Of course they can because bullying is self-destructive as well as hurtful to others, but the bully may not see it that way. A source of pride is being removed. A feeling of power is being diminished. That's why people opposed Jesus and sought to get rid of him: he challenged their sources of pride and threatened to diminish their feelings of power and even their actual power over others.

God wants to be our God, wants relationship, wants our trust, and wants us to become a truly human community. There are problems to be resolved, hurts to be healed, disappointments to be overcome, wrongs to be set right, failures to be redeemed and turned into strengths, enslavements to be broken, and relationships to be restored. Jesus Christ gives life new purpose and meaning. There's no quick fix for all that ails us, but there is a process of salvation. The news is good, and God very much wants to make it good for us. Amen.