

Bearer of Bad News

In the name of him who finished his course on the third day, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you have heard someone start a conversation by saying, "I've got good news and I've got bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" It's kind of hard to know how to answer, isn't it? You want to know just how bad the bad news is and how good the good news is, and whether the latter supersedes or at least makes up for the former before you reply.

Personally, I'm looking forward to the day that I can say it to my wife: "Dear, I've got good news and I've got bad news. The good news is that you no longer have to worry about feeding and cleaning up after that nasty old cat." The only problem is that in the follow up, I'll have a very hard time delivering the so-called bad news as if I actually thought it was bad news. And that's going to put me in the doghouse. ...Hmm, maybe when the time comes, I should just keep quiet about it and let her discover the ... uh, *news* for herself.

Right. Anyway, of all the fantastic perks that I enjoy in my present calling, the greatest by far is that I get to spend a big part of my time announcing really good news to people – the absolute best news: I get to tell of God's love in Christ Jesus and about all that he did to secure our eternal salvation. I get to tell people that for his sake their sins are forgiven. I get to announce to families that their new baby has in Holy Baptism been reborn a child of God and made an heir of everlasting life. I get to proclaim to people kneeling at this rail "This is Christ's body given for you. This is his blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins. At weddings I get to lead couples through their vows and then declare them to be husband and wife joined together as one by God. When announcing the Aaronic Benediction, I get to call down God's blessing on people. Even when folks are dealing with life's saddest and most difficult situation, I get to share with them the good news that their departed loved one who died in the faith is, even as we speak, in glory with Christ, and that they will rise again and live forever. Yes, a huge part of my calling is to be the bearer of good news. It's wonderful.

But I'm guessing that you know where this is going. I've got good news and I've got bad news. And the way it works, I always have to tell the bad news first. The only exception is at a funeral where the bad news is lying right there in front of everyone. Then I don't need to say that the wages of sin is death. We can all see it. More than that, we can feel it. The message comes through loud and clear. At all other times *I do* have to say it. I have to be the bearer of bad news. That's the down side of my calling. And the thing about bad news is, well, it's bad. People don't like to hear it. In fact, it often happens that they don't like hearing it so much that they refuse to hear it. And in refusing to hear, they may go so far as to attempt to intimidate, to silence, or even to shoot the messenger.

That's what we've got going on in two of today's Scripture readings. In the Old Testament we have the prophet Jeremiah. He was called by God to be his last-ditch attempt to bring the rebellious and sin-saturated people of Judah to repentance and back to reliance on the Lord alone. In order to do that, he had to tell them the bad news. It was this: The Lord is very angry with you. He is sick to death of your mixing his worship and truth with that of the pagan Canaanites. You've got the idols and altars of false gods standing right in the Lord's temple. You've got dozens of other shrines and altars to false gods scattered throughout the land. You're participating in all the practices the Lord has forbidden: cultic prostitution, using mediums and fortune tellers, casting spells. It's all an abomination to the Lord. Beyond that, the rich and

powerful have corrupted the justice system. They're using it to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor and needy. You pretend to be so pious and holy going through all your religious observations, but you are despising and trampling upon your own neighbors. The Lord has had enough of it. If you don't repent, give up your idolatry, and return to the Lord, if you don't stop abusing your authority to oppress the needy, the Lord declares that he will make this house like Shiloh.

By way of explanation, Shiloh was the place where the Tabernacle the Israelites had used as their portable temple during their 40 years in the wilderness was set up upon their occupation of the Promised Land. It stood there for nearly 400 years. Over time it became a complex of permanent buildings to house the priests, their families, and their assistants – all the people who carried the water, cut the firewood, and served in maintaining the place and dealing with the needs of worshippers. It was a fairly good-sized city. But in the time of Jeremiah it was nothing but a long abandoned ruin. Centuries before when the prophet Samuel served there as a child and Eli was the aged high priest, things had turned rotten. Eli's wicked sons Hophni and Phinheas were running the show. They used their positions to change worship practices and to steal from the sacrifices people brought to offer, which called into doubt their effectiveness. I mean, if the priest mishandles my offering, if he does his job wrong, are my sins really being forgiven? They were also engaging in sexual immorality with the ladies on the altar guild. All of this was an open secret. And you know how it goes, if the guys who are supposed to be in charge of declaring God's Law and modeling godly behavior are corrupt, you can guess where it led everyone else. Public standards of morality sank to record depths. So what did the Lord do? After several sharp warnings that were ignored, he wiped the place out. He removed his gracious presence from there and allowed it to be overrun and destroyed by invading Philistines. In saying that this house will be like Shiloh, Jeremiah meant that the Lord was threatening to do the same thing to his temple in Jerusalem. He's going to leave and let the temple, the city, and everyone in it be completely destroyed.

This sounded like blasphemy in the ears of Jeremiah's hearers: the corrupt priests, prophets, and religious leaders. They didn't want to hear the bad news. And as we read, in refusing to hear it, they chose the "shoot the messenger" option. They summoned the civil leaders and demanded that Jeremiah be put to death. Jeremiah told them, "Go ahead and kill me if you want. You'll just be adding my innocent blood to your list of other crimes. But know this for certain: the Lord sent me to speak these words to you." As it turns out, Jeremiah was not killed. He was imprisoned for some time, he was mocked and abused; but in the end the Lord saw to it that he was essentially kidnapped by a band of faithful followers and taken safely out of Jerusalem before the Lord made good on his word and made his temple and the city of Jerusalem just like Shiloh.

In today's Gospel we've got some Pharisees who are trying to use the "intimidate the messenger" approach on Jesus to avoid hearing the bad news. They tell him that he should leave Galilee because King Herod is out to get him. It's a lie, but one that seems plausible to the Pharisees because Herod had recently ordered the head of John the Baptizer removed. Recall that he did so reluctantly – but it is worth noting that the reason John was in prison was because Herod didn't like hearing the bad news. It seems to be a consistent theme.

What bad news was Jesus telling the Pharisees? Only that they were just as sinful as everyone else whom they felt they were so vastly morally superior to. Jesus told them that all their made-up rules and traditions by which they thought they were keeping the commandments and advancing themselves in the sight of God were actually doing the opposite. They were keeping the Pharisees away from the Lord and his true righteousness. You need to repent of

your sins and receive God's forgiveness too. And how they hated hearing it. If this Jesus was a true prophet of God, they thought, he would recognize how pure and holy we are. He'd be commending us: Good job, men! As it is, his insults are not to be borne. Let's get him out of here.

Their attempt to intimidate him failed. Jesus told them that he had no fear of Herod. I've got a job to do and I'm going to keep on doing it. But let me tell you where the real threat I face comes from. It's going to be from people like you. Jerusalem, the city of God, is where true prophets go to die. And then Jesus delivers the really bad news: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken." He's telling them that once again, Jerusalem and the Lord's temple will be like Shiloh.

And that is what happened. Jesus did go to Jerusalem. And there he was rejected and killed—not by godless pagans and openly immoral sinners, but by those who imagined themselves to be the best and most godly people on the planet, the people who were the most religiously observant. They didn't want to hear the bad news. They didn't want to confront their own sins and their need for God's forgiveness. And so they crucified rather than shot the messenger. And about 40 years later, after giving them plenty of time to repent and return, the Lord forsook the place and made it like Shiloh.

Let's not make the mistake of letting it happen here. My calling is to declare to you the whole counsel of God. It's my privilege and greatest pleasure to declare to you the good news – the best news there is. But to get to it, I first have to tell you the bad news. I can't be talking about fallen mankind's sinfulness in general, or about what others are doing "out there". I have to convict *you* of *your* sins. I have to expose your idols – all those things you trust in other than the Lord. I have to put my finger on your evil desires, your lusts, your jealousies, your misplaced priorities, your selfishness, your lack of love, your neglect of your duties, your self-righteousness, your laziness and spiritual complacency – all these sins and more: the ways that you are earning for yourself God's burning wrath and condemnation. How do I know what they are? Easy. I'm guilty of them too. And I hate to hear it just as much as you do. But we all need to hear and confront the truth of the bad news. We need to mean it when we say to the Lord, "I, a poor, miserable sinner confess to you all my sins and iniquities with which I have offended you and justly deserve your temporal and eternal punishment".

Why? Because there isn't any good news without the bad news. The Gospel is not God loves you. The Gospel is not God affirms you or is pleased with you. The Gospel is not even God forgives you. The Gospel is God sent his only-begotten Son into this world as a man to live a perfectly righteous life and then to give that life as a sacrifice of atonement on the cross, to suffer and die in agony to pay the penalty that you by your sins deserved. The Gospel is that Jesus by his bloody death and glorious resurrection saved you from spending all of eternity in hellfire. That's really good news; but only to those who hear and acknowledge the truth of the bad news and who fear God's wrath, who repent, who are sorry for their sins, and want to do better. With such repentant sinners, the Lord is pleased to dwell.

Let's not drive him away. Let's not have him give up in disgust and leave this place like Shiloh. Let's be willing to hear the whole counsel of God: the bad news as well as the good. Oh, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't shoot the messenger. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!