

December 1, 2019
National Presbyterian Church
“Some Good News At Last”

Luke 1:26-38

David A. Renwick

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,
²⁷to a virgin
engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the
house of David.
The virgin’s name was Mary.
²⁸And he came to her and said, (*not just “Greetings!” BUT – literally!*
***Rejoice! For you are a person - who stands in a condition of
having been given a free gift!***
The Lord is with you.)
²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.
³⁰The angel said to her, “*Don’t be afraid, Mary, (he knows her by name)
for you have found – a free gift – from God.*”

Throughout the fall and winter we’re looking at the story of Jesus’ life, teaching and significance. And in the next few weeks, as we approach Christmas, we’re going back to the beginning of the story in order to focus on Jesus’ birth – and doing so through the lens of one of the four accounts we have in the Bible: the account that we call the Gospel according to Luke.

The word “Gospel” simply means “Good News” or “Good-Message,” or, since the word in Greek is “eu-angel-ion,” even Good-Angel (the word “angel” in Greek means messenger). And this is the word is used for the stories of Jesus because there was at least one thing that the early Christians agreed on: *that above everything else*, Christianity was first of all a message, an announcement of “Good News”!

And this is important to state for a number of reasons

The first is that the world is filled with bad news; tragic news; sad news – which is literally “bad for us” if it’s all the news we get. And there’s a lot of it:

- not only in *our lives and families* (some of you, I know are carrying huge burdens with no end in sight, and possibly with more of it on the way)
- but, of course, bad news also seems to dominate *the world of politics and economics and nations*. From which there also seems to be no escape.

Exactly two years ago, at Thanksgiving 2017, Jeff Stibel (a business partner of basketball great Kobe Bryant, and a brain scientist decided to do something about this. He writes:

I am a recovering addict. For the past five months, I have quit something almost as hard to give up as drinking, smoking or drugs. **I decided to stop reading the news.** No newspapers, no online articles, no television, no Facebook. Cold turkey, and on Thanksgiving no less.

My thinking was pretty simple: News is inherently temporary and seems to be increasingly hollow. Between print, radio, television and digital -- news is now recycled repeatedly . . . so I figure that I'll find out about it from someone anyway . .

(Of course) There is nothing inherently wrong with news, and I certainly don't believe the philosophy that "It's all fake." And it's quite possible that my News-Hiatus-Experiment may not last. But it's important to know that by design media news is skewed toward the negative, because negativity and fear loom larger in the human brain than positive events:

In fact, because of a tiny *almond-shaped part of our brain* called the "Amygdala," a single negative event makes roughly the same impression *as five positive events.*

SO . . . negative news catches our attention captures our imagination and scares us into reading more . . . and the (media) News exploits this quirk of human nature which at one time, was important. The role of the amygdala was to warn us of danger -- for our survival in the wild. But since we no longer live in the wild, too much negativity can now cause more harm than good.

Studies have shown that people who watch negative news

- are more likely to be *depressed, stressed or anxious.*
- They are also more likely to *think catastrophically* about their personal problems and challenges, even when they have nothing to do w/the news.
- Issues *are often portrayed* in terms of *worst-case scenarios* on the news,
- and *once our brains* get into "worst-case" mode, it's nearly impossible to claw our way out. (DR: and find hope!)

For that reason alone, it's unfortunate that news consumption among Americans focusing on the negative is increasing.

Edited from *BAD NEWS ADDICTION: How I kicked my news addiction.* 4/10/2018 USA TODAY

In other words, even if, and especially if there's no escape from some of the bad news, and even if we don't have the luxury of taking a hiatus from the media news (as Jeff Stibel did), the fact is that from time to time, our souls desperately need some good news (and the hope that comes with it) to balance the plethora of bad news if we're going to survive and thrive.

Or, to put it another way, all of us know the power that is experienced (what a relief it is! what a release it is! what a breath of fresh air it is!) when some Good News finally comes. One of my favorite stories about the power of hearing good news is about a man Jack Elliott.

Jack was a prisoner of war in World War II and was presumed dead by his family: -- BAD NEWS! But on December 15, 1944, 75 years ago, he returned safely to the United States after a remarkable escape.

His daughter, Laura Elliott, tells the story about his arrival here in DC at National Airport, and then at her Aunt Lee's home in Fairfax, Virginia. She said that Lee almost fainted when she saw her brother Jack at the door. And then the plans began to break the news to Jack's mother, Martha, who still lived on the family farm, eight miles outside Richmond. Laura describes the scene at the farm like this. She says,

"Inside the house, Martha heard the sound of car wheels on gravel. . . and wondered who would visit *so close to dinnertime*.

Then she froze. The army delivered death notices in person.

She walked to the door. `Don't cry in front a stranger' she told herself and looked out.

Jack's aged dog, a pointer by the name of Speed, was dancing around a terribly thin man, bent over, trying to pet him.

"Strange," thought Martha. "I haven't seen Speed act that way since Jack left.

Oh, my Lord," she said to herself! "**Jack!**" she cried out, throwing open the door.

Jack stood and opened his arms. They held each other for a long time. Not saying a word. Finally Martha pulled away and put her hand over her heart. She was sure it was the first time she'd felt it beat since Jack left home.

From "A Wing and a Prayer" by Laura Elliott, in *Stories in Uniform*, 2013.

GOOD NEWS! How powerful it is, and how much we need it in a bad news world. That's the first thing.

And the second thing is this: that Good news is what Christian faith is supposed to be about. But for some, sadly, it's not. In fact, to many **outside the Christian fold** these days study after study shows (e.g. Barna Research) that Christian faith is primarily seen as something that makes people *self-righteous and judgmental*. In other words, it's "Bad News" – to be avoided like the plague. To be sure some of this criticism is blatantly unfair. But some of it is probably right on target and legitimate.

And even **within the Christian fold** there are some for whom the news about our faith doesn't seem all that good. For example, there are some who think that Christian Faith is primarily about *living up to a high moral and spiritual standard that is virtually impossible to reach* – and that God is like a high-pressure parent who won't be pleased with us until we get there! So, for some within the faith, there's always a depressing feeling of guilt and unworthiness.

I can remember talking once to a dear church member, with a vibrant faith who led a life that was filled with love for others. But from listening to others (and perhaps reading books or watching TV), she believed that she was missing out on an experience of faith that God was with-holding from her: some kind of religious feeling that she ought to have in order to be a true Christian. From my point of view, this was as sad as it could be, because the genuineness of her faith and the power of her witness seemed obvious! But, to her, she always felt second class, left out, not quite meeting the standard or fully loved by God because she'd never "felt" in a certain way.

How sad that is, whether in the world or in the church – to live under the perpetual influence of **Bad News** or "Less Than Good News" that leaves us flat or crushed . . . when all along at the heart of the Christian message there's supposed to be **Good News** – really good news, on which our lives can depend and thrive. . . in fact, the kind of **Good News** that came to Mary in our passage:

not first of all news about what *she did or did not do* for God,
but first of all about *what God was doing for her and through her*,
as a gift -- out of sheer grace.

Let me put it like this: when history is written it's usually about the powerful and the popular (think "lives of the rich and famous"); mostly men and rarely women. And in this regard, Mary really didn't measure up or count!

- In human terms, she was a person of no great significance, one peasant amongst millions in the first century world, at the lower end of the power and economic spectrum.
- Nor is there any indication either, that she was notable, worthy of noticing, for some other reason (for example, somehow a notch above everyone else in moral or spiritual achievements). In fact, one thing we know about Mary is that years later, when Jesus is a twelve year old boy and then as an adult, Mary's going to forget all about this "seemingly unforgettable" meeting with Gabriel, and will tell Jesus to get off his high horse: to stop acting like an adult! to stop preaching and teaching and healing! and come back home to be normal!

So Mary's an ordinary mixed bag just like the rest of us! But in our story, the *greatest story ever told in all of history*, it's precisely "Ordinary Mary" whom God brings on to center stage. It's to Mary that God comes!

- Not to Judge her. Not to Condemn her. Not with Bad News
- But with incredible Good News:
 - God's decision to Call *her* by name into his service
 - to give unbelievable significance and purpose to her very average life: as a sheer gift!

She's the one to become "Mother of God." And all she needs to do is to say YES – to hand over her life spirit and body to the will and power and control of God . . . which, blessedly, she chooses to do, with these glorious words

"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.
Let it be to me according to your word."

And with the Angel's words and this response her life is changed forever!

And in that we might think that Mary is unique. And of course, in some ways that is true: in flesh and blood there's only one "mother of Jesus"!

But in other ways, Mary isn't unique at all. Mary is so common, so normal, that she's all of us! She's a reminder that in spite of who we are, in spite of what we've done or left undone, in spite of the bad news that dominates our lives and often presses us down, the God who made the universe wants to place his Good News at the very core of our being

God wants to dignify each and every one of us by giving us a free gift – coming to us and calling us by name (are you listening?); living in us by his Spirit; being born in us; calling us into his royal service to become in some ways -- "mothers of Jesus" – people through whom Jesus comes into the world in flesh and blood.

So, our passage could also be read like this:.

In the first day in the twelfth month of 2019, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in the United States called Washington: to YOU.

And he came to YOU and said,

"Greetings, Rejoice! For you are a person who stands in a condition of having been given a free gift by the Lord who is truly with you. Don't be afraid! No bad news here . . . just good news.

Let me say it again: God wants to give you a gift.

In fact by his Spirit, Jesus the Savior, the Son of the Most High, the only King who will rule for ever, wants to take up residence in your life, to grow within both your body and in your spirit. Not because you are already holy – he knows you are not – but he wants to place his holiness inside you as a gift, to give you hope, and to transform you by this Good News from the inside out.

Seems impossible, huh? But remember: nothing is impossible with God.”

Not even a response you may never have made before. A short prayer.

Thank you Lord . . . What amazing Good News! What an incredible honor it is to be your servant. Please come into me as you came to Mary . . . and take control of my life. “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.”

In fact communion is a perfect time . . . to say this prayer. The bread and the wine are tangible free gifts from God – gifts of God himself coming freely into us, as the Spirit came into Mary.

Open your arms, and your hearts, your bodies and your will to this REALLY GOOD NEWS.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2019 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/sermons>

To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800