

## A New King

The thing about showing up here every Sunday is that you get to immerse yourself in what is an on-going story.

And as you immerse yourself, you will hear, I believe, a story more compelling than even a Korean soap opera, a story that begins to worm its way into your life, and, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, works changes in how you think, how you see life, how you approach calamities in life, how you approach yourself and how you approach God.

These last three weeks are particularly important to the unfolding story that beckons us to come along on the Way.

That's "the Way" with a capital W.

Two weeks ago, it was John the Baptist, front and center.

There was John, pointing to the one who is coming right around the bend.

"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming..... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Then last week we see Jesus.

Jesus, who, because of a crisis at the wedding in Cana, overrides his plans, and provides an abundance of wine (an ancient sign that the Lord is with us), even though that day, that time, was not his time to announce who he is.

The time for that announcement is today, back in his hometown of Nazareth.

Now is the day, now is the time: with those who know him best; with those he has grown up among.

He promises good news for the poor, pardon to prisoners, sight to the blind: a time when all debts of whatever kind and nature are wiped off the books, forgiven, forgotten.

But what does that have to do with us?

Answering that question takes us back to John the Baptist.

Before the good news can be good news, we each of us need to face the bad news.

“What is striking, if you listen closely, is that this good news is only good if you are willing to admit what is hard in your life, what is lacking, what has been most difficult.

That is so because it’s not “good news” *in general* that Jesus announces, it is good news for *the poor*.

It is not just *release*, but release to those who are *captive*, sight to those who are *blind*, freedom to those who are *oppressed*.” David Lose.

This is the same kind of good news that John preaches, as he points to axes and threshing floors and burning chaff.

Strange as it seems, it’s good news for those who have looked in the mirror and see the need to change staring back at them: for those who have taken a deep breath and confronted the pain of childhood abuse or abandonment; for those who have faced the rotten things done to others or to ourselves; for those who admit that yes, I, I who think so highly of myself, I too am a sinner.

Coming to grips with who we are is what makes what seems to be bad news into very good news indeed.

I will explain.

One of the best ministries we have going here at St. E’s is a ministry our friend Steve Costa is up to.

Every week he’s down at the Sand Island Addiction Treatment Center listening to 5<sup>th</sup> Steps.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Step is one of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, a program of spiritual steps that begin with an admission of powerlessness (Step 1) and end by reaching out to others on a consistent basis (Step 12).

In between those steps, there is a time when the person in recovery faces herself, faces her past, faces the pain he carries, faces the harm he has caused, and writes all of it down in a searching and fearless moral inventory.

Just like a store's inventory, this list is thorough, complete and painstaking.

Doing the list is called the 4<sup>th</sup> step.

Once written down, it is then shared, out loud, with another person.

This sharing is the 5<sup>th</sup> step.

Facing oneself and then sharing the results with another isn't an invention of AA.

It is at the heart of every spiritual journey: we in the Episcopal Church call it the sacrament of reconciliation.

We used to call it confession or the sacrament of penance.

Coming face to face with my moral inventory brings me exactly face to face with John's axe talk and threshing floors and chaff burning, precisely because the baggage I carry from old hurts, old pains, old fears, is baggage that, once faced, once accepted, can be released, let go of, as good as burned up, as good as chopped off.

Facing the pain of childhood abuse or abandonment; facing the rotten things I have done to others; this is all bad news – but it is bad news only until I face it and share it.

For it is in the facing of my pain, in the sharing of those things that I am embarrassed to recall, ashamed of having engaged in, in that confrontation with myself, the monsters and demons and fears lose their power, lose their grip over my moods and emotions, and with time, become transformed into powerful means that help heal other people in their pain.

In this way, the chaff in our lives is burned, the rotten trees are chopped down, and then, and then, as we come to recognize our captivity, as we come to accept our blindness, in that acceptance, the power of Jesus the Messiah to free us, to give us back our sight, to unplug our ears, can finally work its way on us.

And while getting through this process may seem like quite enough of a journey, thank you very much, it really is just the beginning.

Because it is only from this point on that we can begin to get the real message that is the good news of Jesus Christ.

And that message is this: there is a new way to be human; that violence and revenge and looking out for number one are dead end roads and only lead to more violence, more revenge, and less happiness.

In Jesus, a new way of living is possible; a way of forgiveness (even of the unforgivable) and reconciliation (even when we are the wronged party) and humble service (especially to the least among us).

All of which sounds good until we actually try it on.

Then, the changing we all must do to live this new Way, and the difficulty, some say the insanity, of this changing, becomes evident and obvious.

I discovered this in a discussion I had with my two kids the other day.

You see, the other night, my camera bag and cameras were stolen from my office.

It's the first theft we've had inside the church in a long time and it happened the night of our MLK, Jr service.

Naturally, the gospel reading that night was from Luke.

We'll have that reading in a couple of weeks.

And naturally, the reading, purely by coincidence, I'm sure, says if someone borrows from you, don't ask for it back, if someone needs what you have, give it to them; if someone wants your coat, hand over your shirt too.

All of which left me smiling, of course, chagrined, of course, because no one, me included, likes to have their stuff ripped off.

But what really struck home on how far we have to travel to actually live this new Way (remember, it's with a capital W) that Jesus beckons us to is the reaction of my two kids when I told them the story a couple of days after it happened.

Joseph was all: "Dad, I'm gonna get my BB gun and shoot 'em!"

"Who you going to shoot?"

"I don't know, but I'm gonna shoot em!"

Tea, the Perry Mason in our family, was more circumspect, but also more insistent:

"Dad, you gotta call the police, have an investigation, find out who did it, arrest them and make them pay."

When I told them that I wasn't inclined to do the police thing, my daughter got quite agitated.

"You know Dad, in Les Miz, when the priest let that guy take all the silver and stuff, and then gave him even more stuff when the cops caught the thief, that only happens in the movies!"

"That's not real life."

And I sat there thinking, there we have it.

The Christian dilemma.

Is our faith simply pious words we pray, or is it a new way of life, actually lived, a way of life totally at odds with our common sense, our common ethics?

Becoming Christian is a journey that takes a lifetime; but a lifetime can easily pass with no progress at all made on that journey.

When Jesus steps up in the synagogue, when he finds the place in the scroll, when he announces good news to the poor, freedom to captives, sight to the blind, strength to the lame, do I see myself in them?

Can I accept my own poverty?

Can I buy that I am confined, blind, deaf?

Do I need what Jesus is offering?

And if I do, will I bet my life on it?

Will you?

+amen