

Two weeks ago on Monday morning, the individuals who work in a small department of a multi-national corporation in Brooklyn Park got summoned, one by one, to the HR office. This is a situation that some of you have experienced first hand, so you can guess what is coming. The HR director informed the employees that the corporate office had made the decision that, as a cost-saving measure, their department’s work was being outsourced to a company in another country. Their jobs would disappear in three months. If they stayed through that time, they would receive a retention bonus, and HR would assist them in updating their resumes to help them find another job.

The employees were surprised and devastated. When you’re making a list of bad news that you don’t want to receive, the news that you are being terminated from your job has to be toward the top of the list of bad news.

For the past couple of months, our news media has been filled with reports of men harassing or abusing women. The almost daily headlines have identified politicians, newscasters, sports figures, and entertainers as perpetrators – some of whom are individuals we may have highly respected. While this may be “bad news” at many different levels, it is certainly not “new news.” The truth is that our human culture has tolerated men mistreating women for centuries. What seems to be “new” this time is the response, the determination to not remain silent, led by the women *Time* magazine this week named “Person of the Year” as “The Silence Breakers” and the hashtag #metoo movement on social media they started.

Back to the job termination: One of the employees who is losing her job was pretty shook up that morning, but as she processed the bad news, she came to see this as a positive opportunity. The job she had was certainly not her dream job and she had been thinking about looking for a better one. Inertia had her kind of stuck in place. Now the company would actually help her find a new position and give her letters of recommendation.

And as disturbing as all the bad news stories are of men using their power and position to harass and abuse women, there are many of us who are hopeful that by speaking the truth about our society, we will finally be able to address this disturbing reality and bring about real change.

Now you may be thinking that these two examples are just trying to put a happy face on things and things really are not as positive as they sound. I am not in any way implying that everyone who loses their job should have the attitude of this employee. I don’t think it is ever good news that someone loses their job. Nor I am so naïve to think that this burst of media coverage is going to provide sufficient energy to reverse centuries of men’s mistreatment of women. But sometimes it is true, I think, that amid the bad news that life sends our way, we are able to find good news. Sometimes good news begins with bad news that’s processed in a way that transforms the bad news into good news.

I’m thinking about good news this morning because it’s Advent and though we are anxious to get to Christmas and the birth of Jesus, the collective wisdom of the church over the centuries is that we can’t properly get to Jesus without first being confronted by John the Baptist.

This morning we have read the opening verses of Mark’s gospel, which begins, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” And how does Mark begin this good news? He starts with a “voice crying in the wilderness” named John. And what does John do? He “proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Does that sound like good news to you? For us, good news is more things like getting good grades on a report card or getting a job or a Christmas bonus. But John’s message is, “Good news – you can repent of and be forgiven of your sin.” John stands in the line of Old Testament prophets who spoke truth to the people of Israel, the truth that, though they were beloved and blessed by God, they had not lived the lives God intended for them to live. They had sinned.

How is this “good news”? It is good news when we understand what the word “repent” means. Repent does not mean to simply say we are sorry for our sins. Repent does not mean to feel guilty.

Repent means to turn around, to change. When John says to us, “Repent,” he doesn’t simply say, “you have failed, you have sinned.” He also says to us, “you can change.” And that is good news.

Good news sometimes begins with an honest, sometimes painful look at the truth of our situation. In fact, it’s hard to imagine true change that does not begin in truth telling. So John preached “you are sinners” and “you can be forgiven.” And the amazing thing is that Mark says “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by John in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” The painting by Pieter Bruegel on the cover of the bulletin depicts the large crowds that came out to listen to John. No one forced them to travel for miles to hear John’s call to repent and be baptized. They came because they understood this to be good news.

In our day, there are preachers who draw quite a crowd telling people what they want to hear, flattering their egos and mouthing sweet platitudes. And their sweet, false words attract multitudes. But Mark says that people from all over flocked to hear John’s truth, because John’s bad news (you are sinners) was, in their hearing, what led to good news (you can repent and be forgiven.)

Take the two examples I started with about the job termination and the current headlines. Both situations initially received bad news: You are fired and the life you had is ended. Sexual harassment is pervasive in your society. And yet, in the mysterious workings of what I would call the grace of God, both of them can have that bad news transformed into good news – you can have a new life, maybe even a much more true, better life. We can find ourselves pushed, by bad news, to a new place where we see new, liberating truth about ourselves. The bad news is, in these examples, the beginning of good news.

So here we are in church on this 2nd Sunday of Advent. And while we are not a huge multitude from throughout Judea, we are a reasonably sized crowd. And what have we come for? I think we have come to hear “good news”, but not necessarily what the world defines as good news. We have come here to hear the truth about our life. We know, in our more honest moments, that we have not lived as God intends for us to live. We have made mistakes and done wrong. We have not only done wrong but we have secretly thought, felt, and been wrong. In short, the truth is that we have sinned.

Now there’s message you don’t often hear in our feel-good culture. Yet, by the grace of God, we have been given the wisdom to know that this seemingly bad news is our good news, nothing less than a gift of God to us. The good news is that we – even you and me – can hear the truth, tell the truth, and thereby we can change. We can have a new life and experience what Jesus calls “the kingdom of God.”

We will never have changed lives without first telling the truth about ourselves. And the good news is that God loves us enough to somehow get through to us the bad news about our true situation. God becomes the mirror of truth held up before us, and then God becomes the way that we can learn from the truth and move toward a different tomorrow.

So on this Second Sunday of Advent I am here, standing in the line of John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophets, to proclaim to you again a twofold truth: 1) by God’s grace we can hear the truth that we are sinners in need of change and transformation; and 2) by God’s grace, we can change and be transformed! Amen.