

## So be Good, for Goodness Sake!

[Text - Matthew 3:1-12]

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At this time of year, many advertisers put aside their hard-sell commercials and bring us beautiful pictures, music and words of Christmas Joy. It seems that everyone, from the makers of deodorant to disposable diapers want to "wish you and yours the Happiest of Holidays." [You and your *what*, they don't say.] Now while there's nothing inherently wrong with this advertising approach, it is important that you and I consider who the messenger is, so that we can properly evaluate the message. For example, eight Clydesdale horses pulling a sleigh through a snowy street does create a beautiful picture; but a motorist who has just drank eight Budweisers, driving that same snowy street, could create an ugly path of destruction. So when the people at Budweiser wish me and mine a safe and peaceful holiday, I take that message with a grain of salt. Regardless of what message you or I hear, it's important that we consider the source, so that we can rightly weigh the validity of that message.

When John the Baptist brought his urgent message of repentance to the people of Israel, it was at a time and place of tremendous trouble and distress. The Roman Empire had an iron grip on much of the known world, and upon the land of Israel. And many people in Israel felt that their religious society was in need of drastic renewal. Many Israelites, including John the Baptist, were anticipating that God was about to send the long-awaited Messiah - a formidable figure - who would overthrow the Romans, and deal swiftly and severely with the corruption within the Hebrew community. They were expecting an imposing individual, who would usher in the Reign of God with a cataclysmic event - One who would bring Bad News to those who were on God's "bad side," and Good News to those few who were good enough to receive it.

It's as if they were anticipating that the Messiah would come with a list of those who were naughty, and those who were nice. And like most of us - who prefer to think that *we* are on the nice list, while others are the naughty ones - so it was with many of the religious leaders in Israel. Like First Century Fred Phelps, they absolutely *knew* who would incur the wrath of God: it was all those *other* "sinners" - tax-collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, foreigners, and the rest of those "unfaithful" people. But not to worry: the Messiah was coming to take care of those naughty ones - so they better watch out, better not pout, better beware!

That was the ominous message of many religious leaders at the time of Jesus, including John the Baptist. However, when Jesus comes on the scene, he completely confuses and frustrates many of those leaders. Jesus teaches with a personal authority and integrity that is refreshingly different from many other rabbis. He performs works of wonder and power - healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, raising-up those who are downcast or outcast. Jesus proclaims a message of remarkably *Good* News - conveying a radically inclusive image of a Heavenly Father-Mother, whose desire is to gather *all* Her children, even as a hen gathers and shelters her entire brood. He speaks of God as a Divine *Lover* of people, whose only real concern is that this Love be reciprocated. And perhaps most shocking of all, Jesus contends that this Loving God is best served - not through acts of religious piety - but by vigorously loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. Jesus *is* a tremendously powerful figure; but his strength is centered in compassion and service, not fear or force.

John the Baptist is absolutely correct in believing that the Messiah is coming to take care of the sinners of this world; but his understanding of how the Messiah will "take care of them" is clearly inadequate. John anticipates a resounding blast of law and judgment; but Jesus brings a redemptive blessing of love and grace. Maybe that's why John will later ask this question of Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" John's limited understanding of Divine Love and Grace, makes it difficult for him to fully envision and recognize Jesus as the Messiah. In spite of John's own greatness, he has trouble grasping Jesus' *greater* vision of the wonderful, welcoming Realm of God - because that was something far more grand and glorious than John himself ever anticipated or imagined.

One-Hundred-ten years ago, on December 17th, 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright accomplished the first flight of a self-powered airplane, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. It lasted less than a minute, yet it signaled the advent of modern air travel. Later that day, the Wright brothers sent a telegram to their sister in Dayton, Ohio, to tell her the exciting news. The telegram read: "1st sustained flight today! 59 seconds! Hope to be home for Christmas." Their sister was so excited about their success, that she took the telegram to the editor of the Dayton Daily News, so he could publish this historic event. Imagine her surprise the next morning, when she had to dig through the paper to finally find a small article buried in the back section, with this caption: "Popular Local Bicycle Merchants to be Home for [the] Holidays."

This editor had seen the telegram, but had missed the real news. One of the greatest scoops of the 20th Century had literally been placed into his hands, yet he completely missed it. Looking back, you and I might think, "how could he be so clueless?" But remember, this was the *first* self-powered airplane flight; therefore, this editor had no frame of reference to recognize this spectacular news. He could think in terms of bicycles, or trains, or maybe even those new-fangled automobiles; but a self-propelled flying machine, soaring to new heights, was something totally foreign to his world. Therefore, he wasn't prepared to receive, or to share, that fantastic message.

Maybe that's how it was for John the Baptist. He knew all about God's judgment and wrath; he was familiar with many of the harsh words of the Hebrew prophets, and his own message certainly echoed those words. Therefore, when Jesus comes on the scene, John anticipates and expects more of the same - only this time even more powerful and devastating. However, John is mistaken. Rather than ushering in the Divine Realm with a cataclysmic event, Jesus comes to establish that Realm within the hearts and lives of those who will follow him. And rather than bring more pain and grief to a world already struggling beneath the load, Jesus comes to share that pain and grief and struggle - to live, and even to die, so that the message of Divine love and grace will not be foreign to anyone!

The message of Jesus the Messiah, is a message of *Good News*! And it's a message that's perfectly in sync with the messenger himself. Jesus not only *talks* about compassion and wholeness, forgiveness and freedom - he also embodies those qualities, and graciously conveys them to anyone who desires to share them, including you and me. Today, Jesus Christ invites *us* to be messengers who embody the Good News - who feed the hungry, heal the sick, lift-up the oppressed, and warmly welcome all people. Jesus shows us how to do this, and his Spirit fills us with the power to make it happen: not the power of domineering control, but the power of Divine compassion. A power that can truly help us soar to new heights, and carry us faithfully forward wherever our Life's journey might take us.