

Good News or Bad?

Have you ever wondered about how perspective changes your understanding of the news you hear or the things you see? When we receive news that means good things for us, we rarely pause to think about whether or not this same information might not be so welcome to others. A trivial example of the good news/bad news situation is played out frequently in the arena of athletic competitions. When I first started thinking about this fourth Sunday of Advent and read the Luke passage for today, Mary's Song brought this idea to mind. But it turned out this sermon wasn't to be so simple for me. I meet most Wednesdays with a group of other Presbyterian pastors to talk about things which concern us. These discussions range over issues that make the news, issues within the Presbytery, our communities, our churches, or families or that arise in our interactions with others. We talk about our concerns, not individuals, and many of the issues have roots in experiences which happened in other communities in other times. We also choose a passage to study and discuss from among those suggested as lectionary passages for the coming Sunday. The reasons for picking a particular passage varies depending upon who is present on a particular Wednesday and who might have a preference for a specific passage. Advent is a very busy time, so I had prepared the order of worship for all four Sundays of Advent well in advance which included selecting the scripture passages. I had not intended to read 2nd Samuel this morning as the first Scripture reading. I had originally chosen to read from the Psalter. But the lectionary group had chosen the 2nd Samuel passage for discussion this week and that discussion led to a different reflection about this morning's sermon which is also related to how perspective changes the way one understands scripture. Because that discussion changed my perspective on how this passage from Samuel has been used and another meaning which we need to consider. I want to briefly discuss this first. We usually focus on the last verse I read, verse 16: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." This is taken as a continuation of the promise that God made to Abraham of a covenant between God and Israel through the lineage of David. This passage does firmly establish the legitimacy of David's rule but if we look closely at the beginning of the passage, it seems that perhaps God is not exactly totally on board with David's ideas as he consolidates his power. The opening verses seem to paint a picture of David wanting to "do something for the Lord", something that the Lord has not initiated. Chapter 7, verse 1: Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." David has established Jerusalem as a royal city, and now seeks to make it the central place of worship. The prophet Nathan quickly agrees and tells David to proceed with what he has in mind "for the Lord is with you." But although the verse 16 indicates that the

house of David will be established, it is not David's prerogative to decide where God will dwell. A temple is built later and it does indeed become the center of worship for the nation of Israel but it is not David who is allowed to build it. In this passage from 2nd Samuel we are told how God had spent all the time since bringing the people up from Egypt moving about among them. Here God tells Nathan to remind David just who is in charge of things--Verse 7: "Whenever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Verse 8: "Now you will tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord of Hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies before you; and I will make for you a great name, etc. Notice--the key phrases, David is God's servant. The Lord took David from the pasture and was with him wherever he went; all the things which were attributed to David were really due to the Lord's favor. It did not please God when David took it upon himself to initiate putting God into a particular place--restricting the movement which God had exhibited when he "moved about in a tent and a tabernacle." In many readings of this passage we have often thought about David and his role in Israel's history, yet a closer look shows that only three of the verbs have David as their subject; the rest are all about the actions of the Lord. God is the center of all the actions which took place in the life of the people of Israel. It is clear that God is telling David that David is not the builder. David has an idea to build a place for the Lord to reside, but it is God who is the builder of the house for David. When we come to the passage from Luke, again we find that God's actions are at the center. Our passage begins with Mary praising the Lord, rejoicing in God, her Savior because God has looked with favor on her, his servant. And our usual reaction to this passage is to rejoice because God has acted to bring salvation to us through Mary. This passage is often called the Magnificat because that is the first word in the Latin translation which reads, magnificat anima meum Dominum, my soul magnifies the Lord. Mary sings of a God who overshadows not only her, but also all the powerful and the wealthy. Again God, the image of God in this passage is of a very active participant in the world--God has looked with favor on the lowness of his servant; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, God has lifted up the lowly, God has filled the hungry with good things and God has sent the rich away empty. In other words, God has entered the world and turned it upside down. This is the theme known as the "great reversal" and is found throughout Luke's gospel. When we look at the various nativity scenes or listen to the story which begins with Christ's birth we often overlook this aspect or foreshadowing of the radical nature of the teachings which Jesus will bring and which will lead from Bethlehem and a manger scene to Jerusalem and the cross. Yet within Mary's song placed before the birth, we have this statement of what God is

about. God is moving among the people in a new way. Mary rejoices in the favor shown to her by God, stating that his mercy is for those who fear him. But the visions she has of God's actions in the world are not going to be seen as good news by all--those whose power is taken away; whose status is lowered. For good news to the lowly is not necessarily good news to the powerful. As we move toward Christmas Day and our celebrations of Jesus' birth, we know that the vision of God's kingdom has not yet been completely realized. Yet because God came and dwelled among us not just as in a tent moving among us, but incarnate--within human flesh--we like Mary are truly blessed because we have received a gift--an unmerited gift--a Savior. Because Mary was a lowly peasant girl--not a queen or a princess--not some one likely to viewed as worthy of notice--yet was noticed and favored by God--we too can have confidence that God notices us--and favors us. We too are special to God. God is among us. The question becomes as we view the manger, is this good news for us? Do we want to have God moving among us changing the world so that God's vision for all creation becomes reality or do we want to put God in a building and leave the world unchanged? The Good News/Bad News is that no matter what our thoughts on the matter--God did come and reside in a manger and the world was changed. Some may deny it. Some may ignore it. In fact, if we look carefully at all the scriptural record I think that we will find that God has never been confined by the places that mankind has tried to place the Lord but has always been active whenever and wherever God has willed. But all are given the opportunity to receive the gift of God's favor and join in making the kingdom of God more present in this world. So prepare to joyously sing those carols. Welcome the good news that God is present in the world and moving among us in ways we might not expect. Be open to being used to bring about the change which God desires in you and the world. Amen.