

GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS: COMMENTARY ON AN AMNESTY GOSPEL

[Based on Mark 1:1-14. Dateline: December, 2011]

There's two sides to every story, and there's often some good news and bad news. Is the Gospel all good news? That depends. This Advent commentary considers the implications of rethinking and retelling the Christmas story.

AN ADVENT PRELUDE

The Advent season — preparing for the coming of Christ into our world in a most extraordinary way — is typically viewed as a well-trod perennial trek to the manger. Along the way many quaint and charming traditions have been tacked on. We enjoy them all. And for many friends and family, neighbors and work colleagues, it suffices to bargain shop with religious zeal, and refer to the season generically as the “holidays.”

And yet, amidst the festive celebrations each year, you also typically hear someone’s call to de-clutter a bit and contemplate the “true reason for the season,” whatever that may be. Again and again, Advent gets described as a time of watching and waiting, of preparation and anticipation, for Christ to come into *our* world. Like an old chestnut roasting on an open fire, the question gets asked if we’ve properly prepared a place where we might receive the luminous, human or human-like presence of all we deem divine?

But when pressed about what it means to profess baby Jesus as the “Christ” in *Christmas*, some may simply resort to unquestioned assumptions or pat doctrine about the “incarnate Word;” all the while stringing more twinkling lights on the tree. Others may simply relinquish all such musings to the mysteries of an ultimately enigmatic god, miraculously impregnating us with a redemptive gift.

Consider a different Advent journey and question, where the incarnate manifestation and message isn’t a worn and weary *redux*. Instead of contemplating once again the meaning of Christ coming into *our* world, how

about considering the implications and ramifications of accepting the longstanding invitation to be the ones to instead spend this Christmas where that place has long been prepared for *us*?

To others, it may seem like the same old story about angels and shepherds, stargazers and treacherous earthly princes; and radiant holiness lain in a bed of hay, with the smell of cow dung in the air on a cold, starlit winter night.

But there’s always two sides to every story. And after so many years retelling it one way, we might accept the invitation to embark on another path that may not simply lead us back, once again, to an outcast’s manger; but instead to a hospitable place where there’s room for all.

This commentary considers the implications of just such a version to the gospel story.

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GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

My daughter called the other day and, after the initial greetings, the next words out of her mouth was a familiar script we’ve all heard and used ourselves: “Well, I’ve got some good news, and some bad news.”

The question that usually follows (“Which do you want to hear first?”) is pretty much irrelevant, since the story won’t be complete without both halves. Since there’s always two sides to every story, everyone knows when one comes along there’s often both some good news and some bad news.

In this case, the bad news wasn’t all that bad. The dog had spent the first part of the holiday getting a minor injury stitched up at the emergency pet clinic. The good news was he was doing just fine, and they’d still be arriving for family supper with only a slight delay. Fact is, we all seem to experience good news / bad news stories, an almost daily basis.

For former Republican hopeful Herman Cain, he most recently declared what he called the “bad news” was he was suspending his campaign; but what he assured supporters was the “good news” was his voice and message would not be silenced.

Not long ago, the good news was he was convinced there were thousands of women who had never accused him of harassment. The bad news? As it turned out, there were sufficient numbers to the contrary to derail his hopes of elected office.

Meanwhile, the latest economic good news showed a statistical decline in unemployment. The bad news is it didn’t include all those who’d given up hope of finding a job for the time being; and that the hiring increase was nowhere near required levels to match the needed pace of an economic recovery.

The recent bad news for Conrad Murray, the doctor convicted of involuntary manslaughter in the death of pop star Michael Jackson, was the judge threw the maximum jail sentence possible at him. The good news? With California’s over-crowded prisons it is likely he will see early release.

The good news for the remaining 13,000 U.S. troops in Iraq is that they’ll all be home for the holidays. The bad news is that -- while that nearly 9-year American war has taken nearly 4,500 American lives and wounded over

32,000, killed over 100,000 civilians and cost nearly a trillion dollars -- the recent resurgence in sectarian violence has led some authorities and numerous Iraqi citizens to seriously question the fragile safety, security and stability of present day Iraq.

That’s the way it is. Two sides to every story, and there’s usually something good and something not so good in it. And it’s the same in most people’s personal lives, as it is with the front-page news stories.

True, some folks seem to get more than their share of bad news; whatever a fair share might be, and for whatever reason, explicable or not. Other’s stories seem to be more trouble free. But for most of us, it’s a mixed bag. Unlike fairy tales, the good news / bad news stories in our lives rarely, if ever, simply end, “*and they only lived happily ever after.*”

Are there ever any stories that are not only “real,” but *only* good news, as well?

AN AMNESTY GOSPEL FOR CHRISTMAS

Sometimes the Christmas story is portrayed as getting as close as one can to that kind of fairy tale.

The angel choir dispels the fright of the simple shepherds with “glad tidings” of great, pure, unadulterated joy. Despite the inhospitality of this world, the irrepressible divine makes its presence known in a most unexpected way. All of nature, peoples and nations seem drawn to a stable, with unrestrained awe and adoration. Stars in the heavens bend to point the way. Like a redemptive, restorative act of creation all over again, it would appear to all be *good news*.

The fact is, we know these two well-known versions of the Jesus’ nativity provided in the gospels of Matthew and Luke are fanciful, imaginary tales that emerged out of those two early church traditions. But they did so in order to tell a very real human story, that contained two sides to it; and had within it – as things clearly turn out -- both good news and bad

news. It's what makes their stories real, if not historically accurate on the one hand; or a make-believe fairy tale on the other.

This point is made even more clearly in the earliest canonical gospel, Mark, where brevity and imminence has no time for reimagining creation in a stable; let alone the journey of the magi from who knows where. There's another journey already begun, he seems to say, and we'd best be on our way.

Hence, Mark's story simply begins abruptly, with the announcement,

The good news of Jesus the Anointed begins ...

You'll never see a children's Christmas pageant, based on the gospel of Mark. The urgency and seriousness of his proclamation is a kick start message, meant to pick up where the ancient prophetic tradition left off centuries before; first with the Baptist, and once he's dispatched, with Jesus the itinerant peasant rabbi who'll appear on the scene for the first time as a fully grown male adult. Despite the absence of a Christmas play, the presentation is no less dramatic.

Jesus will pick up the mantle and message from the Baptist; as the gospel's good news storyline continues:

After John was locked up, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming God's good news. His message went: "The time is up: God's imperial rule is closing in. Change your ways, and put your trust in the good news!"

These words are typically heard as a warning and call to repentance, because judgment is about to be handed down from on high. Indeed, the Baptist's token cleansing ritual of repentance, standing knee deep in the chilly Jordan waters, was all about coming clean, *or else*. One could say that's the *bad* news.

But the good news that is coming on the heels of the bad news is about the one who will be the very embodiment of the "Word:" And in a word, that one word would be forgiveness, or pardon, or amnesty.

The biblical commentator Harry Cook makes this important point about what makes a story we call "gospel" a *good news* story:

The term τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (Gr.) is commonly translated as "the gospel of," but to many in antiquity the term referred to a general amnesty that was about to be announced by a ruler or high public official. And to others amnesty meant a declaration that "our team won!"

To some, the gospel of good news means some win, while the same news isn't so good for those who don't. Indeed, the name or title given Jesus as Χριστος, the Christ, God's anointed, conveyed to some that the long-awaited messianic expectation that God's chosen would one day appear; and furthermore, he would victoriously subordinate all the earthy powers and principalities of a world that had oppressed God's people, and set things right again. God's team would one day prevail, and that day had finally come. That's one way the gospel tale gets told, and re-told.

But the ramifications and implications of a "gospel" story as the proclamation of a general *amnesty* reflects a different kind of good news / bad news scenario; where "gospel," as good news, was understood in the context of the convicted offender being pardoned and set free, with past offenses forgotten, and the slate wiped clean.

Thinking of the gospel of Jesus the Christ as a proclamation of *blanket amnesty* provides a different way of hearing the same message. And it's the kind of Christmas celebration that'd make any Scrooge cry, "Humbug!"

Amnesty is a term bandied about a lot these days; as it has been co-opted in the hot button debate over solving the problem of immigration reform. For some, it has become a loaded term, almost like a dirty word that leaves an unpleasant aftertaste. It's more than just a hot potato topic for aspiring politicians these days, debating how best to secure our borders from illegal immigration by means of a wall, high-tech surveillance or electrocution. As successive weekly poll numbers clearly indicate, however, to even hear that one word

uttered on the lips of certain candidates is tantamount to political suicide.

Perhaps that's why it would be highly unlikely to see a John the Baptist type character ever elected to high public office. In fact, "Our side won!" turned out to be a better quip for those who instead served up his head on a platter.

And it seems clear from the gospel accounts, as well, that the itinerant 1st century rabbi from Nazareth never showed much promise with his brief career, when viewed askance by the ecclesiastical authorities; flaunting the Laws the way Jesus did, clearly advocating open borders, and so freely forgiving wrongdoers.

This Amnesty "Gospel" is a story with a message intended to declare there's good news for *everyone*; for perceived winners and losers, for the powerful and powerless, for the acceptable and the unacceptable. Everyone wins. It's as if creation itself is being made new all over again. And it's all good.

And the only bad news in this good news story is reserved for those who still believe they have no need of amnesty, and want nothing to do with it. And who would instead prefer to play the Grinch in all this, ruin what's truly real about this kind of a Christmas for everyone else, and nail amnesty to a tree.

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