

# GOOD NEWS

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

December 13, 2009

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

*(Third Sunday of Advent)*



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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## Lectionary Texts:

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; and Luke 3:7-18

## Luke 3:7-18

<sup>7</sup>John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup>Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

<sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

<sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

<sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

<sup>13</sup>He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

<sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?”

He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>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.”

<sup>18</sup>So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Wesleyan or Methodist approach to the faith is an international presence. There are many different denominations in various parts of the world that trace their heritage to John Wesley in 18<sup>th</sup> century England. In the United States, the largest Methodist denomination is our United Methodist Church. There are large

numbers of United Methodists in other parts of the world due to missionary and evangelistic efforts. This is especially true of Africa where there are several million United Methodists. Within the last few years by official action of the two denominations, the Methodist people of what was called the Ivory Coast in Africa have become part of the United Methodist Church. The nation is now called Côte d'Ivoire, reflecting its French heritage in colonial times. Interestingly enough, the Methodist people in Côte d'Ivoire were part of the British Methodist Church. So, we now have 700,000 United Methodists in Côte d'Ivoire, Africa, who speak many different African dialects where the official language of the country is French and who used to be part of the British Methodist Church. Such is our world.

There are many African United Methodists, now and various United Methodist Churches in the United States have developed relationships with various churches in Africa. With the leadership of our bishop, Bishop Janice Huie, the Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church has established strong ties with the United Methodist Churches in Côte d'Ivoire.

You may remember that most of our mosquito nets through the *Nothing But Nets* program went to Côte d'Ivoire. Doug Molineu of our congregation was a part of the team that went to Africa to help develop ties and deliver the nets. The relationship between that country and Texas Conference United Methodist is a strong emphasis of our bishop. She happens to believe, and I agree with her, that a strong vibrant Africa with Christian influence is crucial to a peaceful world.

I was asked to participate in a meeting this week with leaders from Duke Divinity School and leaders of our Texas Annual Conference. The plan is for Duke to work with leaders in the Ivorian United Methodist Church to put together a basic educational program for clergy there. The people there are very enthusiastic United Methodists. They like the United Methodist emphasis on a full range of ministries that includes education, health care and social concern as well as evangelism. The pastors there are very enthusiastic but have no access to even basic pastoral and theological education. The plan is for the Duke people to work with the leaders in the Ivorian Church to develop basic educational experiences that would be taught by

pastors and laity from the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, people like me and others. It is an ambitious but very intriguing possibility. I frankly don't know if I will participate or not, but some will. I do think helping to provide educational opportunities for African Christians could be significant.

Now I share all of this today because I want you to know what is going on and to share with you some things about African United Methodist worship. The people in our Conference leadership who have been to worship experiences in African United Methodist Churches say it is a wonderful experience. They have great preaching and testimonies, wonderful lyrical singing, and lots of movement. But do you know what the highlight of the service is, and here's the point? It is the offering. Is that the highlight of your worship experience? Maybe it should be if you think about it. They don't pass the plate there where everybody sits quietly and reverently. No, the custom is for everybody to dance down the aisle and bring their offering to the altar. The process may go on for a long time. They may make several passes. I'm trying to get a mental image of that happening here. Maybe not. But the point is that the offering is seen as a joyous opportunity to give back to God. I don't care what style or process is followed, that is the attitude that ought to be present for everybody.

Did you know that following Hurricane Ike, these people who live on a dollar a day took a special offering of \$4,000 and sent it to Bishop Huie to use where it was needed most? Now I don't know if the offering is your favorite part of our worship experience, but what a wonderful thing it would be if you didn't dread it or just tolerate it, but saw it as an opportunity to joyously give back in God's service. I know that today many people give online or mail in a check, but symbolically in our worship experience the offering should be a very important time. You may remember a few years ago we asked you to put something in the plate when it is passed, even if you mail in your checks, just as at least a symbol of giving back. I still think that is a powerful idea. And I hope that when I ask you to make a commitment to support the church financially or to support the renovation and expansion of the Jones Building that you don't see it as a burden, but as a joyful opportunity.

Frankly, if that is not why you give, we might as well fold our tent anyway. Giving is not about guilt or ought, but about a grateful heart. All good things come from a grateful heart. We have to be careful in our land of abundance that we do not become too obsessed with our wealth and our possessions lest we lose our soul. Hopefully, dreading having to give a little money is transformed into a joyous opportunity to give back in service to God from a grateful heart.

Frankly, I thought about all of this in relation to John the Baptist's sermon in our gospel reading today. What sounds like a pretty dreadful indictment, "You brood of vipers," is called in the end, "Good news." Luke records that John's sermon includes things like calling people snakes and talking about the wrath of God and repentance and throwing unfruitful trees into the fire and separating the wheat from the chaff to be burned, and then in the end, as if Luke has heard a different sermon from you and me, Luke's commentary on the sermon is that John proclaimed good news to the people.

Why is this sermon good news?

It is good news because it asks people to make changes in ways that are really good for them. When John lets the hammer down on them and they ask, "What then should we do?" John is ready with a simple, yet profound answer. If you have too much, share what you have with those who have less. His whole sermon is about money and possessions. Share from your abundance, and don't cheat anybody in your business dealings. Be satisfied with what you have. That's John's message, and it really is good news to those who can embrace it. Sometimes that which appears to be harsh or bad news can be transformed into good news. "It's time for the offering" can be transformed from something you dread or only tolerate to at least symbolically dancing down the aisle to share your contribution, an opportunity to give back in gratitude. The harsh words of John became good news for those who embrace sharing their abundance and treating people fairly and being satisfied with what they have.

When I was on the Board of Ordained Ministry a few years back, one of our responsibilities was to interview people who were entering the process toward ordina-

tion as a minister. I remember interviewing a man who had been divorced and we thought we might ask him about it as to how it might impact his ministry. What he said was surprising. He said, “Well, it was pretty simple. My wife ran off with my best friend.” He paused for a while and then he said, “It took me about two years to realize that he really was my best friend.” Now don’t misunderstand me, I’m not advocating such things, but sometimes, even the worst of circumstances turn out to be good news.

One of my favorite Garrison Keillor quotes is this: “Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted, but in getting what you have, which once you have it, you may be smart enough to know is what you would have wanted, had you known.”

The third Sunday in Advent is sometimes referred to as “Rejoice” Sunday. The readings from the prophet and the epistle today certainly reflect that. “Rejoice” they both say. Every day is a day to rejoice and celebrate the good news of the love of God as we have come to know it in Jesus Christ, and simply to live with gratitude and generosity.