

“What Good News Looks Like”
Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26; Psalm 67:1-5
Easter 7

Psalm 97:1-2, 8-12

¹The Lord is sovereign!

Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!

²Clouds and thick darkness are all around the Lord;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s throne.

⁸Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgments, O God.

⁹For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.

¹⁰The Lord loves those who hate evil,
and guards the lives of the faithful—
rescues them from the hand of the wicked.

¹¹Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart.

¹²Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,
and give thanks to God’s holy name!

John 17:20-26

²⁰”I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Acts 16:16-34

¹⁶One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.

¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

¹⁸She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.

²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.”

²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods.

²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.

²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”

²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

The Sermon

I invite you to pray with me as I pray with the Psalms:

Save us, O God,
when the waters have come up to our necks,
and we sink in deep mire, and cannot find a foothold;
when we have come into deep waters,
and the flood threatens to sweep over us;
when we are weary with crying;
and our throats are parched.

Our eyes grow dim with waiting for you
when we are hated without cause;
falsely accused,
charged with breaking things we didn't break.

O God, you know our embarrassments and failings;
the real wrongs we have done are not hidden from you,
and they are burdensome.

Heal us, O Lord,
when we are languishing;
when our bones are shaking with terror.

Save us, O Lord, save our life;

when we are weary with moaning;
when every night we flood our beds with tears
and we drench our couches with weeping.

Shine your light on us, O God;
with your inconceivable power and might.
Come and save us;
Restore us, O God;
let your face shine,
that we may be saved;
Restore us, O God;
let your face shine—
it is the only way we can be saved.ⁱ

Amen.

Dorothy was an active and deeply faithful member of the church I'd been serving for some years. Very far to the fundamentalist side theologically, she had been personally responsible for many people joining our congregation, and she had always been very good and kind to me.

The neighborhood where she lived—mostly a retirement community—had been going through some kind of local political turmoil. I didn't live in that neighborhood, and didn't know most of the people involved.

One evening I was in the middle of a choir practice directed by my spouse when Dorothy appeared outside the choir room door and motioned for me to come out.

We went into my office down the hall, and she laid out a situation that had erupted in her neighborhood. I have mercifully forgotten the details, but it had to do with another church member, Mrs. Murphy, who also lived in that neighborhood and who apparently had been wronged somehow.

And Dorothy was now riding into my office to right a wrong that was being done to somebody else, coming to me as if it had anything to do with the church, which it did not, and demanding that I immediately do something to fix the situation.

I said, "Hmm, I hadn't heard about this; let's try to think it through."

Dorothy pressed her case a little bit; and I was thinking, “Well, poor Mrs. Murphy! Let’s see, what’s the best solution here? Is there some helpful role the church can play here? Is there something that I could do pastorally?”

All the time those thoughts were going through my head, Dorothy was sitting in the chair about three feet in front of mine, and she was kind of semi-whispering, apparently under the assumption that the church and its pastor didn’t care enough about the other person we were talking about, Mrs. Murphy.

And Dorothy was quietly saying: “I am not going to stand for this...”

And I thought, “You seem to have some misdirected anger.”

She said, “I don’t care whether or not you like her...”

And I thought, “Where did THAT statement come from?”

She said, “I swear, I will raise the roof...”

None of which had anything to do with the fact that I’m sitting there trying to come up with some helpful idea for something that isn’t even our issue anyway.

Finally, she said again, “I am not going to stand for this,” and I remembered this story from Acts, and it was only the strength of God that prevented me from putting my hand on Dorothy’s forehead and saying,

“You demon who is causing Dorothy to act like this, I rebuke you! COME OUT!”

But I didn’t. But I thought about it.

Paul and Luke and some others were in the midst of a long journey that had taken them for the first time into Southeastern Europe; they were in a thriving Roman town called Philippi.

They were all going to a place of prayer one day when they met a young slave woman who brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling, allegedly because she had a spirit of divination.

She started following Paul and the others, and she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!”

I’ll bet the first time she did that, they kind of went, “Yeah!”

And then, says Luke, who was there: “She kept doing this for many days.”

I would imagine that by about Day Five, you’ve had just about enough of the young woman walking behind you everywhere you go going, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!”

And finally she said it one too many times, and Paul turned around and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!”

“And,” says Luke with a straight face, “it came out that very hour.”

Then came the predictable ramifications: her so-called “owners,” who had just lost all that potential income, turned to the authorities with accusations of such offenses as disturbing the peace and being Jews—“advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.”

Tragically easy enough to get the crowd to join in attacking them; they were beaten severely, and thrown into prison, and the jailer, under strict orders, put them in the innermost cell and locked their feet in the stocks.

When the midnight earthquake came, shaking the foundations of the prison, opening the doors, and rattling the prisoners’ chains until they fell off,

the jailer woke up and decided the only way out of what would be recorded as his failure was to do grievous self-harm.

And Paul said, “Don’t! Look: we’re all here.”

Soon he had them all outside, and he was asking them, “What does somebody have to do to be saved?”

They said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house; and he took them and washed their wounds, and he and his entire family were baptized that night. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

What does good news look like?

Well, for starters, it’s not just shouting about it.

The young woman enslaved as a medium by human traffickers was saying about Paul and the others, “These people are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

What she was saying was true, but she was just shouting the *words* over and over.

That’s enough to annoy the most patient, devoted disciples on earth.

You want to know what good news really looks like?

Paul and the others intervened in their own jailer’s intention to do self-harm; invited him to salvation; allowed themselves to be tended and fed by him; and saw to it that he was baptized.

I am reminded of that focusing question which is appropriate in every circumstance: Where is God already at work in this situation?

In our pathetically limited ability to perceive the world around us, we tend to have a very limited view of “reality.” That perception of reality, though, has to do with mortal life and death circumstances.

Whether it’s the uncertainty of a harvest, or the constant fear of enemies against whom the people of God often felt powerless, as reflected in the Psalms;

or in those agonizing last hours that Jesus had with the disciples, in the face of the imminent power of death and violence which would soon overtake him;

or in the living hell of human trafficking and exploitation:

in the major, life-threatening traumas,
or the minor, mundane annoyances
that are all part of Christians being Christians—

God is already at work in all of those situations.

God was there long before we realized it;
before we ever considered it;
before it was even a situation:
God was already there.

Try as we might to reduce that to an inspirational bumper sticker
or a pitifully inadequate response to real human tragedy,
a truth that deep can never be trite.

God is already there, and at work,
in the most mundane annoyances
and the most horrific tragedies.

And sometimes, God willing, even in those circumstances, we get to see a glimpse of what good news looks like.

Elmarie Parker was here on Thursday night and showed us a couple of slides from a church in the town of Kirkuk in Northern Iraq.

One day a family of refugees came to the church door, and asked if they could come in. Isis had come into their town and they were fortunate to make it out with their lives. They had practically nothing else—and these had been middle class people like you and me, not even people on the margins.

Heaven knows that church didn't have much, but they opened their doors to that family to come in, and have shelter; and they would do their best to make sure they had food.

Sixty-four more families came into that church. They re-purposed rooms and learned a whole new way of living. And it should be noted: the refugees were Christians and Muslims; the church made no distinctions.

This is just one of the many church communities that Elmarie and her husband Scott work with on behalf of the PC(USA). They told her recently that there were two gifts that Isis had given them—and she made sure we heard that it was said that way: two gifts that Isis had given them:

They said, “It has brought us closer to each other and closer to the church. Thanks be to God...we have lost everything, but not our faith.”

What does the *gospel*, the good news, really look like?

And, where is God already at work in this horrible, desperate, tragic situation?

Tom Long has often talked about a woman named Kathleen.ⁱⁱ She had always wanted to be a missionary, and go to exotic places, and spread the good news. Her dreams hadn't worked out that way. She'd gotten married, had children; they needed more income; she went to nursing school, and became a public health nurse in Asbury Park, New Jersey.

Asbury Park was a resort town a long time ago—hotels and shops and everything. But by the time Kathleen came along as a public health nurse, Asbury Park was a grey shell of its former self.

One of the old hotels had been converted into a for-profit retirement home owned by some shady character. Scores of people lived there, old, sick, and desperately poor.

The management wouldn't let public health nurses into that hotel: they didn't want them to see the squalor that those people were living in on their social security checks, and somebody at city hall was getting money under the table to look the other way.

Kathleen had to go past that hotel on her way to work, and every time she did, she thought she saw Jesus staring out of a darkened window.

So she went in without telling them who she was, and got a job as a maid. And every day she'd go room to room, changing linens and scrubbing toilets, but then clandestinely taking blood pressures, checking medications—and speaking a word of encouragement and love to people who otherwise had very little hope.

What does good news look like?

I have the honor of calling Shannon Spencer a dear friend who has my profound admiration. She's a UCC minister in Asheville, who some years ago put everything she had into starting the Asheville Poverty Initiative.

They noticed that for all the needed ministries that are centered in downtown Asheville, there is a huge population in West Asheville in public housing or homeless or on a painfully restricted fixed income. She said, West Asheville may not be exactly a food desert, but in many ways, it is an *affordable* food desert.ⁱⁱⁱ

So she started a program called 12 Baskets.

Similar to the Second Loaf program that happens here in Montreat during the summer, the 12 Baskets Café gets donations of perfectly good food that would otherwise just be thrown away, but it comes from businesses—nightly hot bars, buffets, grocery store displays.

And now every weekday from 11:00-1:00, people from all walks of life gather at the Café. The food is free; people are welcome to donate to help cover the overhead. It's job training, community building, stereotype destroying, and most importantly, hungry people can find Isaiah 55 in the flesh: "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy without money and without price."

If you're interested, they need people to pick up food donations and deliver to the café, assist in setting up, serve as wait staff, help with clean-up, and wash dishes.^{iv}

What does good news look like?

Remember "Dorothy" who came to my office bringing such a kerfuffle?

A year or so later, it was time for her to move to a town far away, where her new grandchildren were living. On her last Sunday, I had Dorothy come up to the pulpit. There were, I suppose, about 170 people in worship that morning.

I had Dorothy stand right next to me, looking out over the congregation.

I said, “If you originally visited this church because you were invited by Dorothy, please stand up.”

An astonishing number of people—about half the people in the congregation—silently shuffled to their feet.

I said, “If you became a member of this congregation because Dorothy and her late husband continually encouraged you to do so, please stand up.” There were some quiet giggles as people either remembered how that couple had lovingly stayed on them, or noticed how many people were now on their feet—about 75% of the people in the sanctuary.

“If you have a personal memory of a time when Dorothy said something supportive or just made you feel glad you came to church that day, please stand up.”

At that point, the only people not standing were first-time visitors; there were, maybe, half a dozen out of the 170.

You want to know what good news looks like?

A blessing from John O’Donohue:

On the day when
The weight deadens
On your shoulders
And you stumble,
May the clay dance
To balance you.

And when your eyes
Freeze behind
The grey window

And the ghost of loss
Gets into you,
May a flock of colours,
Indigo, red, green
And azure blue,
Come to awaken in you
A meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays
in the currach of thought
And a stain of ocean
Blackens beneath you,
May there come across the waters
A path of yellow moonlight
To bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
May the clarity of light be yours,
May the fluency of the ocean be yours,
May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow
Wind work these words
Of love around you,
An invisible cloak
To mind your life.^v

Friends, whatever circumstances are dominating your life right now,
where is God already at work in that situation?

I invite you to consider this
because we are often surprised
when we look into the things going on around us and within us
to find a glimmer of what good news really looks like.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
May 8, 2016

ⁱ Paraphrases from Psalms 69:1-8, 6:1-6, and 80:1-7.

ⁱⁱ This is an illustration Tom Long has used repeatedly, quoted and/or referenced here from a sermon on John 4 delivered at the Festival of Homiletics, May 2008, Minneapolis, MN.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mackensy Lunsford, “New West Asheville Cafe to Feed All Who Enter - For Free.” Asheville Citizen Times, May 6, 2016 (<http://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2016/05/06/new-west-asheville-cafe-feed-all-who-enter/83883048/>)

^{iv} See <http://www.ashevillepovertyinitiative.org/>

^v “Beannacht,” In John O’Donohue, *Echoes of Memory* (New York: Three Rivers, 1994)