

Bad News! Good News!
Psalm 62, Mark 1:14-20
January 22, 2012

Legend has it that Swiss psychologist, C.J. Jung used to keep a bottle of brandy on his desk. When someone would come to see him sharing a calamity that had befallen, Jung would open the brandy, pour two glasses, and toast his visitor's coming success. Equally when someone visited with news of a great accomplishment, Jung would stand and extend his hand in deepest condolences for the person's impending misfortune. Jung believed that life is a predictable wheel, like the seasons. Winter follows autumn. Spring follows winter. Bad news follows good news. Good news follows bad news.¹

We see this cycle playing out in our scripture readings. Jesus' cousin, John the Baptizer, just forty days previous baptized Jesus. Now John is suddenly arrested. Bad news, but good news follows. As John exits the stage, Jesus enters to take center stage. Those hungering for hope are not abandoned. John had the audience primed, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Messiah. Jesus brings good news. Jesus is the Good News of God.

The Jewish people under Roman occupation are longing for an end to their oppression. Jesus proclaims good news, "A new age, a new time in history has begun. I am inaugurating a new form of government that will transform the balance of power in the world." This sounds like good news indeed to those who have been subjected to sanctioned cruelty.

Jesus offers some instructions for claiming the good news. "Repent and believe." To repent is to change one's mind, to turn around. Instead of wallowing around in your own bad news, look up to see fresh beginnings. Turn your head in a different direction so that all things can be seen and experienced in a new way. God is doing a new thing, and you are invited to be a part of it. Begin by believing that God is at work. Have faith that new life can emerge even out of death. Trust that deliverance is on the way. "Repent and believe in the good news."

Jesus immediately goes out to invite or prod or cajole people to believe this good news. He recruits his first followers at the Sea of Galilee, known as the Sea of Chaos. He finds Simon and Andrew, James and John, four fishermen. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." They leave behind their nets, their careers and livelihoods; they leave behind their families, parents, spouses, children. This sounds like bad news - being torn away from that which is familiar and those who are dear. The disciples follow Jesus into a new way of life that will make the presence of God real and alive in the world and in individual lives. Good news, for the power of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation is set loose in the world through Jesus. In the face of chaos Jesus offers stability.

Each of us experiences bad news cycles at various seasons in our lives. We experience setbacks in working toward a goal. Many have, like the disciples, lost employment, not necessarily through choice but because of economic conditions. Some live with ongoing turbulence constantly below the surface; sometimes the tension or conflict is far rockier than others. At times we find ourselves anxious about what the future will hold, living under a cloud of uncertainty.

When we are moving through a bad news cycle, we feel naked and vulnerable. We feel exposed to the elements, a target for destruction. We find ourselves in a liminal space, a time in between what was while waiting for what is yet to come. The Latin word *limina* means threshold. A liminal space is where transformation happens. It is when we are betwixt and between, and therefore by definition, “not in control.” It is a teachable space, where we find creativity blossom, perspective broadened, and compassion deepened. It is a place of dying and rebirth, even of metamorphosis, the place where the caterpillar spins its cocoon and disappears from view.

Few of us choose to enter a bad news story or a liminal place. Life happens. Someone we trusted fails us; a job we counted on suddenly ends; a child or spouse dies; our bodies age. We resist calling such a new adventure home. We would much rather run back to the familiar, secure circumstances of the past. Since we can rarely go backwards, in order to grow and live and thrive, we must learn to embrace the possibility of transformation into a new vision of the future.

How do we move through and beyond the bad news cycle? The teaching of Jesus is, “Repent.” Change your mind. Adjust your attitude. Turn your head and take a fresh look at the situation. View things through a different lens and get an innovative perspective.

To develop a broader vision means we must be willing to forsake, to let go of our narrower vision. We question what we already believe and dare to explore that which is threatening and unfamiliar. The path to holiness and transformation is through questioning everything.

Richard Rohr has heard biblical scholars claim that in the four Gospels, Jesus is asked 183 questions directly or indirectly. Do you know how many of them he directly answers? Three! Jesus leads his followers into spiritual growth not by giving them the answers, but by leading them into a liminal and dark space, where they will seek God and yearn for the wisdom of God.ⁱⁱ

The poet Rilke has offered similar advice:

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the

*future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*ⁱⁱⁱ

We move through the bad news cycle by changing our perspective, mining deeper for the gold hidden in the midst of the dark caverns. Jesus says, “Repent.” Turn around. Try on a new lens with which to view life.

But the second step of Jesus’ instruction is equally important: “Believe in the good news.” Give your heart to God. God will transform your fear into faith. In place of a cowardly heart, God will grant you courage to move forward unafraid. Trust in God steers us out of the bad news cycle into the good news cycle.

Psalms 62 is a Psalm of trust. It progresses through a pattern common to many of the Psalms. The author is feeling stable in life and can attest to his faith, “For God alone my soul waits in silence, from God comes my salvation.” But the tone quickly changes and the song expresses distress. The Psalmist feels battered by those whom he had trusted. He feels betrayed and recognizes that humans are not trustworthy. They will disappoint. Then all the psalms with one exception reclaim a sense of God’s peace and presence. Life is reoriented. The Psalmist remembers that the most secure place in which to put one’s trust is in God. “I must find rest in God only, because my hope comes from God.” Grounded again in his rock solid relationship with God, the Psalmist can move forward again.

We move through similar patterns in life. Life is moving along smoothly; we’re in a good news place, oriented in a positive direction. But then disaster strikes – disease ravages a body, a friend betrays, enemies attack, despair overwhelms – and one is disoriented. Life is turned upside down. This is the dark and luminal space. Eventually we move on through the threshold into a new space. Life is reoriented. God has been at work in the darkness bringing life out of death, hope out of despair. Life is different, but good news is claimed. The one who trusts in God is not disappointed. With the Psalmist we can sing again, “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from God comes my salvation.”

Trust in God helps us navigate the storms of life. American humorist H.L. Mencken said, “Only a savage in the bush or the American gospel tent preacher supposes that religion is a matter of knowledge. Religion is 99% trust and 1% knowing.”

John G. Paton was one of the great missionaries to the South Sea Islanders. In translating the scriptures into the native language of these islanders, he could find no word for “believe.” Since the concept of “belief” is so basic to the Christian faith, he could not finish his translation.

One day an exhausted islander came to Paton’s home, threw himself down in a chair, put his feet up on another chair, stretched his body, and sighed how great it felt to be able to lean his whole weight on those two chairs. Instantly Paton knew

his quest for the right word had ended. At its most basic level belief is “leaning our whole weight” on God, surrendering to God’s strength, not ours. Belief is not an act of truth or of knowing. It is an act of trust.

We move through the bad news cycles of our lives by changing our perspective and leaning on God. “Repent and believe in the good news.” The dark, luminal space of uncertainty is the place of transformation where new life is born. Waiting in God, even in the silence and emptiness, we will find an anchor on which to stand while the storm blows. We need not be shaken, for strength belongs to God.

Roger Ebert is not a person of faith, but he has been living through a dark and luminal space in recent years and his is a powerful story of transformation. Ebert is the famed movie critic, a longtime partner of Gene Siskel. Siskel and Ebert were famous for their thumbs; if they liked a movie they would give it a thumbs up; if they didn’t like it, a movie would receive a thumbs down. They would often disagree in their opinions about a movie, so the most coveted award a movie could receive was two thumbs up, one from each of them. Gene Siskel died of cancer several years ago. Roger Ebert says that Siskel never mentioned his illness, even to his longtime colleague. Ebert respected Siskel’s privacy, but he said, “I would have like to have talk about it, so when I got sick it made me handle things in a different way.” Roger Ebert did develop cancer, a very serious form, which led to several surgeries and the loss of his ability to speak. His face has become disfigured so that he looks very different from the days when he was on television.

Ebert wrestled with how he would live as someone who essentially has been silenced, literally stripped of his voice. He determined that he would live as someone who would not be silenced. He learned to type on a computer that is able to speak for him. On the radio interview you hear his words read by a computer. He continues to write even more. He has written a memoir in which he is very honest about his struggles with cancer. He is a prolific blogger.

As he made the decision to tell his story and invite other people into it, his advisors suggested that he not let anyone see what he looks like now with his disfigured face. Don’t let anyone take a picture of you; people are going to be upset by what you look like now. Ebert and his wife talked about it. Rather than worry constantly that a photographer would peer in his window, take a photo, and reveal it to the world, they decided that his wife would take a loving and beautiful picture of him just as he was. He would post it himself on his own blog and say, “You will not push me to the side and make me invisible.”^{iv} This weekend his show, *At the Movies*, including Roger, has returned to television. Roger Ebert’s life was drastically disoriented, but he has navigated his way through a dark and

difficult luminal space. His bad news has been changed into good news, in large part because he made a conscious choice to seize a new beginning.

We, too, can wade through the bad news cycles of life by changing our perspective and trusting in God. “Repent and believe in the good news.” “I find rest in God alone, because my hope comes from God.” May we trust that the space of uncertainty is exactly the place where new life is born.

For you alone, O God, our souls in silence wait, for you are our salvation. In this stillness we draw from your deep well of hope and healing, of grace and blessing. In your presence we are showered with abundance, with peace and trust.

We are grateful for those seasons of good news in our lives. Oftentimes we take for granted your steady, guiding hand. We are blessed by periods of stability when all is well.

May you enter into the lives of those who feel disoriented, for whom life is chaotic and turbulent. Offer your comfort and hope. Hold them through the darkness. Move them forward into new terrain where stability will be recovered, life renewed.

We remember and give thanks for the ways in which you have seen us through the storms of life and reoriented us, landing us in a fresh, but life-giving setting. Help us to trust that you indeed will companion and guide us through all the storms of life.

We seek your strong and healing presence with all who are ill and recovering from surgery. Abide with all moving through seasons of loss and grief for loved ones.

Guide our nation as our leaders seek to navigate storms of various magnitude. Shed light upon our pathway, light that will lead to justice and stability for all.

Be a source of support and strength for those serving in the military, offering their lives for the protection of others.

May your Spirit offer sustenance to persons living in troubled nations seeking to recover from devastating conditions. Encourage the spirits of those living in Sudan, Japan, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Placing our trust in you, O God, we lift these our prayers. Uniting our voices with Jesus the Christ, together we pray....

ⁱ Alexander Shaia, “Everything is Horrible! Good News!” www.quadratos.com.

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, “We need transformation, not false transcendence,” *National Catholic Reporter*, February 15, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.

^{iv} Roger Ebert: A ‘Life’ Still Being Lived, and Fully, September 13, 2011 interview with Melissa Block, *All Things Considered*, www.npr.org.