

The Peace of Shaking Things Up

a sermon by J. R. Luck

December 4, 2011 at Peace UCC Greensboro, NC

Shepherds, stars, angels, donkeys, magi, snowflakes, Joseph, Mary, doves, ivy, snowmen, innkeepers, holly leaves and berries, Christmas trees, boats, sheep, Christmas lights, Harleys, mangers, reindeer, R2D2 and C3PO, Santa Claus, trumpets, beaches, children, wrapped presents, St. Nicholas, cows, Christmas ornaments, snow landscapes, wreaths, silhouette of Bethlehem, dogs, candles, church steeples, Christmas slogans like "Deck the Halls" accompanied by musical notation,... Shall I continue?

Women in bikinis, sleighs, bells, poinsettias, cardinals and geese, candy canes, pinecones, firs and pines, eucharistic symbols, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, stockings, hot chocolate, Sarah Palin, crosses, firemen, sleds, elves, Rudolph, soccer balls, decorated Palm trees, the White House, the North Pole....

At some point or another I have seen all of those items on a Christmas Card. But can you imagine a Christmas card with John the Baptizer on it. There'd be John, dressed in animal hides, holding a grasshopper. The card would read: Merry Christmas you brood of vipers; Now Repent! Crazy huh?

Here's what's crazy. The gospel of Mark begins with the words "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" and that good news starts with.... Mark? It'd make sense if it started with the virgin Mary or gentle Joseph, Joseph dear. It'd make sense if it started with a manger or a star or some magi.; perhaps some shepherds or angelic messengers or at the very least a baby. Indeed none of them make an appearance in Mark. But no. The good news of Jesus Christ begins with John the Baptizer.

The good news begins with a preacher out of the mainstream who set up his revival tent in the middle of nowhere. And in a day and age without cars people actually traveled to the middle of the desert to hear a locust-eating crazy preacher. And when they arrived John didn't congratulate them on their willingness to make the journey. He told them they were sinners and there was some serious need of change; change that could flatten mountains; change that could raise valleys. Now you'd think the people would say, "He talks too much about change." Nope. Quite the opposite for they are baptized as a symbol of the change they willingly embrace.

Isn't it utterly fascinating that on the Sunday the church chooses to light the candle of peace, we get to hear about a prophet who shook things up? John the baptizer you see offers no words of peace... well, except... maybe he does. I guess it all depends on how you define peace. Unfortunately, we all have bought into the illusion that peace comes from NOT rocking the boat. The sad irony of the civil rights movements was that the peaceful, non-violent protesters were the ones abused and then jailed for... disturbing the peace. Nations, organizations, administrations, and yes, even congregations frequently ask for peace precisely so as not to embrace change. Bashar al-Hasad of Syria, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen cried out for peace and denounced rabble-rouses and radicals precisely to minimize, postpone and counter the cries for change and justice. And when those in power agree to change, more often than not the change is glacially slow. Let's put a toe in first and make sure it's not too cold. And if anybody should know about that, it's the church. We want to stick a toe in change, while John and the Baptists want to half drown us. And the anabaptists, they put you under three times, just to make sure it takes.

We believe peace comes from not rocking the boat; from sameness and constancy. But I'm sorry folks, history, not to mention our Bibles, teaches us that usually real peace, wholeness, the

Kingdom of God comes only after the boat is turned upside down; only after the mountains are made low; only after the valleys are filled. If you don't believe me, just ask Ebenezer.

I adore Charles Dicken's class A Christmas Carol. There's no Christmas schmaltz, no sugary visions of a pie-in-the-sky theology that says, we're being too hard on Ebenezer. No the story is a painful but necessary confrontation with reality and I'd like to read some of it to you. I begin in the second chapter after Ebenezer first encounters the ghost of his business partner Jacob Marley.

...the spirit raised a frightful cry, and shook its chain with such a dismal and appalling noise, that Scrooge held on tight to his chair, to save himself from falling in a swoon....

Scrooge fell upon his knees, and clasped his hands before his face.

'Mercy!' he said. 'Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me?'

'Man of the worldly mind!' replied the Ghost, 'do you believe in me or not?'

'I do,' said Scrooge. 'I must. But why do spirits walk the earth, & why do they come to me?'

'It is required of every man,' the Ghost returned, 'that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world-oh, woe is me!-and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness.'

Again the spectre raised a cry, and shook its chain and wrung its shadowy hands.

'You are fettered,' said Scrooge, trembling. 'Tell me why?'

'I wear the chain I forged in life,' replied the Ghost. 'I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?'

Scrooge trembled more and more.

'Or would you know,' pursued the Ghost, 'the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!'

Scrooge glanced about him on the floor, in the expectation of finding himself surrounded by some fifty or sixty fathoms of iron cable: but he could see nothing.

'Jacob,' he said, imploringly. 'Old Jacob Marley, tell me more. Speak comfort to me, Jacob.'

'I have none to give,' the Ghost replied. 'It comes from other regions, Ebenezer Scrooge, and is conveyed by other ministers, to other kinds of men.'

Comfort, comfort, comfort. While Scrooge has no comfort to offer others, he wants to be comforted. Later, Scrooge meets the ghost of Christmas past. Dickens writes:

He then made bold to inquire what business brought him there.

'Your welfare,' said the Ghost.

Scrooge expressed himself much obliged, but could not help thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that end. The Spirit must have heard him thinking, for it said immediately:

'Your reclamation then. Take heed.

Your reclamation. Scrooge is bothered by the spirits precisely so that he will fare well, so that he and his life can be reclaimed. But Scrooge begs, pleads, and demands that the ghost speak words of comfort. Does Ebenezer not speak with our mouth and our words. Do we not want, nay insist on hearing words of comfort? But when we are bound in chains of our own making, comfort is the last thing we need. Had there not been confrontation and painful honesty, there would have been no conversion for Ebenezer, only chains. As Flannery O'Connor said, "Grace must wound before it heals. It must be dark and divisive before it is warm and binding." There can be no peace

without conversion. There can be no peace without trouble. There can be no peace without displacement.

I love Christmas. I love the shepherds, and the star and yes even the snowmen. I love the holly and the ivy; I adore St. Nicholas. I adore being at Disney World at Christmas time. I love the trappings of Christmas, but they can't save us and we need saving. We want peace. We want things to be easy, self-serving, still, predictable, the same, generic, accepting, accommodating, did I say easy?, painless and smooth. But name me one person in the Bible who had things easy, still, predictable, generic, accommodating and smooth. Certainly not Adam & Eve. Abraham or Sarah did not find salvation by staying put in their old age. Ruth did not secure her welfare by returning to her past. Esther did not find peace for herself, her family or her people by playing it safe. Miriam did not find it by acquiescing to the Egyptians. Moses was not led to the promised land by staying safe with the sheep. Amos, I am assuming would have been happier had he stayed on his southern farm tending sycamore trees. And John the Baptizer, well he lost his head. I guess he could have played it safe and not upset the powers that be. I assume Mary could have said no, probably wanted to say no. But where would we be if she had? And Jesus, the prince of peace who uttered peace, lived peace, and manifested peace.... what if he had chosen the road most have chosen. And Lord knows, if anyone ever was guilty of disturbing the peace, it was Jesus, thanks be to God. But that shouldn't surprise you. Being disturbed is often the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Being disturbed is usually the first step toward real peace and shalom. Scrooge needed to be disturbed for his own sake, but as important, Tiny Tim needed for Scrooge to be disturbed as well. Sometimes God blesses us by disturbing us. The conclusion of A Christmas Carol is only possible because of the gift of disturbance and displacement. And so I leave you with those words

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!

Amen.