“Something Is About To Happen”
A Sermon at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
December 8, 2013

Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

You know the old set-up for a joke:
I have good news and bad news.
Like this guy, Howard, who went to his doctor. After X-rays, an electrocardiogram, blood tests, the anxious patient waited for the doctor's return.
"Howard," the doc began,
"I have good news and bad news."
"What's the good news?"
"My son has been accepted to Harvard University School of Medicine."
"And the bad?"
"You're going to pay for it."

Today I have a variation in that set-up:
I have good news, and bad news, but then later, more good news.

I have good news because the faith at the heart of this season is full of promising things. Even with Advent’s penitential side, with the waiting and longing that make up this season, there’s an expectant joy.

It’s in the air this time of year. Lots of us are ready for that difference.
I was in Massachusetts last weekend visiting my son and his family. I was struck, when running errands in their town near Boston, by how friendly people were. They had a twinkle in their eyes--these supposedly reserved New Englanders. I think that friendliness had to do with the sense of anticipation now that we are in December. Christmas is just days away.

We feel it. Strapping a tree to our car roof, pulling out the Christmas cookie recipes, decorating with greens, lighting an Advent wreath, hearing Handel’s *Messiah*. All these things feed our anticipation.

But that sense is about more than cherished customs and rituals. We also notice a longing for something else. We find ourselves waiting for more—a word, those of us who aren’t satisfied with where we are spiritually.

The word *Gospel*, so important to our faith, comes from an ancient root word that literally means good word, good news, good announcement. This season we wait for a big birth announcement. Not just an announcement, but a proclamation that a new order is on the way.

Our passage from Isaiah captures this sense of anticipation. The people who heard it had been ground down from a once flourishing tree, to a dormant stump. Things were discouraging.
Instead of being the strong and thriving people God had called them to be, they were under-living the promises they had been given.

But, Isaiah says, speaking of the line of David, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” Tree stumps don’t bear fruit, let alone branches. But Isaiah, over and over again, tells the people of God that an unseen Reality is at work, something even more real than what they see right in front of them, bringing new life, new fruitfulness.

That could be good news to us, too, in this place.

The preacher Tom Long tells a story about an adult Sunday school class discussing the question, “Why stay in the church?”

“I’ll tell you what keeps me coming to this church,” one man said, with everyone seeming to lean forward in their chairs to hear what he’d say.

“It’s strange, I know,” he went on, “but I get the feeling here, like nowhere else, that something is about to happen.”

Even when we get discouraged.

Something is about to happen.

Something good.

And I believe in that dangling potential for us as a parish. Whatever the discouraging, hurtful, experiences some of us have had.

However we wish we saw more happening.
Amid our restlessness, God comes with a promise.

Which leads to the other aspect of this season.
For there is some bad news today.

We hear not just the promises of Isaiah but a prophet’s impassioned call to a different way as John the Baptist shows up. Because sometimes we don’t get to the good part of the good news without tough self-appraisal.

Sometimes we need to turn from some habits that, while comfortable, hold us back from more.

The literary genius Flannery O’Connor once said, “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”

That helps explain why John the Baptist appeared on the scene urging his hearers to repent. They needed hope, but first they had to deal with some things that kept them from the fullness. We need hope, in this season of anticipation, but there’s a change needed. All persons need to grapple with how they fall short.

I love a cartoon that appeared in the New Yorker magazine some years ago. It shows an elegant matronly woman shaking the preacher’s hand as she leaves church. She asks, “Why preach about sin to such nice people?”

Words like sin may seem out of place in our time.
I feel like paraphrasing that woman’s comment to her priest, and asking myself, “Why preach about repentance, especially in our day of self-esteem and affirmation?” And why preach about repentance to a congregation of people I respect so much—you—to people for whom I feel such affection and love?

But we do have moments when we see how thin what we live by really is. We see how we have gotten casual around holy things. A little too cozy around wrongdoing. Willing to settle for too little.

Part of us knows realizes that coming to church only once or twice a month isn’t really going to sustain us spiritually, not given the challenges of living faithfully in a sub-Christian world. Part of us realizes how prone we are to skip the work of staying on a growing edge spiritually. We get busy with other matters. Or overwhelmed with all the demands of work and family, Or occupied with good things. Carolina home games the day before Sunday leave us tired enough we just want to sleep in.

But today we sense we can be more than we have been. So we need, along with the encouraging news, this figure of John the Baptist appearing in the wilds of Judea, dispensing with polite niceties. He just said it: Repent. Turn.
Even the surroundings echo a bracing toughness:
The wilderness mentioned here in Matthew doesn’t mean lush wooded mountain forests, like when we speak of wilderness camping.

No, think *desert* wilderness.
Think parched land and stark surroundings.
Think life stripped to the dry bone.

John wears camel hair (not the soft-to-the-touch camel hair we associate with fine blazers).
No, we’re talking bristly, rough fabric, burlap.

“You snakes!” he says to the religious types.
“What are you doing here acting like you are sorry for your sins?”
He knew that they didn’t really mean it when they showed up asking for baptism.

John went to the core, to the will, to the heart.
“Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees,” he says. The word *radical* literally means going to the root. He didn’t want them to stop short of true change of heart, true amendment of life. This is not the kind of person kept at the top of people’s invitation list for holiday parties.

For hearing his call usually feels, at first, like, well, bad news.

But like I said, I have good news, and bad news.
But then more good news.

For there’s amazing prospects here for those frustrated at a lackadaisical personal faith that
seems more like a hobby than something life changing. There’s promising news for those of you who may be discouraged at our unmet potential as a people, as a parish. Those weary from trying, tired of urging others on hear that there’s more on the way. Don’t give up--something is about to happen! It may take patience, but we are making way for something better. Something bigger.

A TV program profiled Nelson Mandela, just hours after his death. A friend of Mandela’s told the interviewer about a recent visit he’d made with his young son to see the renowned leader who made such a difference in South Africa.

When he and his son came in to see the aging Mandela, Mandela said, “Oh, it is so nice that a young boy would still come and see an old man who has nothing new to say.”

Prophets know they have to repeat themselves. Prophets know the visions of hope that they’ve been casting have still not come about, and so they say the same thing. And keep saying it. And they wait.

Don’t give up. For here is a vision for Trinity: That not just some of us, but lots more of us will move from casual to committed. That we will be gripped by a transforming faith. That who we become will be noticeable and measurable and unmistakable.
Speaking of football, did you hear what happened earlier this week? The Seattle Seahawks pasting of New Orleans in Monday night football set the fans in the stadium wild. The noise and exuberance and stomping actually registered as a minor earthquake at nearby University of Washington, where they had a seismic recording station. http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/03/us/seattle-seahawks-earthquake/

A rumble and commotion you couldn’t miss if you happened by! I love it. There’s no reason Trinity can’t have that kind of presence in the lives of those of us here. That impact in our surrounding community.

Why wouldn’t God’s working make a measurable difference? A difference of seismic proportions?

Something remarkable is going on here. Even better, something is about to happen. Please, join me in watching for it. Please, don’t let your casualness or your impatience mean that you miss it.