

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(October 18, 2009)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Against the Flow**

(studies in Jeremiah)

### **Band-Aids on Cancer**

(Jeremiah 3-6)

Study #3

#### **Introduction: Bad News/Good News...**

This morning I am pleased to announce that Isabel Caviness is doing well.

Of course, I'm sure that you are glad to hear that. Isabel is a long-time attender here at Northwest and it's always good to hear when someone we know and love is doing well.

But the news that Isabel is doing well today is *exceptionally good news*, given the fact that she suffered a heart attack on Friday.

This morning she is resting comfortably in Methodist Hospital. But Friday she was taken from her home in an ambulance to the hospital and was taken immediately to surgery to open a major artery that was 100% blocked. Yeah, it is good news is that she is doing fine!

Good news is received as mildly interesting when things are going well. Good news is outrageously wonderful against the backdrop of a potential disaster.

Today, as we continue to pay attention to the prophecy of Jeremiah, we are going to think about good news and bad news<sup>1</sup> from chapters 3-6, a section in which there is decidedly more bad news than good.

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<sup>1</sup> According to sociologist Douglas Maynard, author of Bad News, Good News (Conversational Order in Everyday Talk and Clinical Settings), University of

In the messages recorded in these chapters Jeremiah brings a consistent message of gloom and doom - not a terribly appealing message in any era, certainly not in our own. It really wasn't all that popular in Jeremiah's era, either (around 600 BC, or 2,600 years ago).

But the message he brought and the KIND OF MESSAGE he brought speaks volumes to you and me as we seek to imitate Jeremiah and to be the Lord's mouthpieces today.

Before we get to Jeremiah's gloom and doom, though, let's spend a bit of time considering what a delight it is to bring GOOD NEWS!!

#### **The Wonderfully Fun Ministry of Bringing Good News!**

##### **The Joy of Delivering Good News**

I've often had the pleasure of bringing good news to you on Sunday mornings. Isabel is recovering. So-and-so had a healthy baby. The short-term Missions team landed safely. All of the High School youth returned from their recent campout with most of their fingers and toes.

There are no doubt times you can recall when you have been able to deliver great news. If you are an employer, you've said, "*You got the promotion*" to a hard-working employee. If you're a coach, you've announced, "*You made the team!*" to a nervous athlete.

It is a delightful privilege to deliver good news. Such news makes people feel good. It is affirming. It puts a spring in their step. Who doesn't like the idea that they're spreading sunshine?

When we found out on Thursday that the little boy was NOT in the hot air balloon and that he had NOT fallen out of a basket above the skies of Colorado - we all rejoiced in that GOOD NEWS. (and yes, we are still sorting out the details of a possible hoax...)

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Chicago Press, 2003, when we share or receive good or bad news, from ordinary events such as the birth of a child to public catastrophes such as 9/11, our "old" lives come to an end, and suddenly we enter a new world. The news we receive changes us. Scripture might tell us that bad news has the potential to bring about more dramatic change as it serves as a wake-up call to change directions.

The Bible talks about how sweet it is when someone brings good news. Solomon wrote,

*[Proverbs 15:30] Bright eyes gladden the heart;  
Good news puts fat on the bones.*

And again,

*[Proverbs 25:25] Like cold water to a weary soul,  
So is good news from a distant land.<sup>2</sup>*

And then we can consider how wonderful it is to receive good news! When life turns out the way you have longed for it to turn out, when your team wins or your candidate wins, when the diagnosis from the Dr. is encouraging, well, the day just gets a little bit cheerier.

Our love affair with good news is neither recent nor unusual. It's part of the human condition. Like us, the people of ancient Israel loved to receive good news, and the history of the nation made for a perfect breeding ground for good news.

### **Israel - "Most Favored Nation" Status with GOD**

Among nations today, the status "Most Favored Nation" is a much coveted designation. It means that one nation grants another nation all possible advantages in trade.

While ancient Israel probably didn't make it on many other nations' "Most Favored" lists, there is no doubt but that she enjoyed a "Most Favored Nation" status with God.

It all started when God chose to bless Abraham (2,000 BC), but it didn't stop there.

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<sup>2</sup> See, too, *[Isaiah 52:7] How lovely on the mountains  
Are the feet of him who brings good news,  
Who announces peace  
And brings good news of happiness,  
Who announces salvation,  
And says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"*

Abraham's offspring - Isaac, Jacob and Joseph - were all blessed by God. Then, after a four hundred year stopover in Egypt, the descendants of Abraham, who had grown into a respectable sized group while enslaved there, were freed by the power of God.

They walked across Egypt to the Red Sea and then walked across the dry sea bed of that Red Sea! God gave this people His Law from Mount Sinai and then led them around in the wilderness for forty years while meeting their every need, from food and water to shoes and clothing.

He allowed them to cross the Jordan River by piling up the waters so they could cross on dry ground and then led them in military victories over the Canaanites.

Israel was blessed for hundreds of years in the good land God gave them. He reminded His people over and over again that He loved them. He protected them against enemies. He was clearly for them - and that's always good news.

Now, jump forward with me to the time of Jeremiah. This is fifteen hundred years after Abraham and hundreds of years after the conquest of Canaan.

The prophets who were representing God to the nation at this time knew full well that Israel was God's chosen nation. This highly favored nation had experienced God's blessings for as long as anybody could remember.

And they assumed that as it had been in the past, so it would be in the future. The prophets, confident of God's love and favor, were delivering a consistent message of good news.

### **Prophets Who Preached Peace and Prosperity**

In chapter 5, verse 12, they declared that the Lord would never send hard times on them, *"the apple of His eye"*<sup>3</sup> - *[12]...Misfortune will not come on us,  
And we will not see sword or famine.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A couple of centuries later the prophet Zechariah would refer to Israel in this way, Zechariah 2:8.

Jeremiah records that his fellow prophets were saying to the people of Israel, **“Peace! Peace!”** *“Peace and safety is our present experience and will be ours in the future.”* (Jeremiah 6:14)

Happy days had been with them for centuries and happy days were undoubtedly there to stay. As they had enjoyed times of blessing in the past, they were certain of times of great blessing from God in the future.<sup>5</sup>

These prophets could not fathom the idea that the Lord would do anything other than bless His people.

The Jews thought that they had the equivalent of a modern-day diplomatic immunity. Since they were His people they could behave however they wished and He would never discipline them. (That idea dies hard...)

So, the prophets continued to proclaim good news, which was no doubt fun.

BUT, good news is not always the need of the hour. Sometimes, it is necessary to deliver bad news.

### **The Need of the Hour: Bad News**

#### **When is “bad news” necessary?**

*When SOMEONE faces an emergency*

If you look out the front window of your house and see that your neighbor’s home is on fire, you’ll run over to deliver the bad news.

Physicians don’t have the luxury of only delivering happy diagnoses. They are called to deliver the grim ones, too.

You may know and love someone who is destroying his family and friends and career with drug or alcohol abuse. To continually prop this person up with good news would be wrong.

If a friend of yours has spending habits that are bringing his or her life and family to ruin, it would hardly be kind to do anything BUT tell them the bad news truth.

You have probably had to deliver bad news from time to time. It’s tough. It’s waaay more fun to deliver good news. But sometimes, bad news is the need of the hour.

You don’t have to live very long to also be on the receiving end of bad news. And, while nobody especially enjoys getting bad news, if the reality of the situation is bad/hard/negative, it’s better to know it than to not know it.

*When YOU have faced an emergency*

I’ve received several pieces of quite bad news over the past week or two. While I have been deeply saddened to receive these news flashes, I’d far rather have the news than not know that things are bad in the lives of people I know. It’s better to know.

You wouldn’t expect your physician to sugarcoat the news of a cancer growing in your body if that was what was really going on, would you? Of course not! If you have a son or daughter who is beginning to act out in rebellion, you wouldn’t want that hidden from you, would you? No!

Bad news is what we expect to receive when there are tough things going on. In fact, if the bad news is kept from us we are robbed of knowing and thus robbed of doing anything about the bad situation.

Receiving bad news is the first step toward a resolution of a bad scene!

The prophets in Jerusalem were uniformly delivering **“Peace! Peace!”** messages in the days of Jeremiah. But these messages were not the messages they needed to have been preaching. A good news message was unwarranted.

The real need of the hour was for someone to step up to the plate with an honest, courageous message of bad news.

<sup>4</sup> Sadly, the verse begins with, **“They have lied about the Lord and said, “Not He”**

<sup>5</sup> This is actually a theme that we will see throughout Jeremiah, especially when we come to the sections dealing with Pashur (chapters 20-21).

## Bad News for Israel

We're talking about the time frame of young King Josiah's reforms. These were days of excitement and renewal when the evil stain of the former kings (Manasseh and his evil son, Amon) was being washed away.

Josiah was working as hard as a king could work to turn the nation back to the Lord. But, while the king was bringing a lot of great initiatives, the real impact of Josiah's reforms was about a mile wide and an inch deep.

The people were willing to go along with the show of reform, but behind closed doors, not much had really changed. Jeremiah lets us know that there was still so much change that needed to occur.

While Josiah was removing pagan priests and cutting down idols, the people were still committed to the worship of foreign gods.

*Spiritual adultery (3:1-2)*

**[3:1] God says,  
 "If a husband divorces his wife  
 And she goes from him  
 And belongs to another man,  
 Will he still return to her?  
 Will not that land be completely polluted?  
 But you are a harlot with many lovers;  
 Yet you turn to Me," declares the Lord.  
 [2] "Lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see;  
 Where have you not been violated?  
 By the roads you have sat for them  
 Like an Arab in the desert,  
 And you have polluted a land  
 With your harlotry and with your wickedness.**

Next Sunday we will devote ourselves to a consideration of idolatry - the worship of anything other than the one true God. We'll even explore ways in which we, today, may have slipped into idolatrous ways.

The Jews of Jeremiah's day weren't picky about who or what they worshiped.

Nor were they very careful about avoiding what Jeremiah refers to as "evil."

*Quick to do evil (4:22)*

**[4:22] "For My people are foolish,  
 They know Me not;  
 They are stupid children  
 And have no understanding.  
 They are shrewd to do evil,  
 But to do good they do not know."**

This is a general purpose sort of evil. We don't know what is in view here. He may be thinking of people cheating others out of money. Or perhaps bending laws when it could be gotten away with. Or domestic violence? Or ????

As well, sexual immorality was rampant in the nation.

*Rampant immorality (5:7)*

**[5:7] "Why should I pardon you?  
 Your sons have forsaken Me  
 And sworn by those who are not gods.  
 When I had fed them to the full,  
 They committed adultery  
 And trooped to the harlot's house.  
 [8] "They were well-fed lusty horses,  
 Each one neighing after his neighbor's wife.**

And there was a trampling of the rights of the people with the least pull, the least weight, the least power in society.

*Social injustice*

**[6:28] 'They are fat, they are sleek,  
 They also excel in deeds of wickedness;  
 They do not plead the cause,  
 The cause of the orphan, that they may prosper;  
 And they do not defend the rights of the poor.**

This stuff is BAD! To deliver a message of good news in a time like this would be wholly inappropriate. Given the state of the spiritual lives of the people of Israel, another message altogether was desperately needed.

And Jeremiah was just the man to deliver it.

### **The Man of the Hour: Jeremiah**

*“Bad news” - shooting straight about sin*

Throughout the long fifty two chapters of his book, Jeremiah repeatedly called attention to what was really going on in the nation, and particularly in the city of Jerusalem.

But in chapters three through six we find some of the most stinging, “bad news” messages he gives.

He says that the people of Judah were, without exception, given over to evil. (5:1-3)

*[5:1] “Roam to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,*

*And look now and take note.*

*And seek in her open squares,*

*If you can find a man,*

*If there is one who does justice, who seeks truth,*

*Then I will pardon her.*

*[2] “And although they say, ‘As the Lord lives,’*

*Surely they swear falsely.”*

*[4] Then I said, “They are only the poor,*

*They are foolish;*

*For they do not know the way of the Lord*

*Or the ordinance of their God.*

*[5] “I will go to the great*

*And will speak to them,*

*For they know the way of the Lord*

*And the ordinance of their God.”*

*But they too, with one accord, have broken the yoke*

*And burst the bonds.*

Given that generalizations are always false ( ☹ ) Jeremiah says here that EVERYONE is guilty.

Imagine that you are in Jeremiah’s audience as he delivers this speech. It would be quite a challenge to listen to this.

It would be as if I, this morning, reproached those of you who admitted to being guilty of a certain sin - and then called those of you who refused to admit to this sin “liars.” Talk about being exposed!

Throughout the chapters we are highlighting today, Jeremiah accuses the people of a general tendency toward ingratitude and inattentiveness to God (5:23-24)<sup>6</sup>, a flair for deceit (5:27)<sup>7</sup>, and a wholesale attraction to evil (5:30-31)<sup>8</sup>!

Jeremiah shot straight about the state of the nation’s spiritual and moral life. He didn’t sugarcoat when talking about their misbehavior. He spoke truth.

And when it came to speaking about the bad news of coming judgment, well Jeremiah didn’t stutter there, either.

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<sup>6</sup> [5:23] *‘But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; They have turned aside and departed.*

[24] *‘They do not say in their heart, “Let us now fear the Lord our God, Who gives rain in its season, Both the autumn rain and the spring rain, Who keeps for us The appointed weeks of the harvest.”*

<sup>7</sup> [5:27] *‘Like a cage full of birds, So their houses are full of deceit; Therefore they have become great and rich.*

<sup>8</sup> [30] *“An appalling and horrible thing Has happened in the land: [31] The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule on their own authority; And My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?*

*“Bad news” - shooting straight about judgment*

In chapter 4 he warned his fellow Jews about what God *might* do, *could* do, and what He *likely* would do if they continued to live so badly.

**[4:3] For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem,  
“Break up your fallow ground,  
And do not sow among thorns.**

**[4] “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord  
And remove the foreskins of your heart,  
Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,  
Or else My wrath will go forth like fire  
And burn with none to quench it,  
Because of the evil of your deeds.”**

But by the time he comes to chapter 6, time has passed and evil has continued unabated. He preaches now as if the coming judgment is inevitable.

**[6:1] “Flee for safety, O sons of Benjamin,<sup>9</sup>  
From the midst of Jerusalem!  
Now blow a trumpet in Tekoa  
And raise a signal over Beth-haccerem;  
For evil looks down from the north,  
And a great destruction...**

**[12] “Their houses shall be turned over to others,  
Their fields and their wives together;  
For I will stretch out My hand  
Against the inhabitants of the land,” declares the Lord.**

**[22] Thus says the Lord,  
“Behold, a people is coming from the north land,  
And a great nation will be aroused from the remote parts of the earth.**

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<sup>9</sup> Note also 4:11, 5:15-17. Significant in the following verse is that Jeremiah writes as if the invasion has already occurred.

**[5:16] “Report it to the nations, now!  
Proclaim over Jerusalem,  
‘Besiegers come from a far country,  
And lift their voices against the cities of Judah.**

**[23] “They seize bow and spear;  
They are cruel and have no mercy;  
Their voice roars like the sea,  
And they ride on horses,  
Arrayed as a man for the battle  
Against you, O daughter of Zion!”**

**[24] We have heard the report of it;  
Our hands are limp.  
Anguish has seized us,  
Pain as of a woman in childbirth.**

**[25] Do not go out into the field  
And do not walk on the road,  
For the enemy has a sword,  
Terror is on every side.**

**[26] O daughter of my people, put on sackcloth  
And roll in ashes;  
Mourn as for an only son,  
A lamentation most bitter.  
For suddenly the destroyer  
Will come upon us.**

Jeremiah had similar things to say throughout his prophetic ministry. At no point does he hold back on the delivery of the news the people needed to hear. And in most cases, the need of the hour was the proclamation of bad news.

### **Conclusion:**

In Jeremiah 6:14, he spoke out against the prophets of his day with a stinging rebuke. These were the guys who said that God would never discipline His people and who preached **“Peace! Peace!”** Jeremiah says that they weren’t doing the people any favors. He says that they healed the healed the wound of God’s people *superficially*.

Fascinating way to put it.

The spokesmen for God in Jeremiah’s day were busy putting Band-Aids on the people’s cancer. **“You’re bleeding to death? Take two aspirin and call me in the morning.”**

Problems were grave, yet they proclaimed messages of good news.

**[6:14] “They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, Saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ But there is no peace.”<sup>10</sup>**

Jeremiah courageously went against the flow and highlights for us, today, the importance of truth-telling - even when the truth is not terribly appealing. Jeremiah would want us to know that bad news is sometimes the best news we can receive or give.<sup>11</sup>

*Jeremiah - our role model*

What an example of courage! We’re grateful that he has served as our role model. When things are bad, good news is unwarranted. And when there is misbehavior, bad news is the need of the hour.

But Christians are Good News leaning people. We have received and believed the Gospel. So, is bad news something that Christians need to be concerned about? Yep.

*“Bad news” for us?*

The New Testament tells us that when we, God’s people, choose to behave in sinful ways, God will discipline us. That’s not really “bad” news. There is a redemptive purpose in this discipline. He wants us to grow in holiness.

But, here is some “hard” news for any of us refuse to respond positively to the discipline He brings our way. The discipline will get stronger. (See Hebrews 11) He’ll keep on applying more and more pressure in very creative ways to grab our attention, to wake us up and to drive us to repentance. For after all, it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4).

And for more on the “bad news” side, consider these warnings direct from the New Testament to the Christian:

- If you are angry with someone, and you hold on to that anger and you don’t let it go and you don’t deal with it and you don’t try to reconcile with the person you are angry with and you just stay angry - you give the enemy (yes, Satan!) a gateway into your life. (see Ephesians 4).
- If you don’t learn the grace of forgiveness, Satan will have a field day with you. (2 Corinthians 2)
- Sin is addictive and progressive. Nipped in the bud, escape is likely. Allowed to grow and fester, sin becomes wrapped around our souls and is much, much harder to deal with.
- The way you live - here and now - is heaping up an eternal reward in the presence of God - or not.

The “bad news” of God’s discipline of His people just may be the best news you could receive today!

*Your friends need to hear bad news from you*

And it just may be that the people you work with, go to school with, and hang with need to hear some bad news from you.

The Gospel of Jesus is outrageously good news. Jesus died and rose again from the dead. But it is only received as outrageously good news by someone who understands the bleak situation he or she is in because of sin.

Before the Gospel is embraced as GOOD NEWS it is necessary to embrace the BAD NEWS that our sin has separated us from God, that we face an eternity in Hell, and that there is no possibility of transcendent meaning or purpose in this life. That’s bad news, indeed.

Jeremiah points the way and invites you and me to be God’s mouthpieces today. To bring bad news - while weeping! - so that others will accept the best news there is, the message of Jesus.

When you tell your friends this bad news, though, you are telling them the truth. And you are whetting their appetite for the best news they could ever hear.

<sup>10</sup> See also Jeremiah 8:11 for the same remark.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah was given the task of being an “assayer and tester” of God’s people. (6:27-30)