

***Good News is always good.*** (Luk 3:7-18; Zeph 3:14-18; Php 4:4-7)

\* Friends, among the recent guests with whom we worshiped at St. Luke's there was the son of the founder of this church Rev. Henry Koepchen. After the service I welcomed him in the parsonage that sometime ago was his own. He and Mrs. Louise Koepchen, with interested looks, went through the parsonage. On the second floor Henry showed us his former bedroom and described how it was furnished; he told us some other interesting things. At the end we approached our sunroom. There was a radio here as he pointed to the place by the window. *This room was my favorite*, he said. Upon hearing pastor Koepchen, I quickly imagined the thirteen year old boy Henry sitting by the window and listening to the science-fiction *The War of the Worlds* by Herbert Wells. On December 7, 1941, he continued, I was standing at the window when the broadcast announced the war with Japan after the air strike at Pearl Harbor. Indisputably, it was the shocking news for the boy and for many Americans. As it seems for me this news was good for Russians and bad for many Japanese.

\* And now supporting this point I am going to bring forth some other examples. When people heard the news that the U.S. government decided to send 30.000 troops into Afghanistan, then there was a disagreement in opinions. The pacifists and humanists reflected negatively because any war against the human race is bad news for them. In sharp contrast with the pacifists we see the politicians and strategists who anticipate a more secure and peaceful world when the military operations will be over. For the next example, can we say that legalization of gay marriage in the U.S. is good or bad news? After the New York State Senate rejected a gay marriage bill last week, the front line in the national battle over same-sex marriage shifted to New Jersey. A few days ago I saw a picture posted by the *New York Times*; it showed the supporters of gay rights. They reacted ecstatically as the committee vote was taken on a bill to legalize gay marriage. At the same time the opposition of gay marriage seemed displeased. By the way the final battle is still ahead. On this Sunday occasion, we've also heard the news proclaimed by John the Baptist. He said, *the one who is more powerful than I will come, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*, (Luk 3:16). It was amazing news. I bet there was no agreement among Judeans on the point of acceptance of John's message. Those who feared God gathered around John confessed their sins and asked for baptizing; but the Pharisees and upper class reacted to John's call sarcastically or even angrily. It becomes obvious that the same message can be good for one and bad for someone else. It is quite clear that there is always a battle in opinions regarding a matter of great importance.

\* As far as we determine the problem, let us look for unity in opinions asking the Lord for help. Dear Lord Jesus, we acknowledge ourselves as unworthy persons, sinful and unclean and that we cannot free ourselves from the power of sin that wants to alienate us from your wisdom, grace and union in one Spirit. We look for your unfailing love, mercy and guidance so that to appear before you without spot or

blemish as you make us for yourself to the Last Day of your Advent. Dear Lord, grant us the understanding of John the Baptist's message as it is, and empower us to stay in unity, one church in Christ Jesus under your blessing and protection. For the sake of your most holy name we pray. Amen

\* Thinking back to the news from (Luk 3:16), *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*, I want to make a point. First, the pronoun YOU in this sentence is plural in Greek. Second, if it is so, then according to the Spirit of John's message, there are ones who will be baptized by the Holy Spirit and there are ones who will be baptized by fire. Notice the point of next importance, John the Baptist warns people with imagery of fire that will not die out. Now ask yourselves, is it good news to you or bad? For example my former supervisor pastor E. L. would say that everything depends on context.

\* According to Luke's (v.18) it says, ... *with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people*. If the evangelist calls this news good certainly it must be when even pacifists and humanists among us and all kind of liberals among us including hypocrites will say, *Yes pastor, it is the good news!* But I don't believe them! You know, they are very tricky; they can even prove that white is black and vice versa. The same trick they perform with the Bible, including the message we are thinking over at this moment. In connection with (Luk 3:16) the false say, that the baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire is only one baptism. In this sense the work of fire refers to the cleansing, purifying work of the Spirit through the water of our Baptism and following its sanctification. Therefore, the whole message of the Bliss in the Holy Spirit and the Judgment by fire was trimmed in such a way that there is no more judgment on the surface, only mercy, mercy and mercy.

\* Now listen to the trimmed news I borrowed from the article "....." by ....., theologian. Here he gives me advice on how I need to preach you the Gospel. He wrote, *Good News is the message of hope for absolutely everybody. Christian preachers don't have to resort to threats of hell to coerce people to turn to Christ. They can proclaim the truth, the good news: "God loves you. He isn't mad at you. Jesus died for you because you're a sinner, and God loves you so much he has saved you from everything that is destroying you. So why should you keep on living as though this dangerous, cruel, unpredictable and unforgiving world is all you've got? Why don't you come and start experiencing God's love and enjoying the blessings of his kingdom? You already belong to him. He's already paid for your sins. What are you waiting for? He'll turn your sorrow into joy. He'll give you peace of heart like you've never known. He'll bring meaning and purpose to your life. He'll help you improve your relationships. He'll give you rest. Trust him. He's waiting for you.*

\* Now listen to the good news from John the Baptist, compare these two and find your favorite preacher. *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.*

*Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.* Look, both messages are good news, but the first is only half truth. It leads people to an unfruitful, careless Christian life and spiritual death.

\* Looking for imageries of the American Jesus on the internet I found one, called *Undefeated*. It portrays a boxer with long hair and beard, he is resting at the corner of the boxing ring and looking at your eyes boldly. His belt has an inscription, *Saviour*; his right gloves – *Mercy* and left – *Justice*. While this composition is questionable, I used it in order to bring forth the idea of inseparable good news. It is like two hands of one body, or the good news is like a coin with two sides, they are inseparable.

\* In fact today we've heard good news, not only from John the Baptist, but also from the prophet Zephaniah and the apostle Paul also speak loudly on this account. Both told us the good news as it is. They appeal to our hearts with words of exhortation, "*Be glad and rejoice with all your heart; Rejoice in the Lord always.* Significantly, Paul greets us with a twofold *Rejoice*. He does it in order to emphasize a reason.

\* There are two great reasons. According to Zephaniah, *the Lord has taken away your punishment*, (v.15). That is the forgiveness of our sins and everlasting salvation. Don't think that the prize for it is cheap, because it is the suffering and death the Son of God on the cross. The Father judged his beloved Son for us. Sometime in the future seeking Jesus among the greatest men of faith you will never miss him; you will recognize him by the stigmata, ever-visible signs of God's justice he took upon himself in our place. And the second reason for great joy is found in God's judgment. He had saved his people from the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians and so forth. I dream that in Christ's coming God will separate the faithful from hypocrites and the church will see the salvation of the Lord. Only imagine there will be no one who will accuse you, or lie against you, or hate you. That is really good news, isn't it? Rejoice, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud o Israel!, your persecutors are taken away.

\* Significantly same message simultaneously can be good for one and bad for someone else. Meanwhile the good news from John the Baptist is always good because it is **objective** news. It cannot be modified by a person's perception or opinion. The message from John the Baptist we've learned today says clearly, God will bring final salvation to those who keep His words as a matter of great importance, (Mat 7:24), and He will bring justice to everyone who loves and practices falsehood, (Rev 22:15).

This is good news from John the Baptist; it was set forth for great joy.

Amen.