

I've Got Some Good News!

Message for Sunday, November 29, 2015
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

Children's Message: Psalm 32:1-2 "What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven!"

Ask if any of them has ever done something bad. Listen to their story. Ask if they were sorry they did it.

You just confessed! That's what confession is: to admit I did something bad. And that's a *good* thing! Not the bad action, but admitting it.

Because once you've confessed, you don't have to worry about someone finding out your secret. Like this story...

A little brother and sister went to spend the summer with their grandparents. One day the grandfather made slingshots for them. "Now be careful with this, and never shoot rocks at animals or people." "OK, Gramps," they solemnly promised. Johnny spent the next few days firing rocks at trees, cans, and make believe enemies. Then one morning he spotted, far across the pond, his grandmother's pet duck. Not really aiming, he let fly a rock. He was horrified as he watched the rock fly through the air and hit the duck right in the head, killing it. "Oh, no! What am I going to do?"

The little boy, fearing his grandparent's wrath, desperately searched for a place to hide the dead duck. Finding the perfect place, he hid the duck under the pile of firewood near the barn. As he stood up congratulating himself on his cover-up scheme, he spied his sister watching him from the front porch. She called out, "Lunch is ready."

All through lunch he was silent. His food sat in his stomach like lead. He waited for his sister to expose his crime. She smiled and sat silently eating her sandwich. Then grandmother spoke, "Sally, will you help me wash the dishes?" "I'd be happy to Grandma," she replied, "but Johnny told me he really wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" Johnny was considering whether to protest or not when she leaned over and whispered to him as she left the room, "Remember the duck!"

Johnny sat there in grim silence realizing that bad days were ahead.

The rest of the week was a nightmare for Johnny. He had to skip a fishing trip so he could help make supper, and then he graciously let his sister lick the fudge pan. After many days of doing his sister's chores, he could take it no longer. "Grandma," he tearfully confessed, "I didn't mean to, but I killed your duck." "I know, Johnny," she gave him a hug, "I was standing at the window. I saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. But I had to wait until you were ready to come to me and ask forgiveness. I wondered how long you would let your sister keep you a slave!"

He was free! He had confessed, he was forgiven, and it was *wonderful*! Do you see why confession is such a good thing?

Message: "I've Got Some Good News!"

I've got some good news for you today! I've got something I want to share with you that'll just make you feel great! Please listen very carefully for what I am about to read, for this is one of the most hope-filled and joyful passages in the Bible:

Matthew 3:7-8, Today's English Version:

"You snakes! Who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins."

Now you probably would like to stand up right now and challenge me on that: "Whoa! I thought you said these were words of hope and joy! Then why do you threaten and insult me with those words?"

I think you're very right in wanting to ask that kind of question. Please grant me a moment to explain:

These are the words that John the Baptist preached to the crowds which began to follow him. His purpose was to prepare them for the Saviour who was coming after him.

John's call to repentance is not just a stern warning. It is, in fact, an invitation that makes it possible for us to come clean before God and before others.

When I was a boy, I was in a group of boys who were playing with matches and ended up starting a prairie fire. Someone told my parents that I had

been seen near the place, and so they asked me if I knew anything about it. I lied, and said that I had seen some others do it, but I was too far away at the time to tell who they were.

I never forgot that moment. Although I grew up well, and did not get in any more trouble, that incident stuck in my conscience for years. It was like when you eat a heavy meal just before bedtime. It lies in the stomach, making you uncomfortable, unable to sleep. Then one day I finally confessed, and the burden was lifted.

Being honest hurts. But it also heals.

By the way—the same holds true when people have been the victims of cruelty. I heard about a family where all seven daughters had been sexually abused by their father over many years. It was only fifteen years after they had all grown up, that one of them found the strength to tell her story.

Sadly, living for so many years with memories of that abuse had left its mark on those women. Counsellors at women's shelters find that women who were abused years earlier still have many problems stemming from that. They may have trouble relating to men; they may have headaches or stomach pains for no apparent reason; their self-esteem is devastated. When they finally trust someone and talk about it, then the symptoms may go away.

Being honest hurts. But it also heals.

This passage truly is one of the greatest passages in the whole Bible for hope and joy. For it tells us that we can be open and honest before God. You can begin all over again. You can begin a new life today. This is God's gift to us at Christmas time. Jesus Christ, our Saviour is born.

As I talk about repentance, I want to remind you what repentance is. I can think of no better explanation than that given in a Sunday School class:

The teacher asked the class, "What does repentance mean?" One student replied, "It means being sorry for your sins." Another student added, "It means being sorry enough to quit."

Today, if you feel sorry enough, it could be the happiest day of your life. God's gift of true joy and hope is offered to us in Jesus Christ. Will you accept?

Prayer:

Holy, pure, almighty God: I bow before you in worship. You are far, far more than I ever imagined. I usually think of myself as being a pretty good person. But when I look at you... I'm not even close to the kind of person I should be. I'm sorry for all the wrong that I've done.

I thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, who gave his life on the cross for me. Because of him, I have forgiveness for all that wrong. A tremendous weight is lifted; I feel light. I thank you for giving me another chance, for a new life. I now turn away from all the wrong things in my life, and I turn to you. I commit myself, every part of my life, to following and serving you, and you only. I ask you to fill me with your Holy Spirit, to help me in this new life.

And thank-you for the joy and the peace. Amen

Invitation to communion

The Bible tells us how wonderful it is to confess our wrongs, and receive forgiveness. Knowing God's love like that makes all the difference in life. As an invitation for us to do that as we prepare for communion, let me tell you a story of grace in action. It's by Max Lucado, in his book *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*.

The small house was simple but adequate. It consisted of one large room on a dusty street. Its red-tiled roof was one of many in this poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of a Brazilian village. It was a comfortable home. Maria and her daughter, Christina, had done what they could to add colour to the grey walls, and warmth to the hard dirt floor: an old calendar, a faded photograph of a relative, a wooden crucifix. The furnishings were modest: a pallet on either side of the room, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove.

Maria's husband had died when Christina was an infant. The young mother, stubbornly refusing opportunities to remarry, got a job and

set out to raise her young daughter. And now, fifteen years later, the worst years were over. Though Maria's salary as a maid afforded few luxuries, it was reliable and it did provide food and clothes. And now Christina was old enough to get a job to help out.

Some said Christina got her independence from her mother. She recoiled at the traditional idea of marrying young and raising a family. Not that she couldn't have had her pick of husbands. Her olive skin and brown eyes kept a steady stream of prospects at her door. She had an infectious way of throwing her head back and filling the room with laughter. But her spirit of freedom made her keep all the men at arm's length.

She spoke often of going to the city. She dreamed of trading her dusty neighbourhood for exciting streets and city life. Just the thought of this horrified her mother. Maria was always quick to remind Christina of the harshness of the streets. "People don't know you there. Jobs are scarce and the life is cruel. And besides, if you went there, what would you do for a living?"

Maria knew exactly what Christina would do, or would *have* to do for a living. That's why her heart broke when she awoke one morning to find her daughter's bed empty. Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. She also knew immediately what she must do to find her. She quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up all her money, and ran out of the house.

On her way to the bus stop, she entered a drug store to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro.

Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for streetwalkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture — taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note.

It wasn't too long before both the money and the photos ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth, but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

She did.

In that story, Maria said, "Come home." Jesus says the same thing to us:

Matthew 11:28, New Living Translation:
"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Let's say "Yes" to Jesus' invitation. Let's come to him now.