

Good News or Bad News?

There are many images of Jesus in the Gospels. Today, I'd like to invite you to choose one of them. You don't have to create it - just choose it. For example, I choose 'the baptism of Jesus'- when the adult Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. I like that image because it reminds me of Christ's humility.

I will give you ten seconds to think about it. Now, I invite you to share what you chose with the person sitting beside you. Talk with your partner about the image you chose and what impressed you about it for the next two minutes. Did everyone have time to share? What did you notice in sharing? Was the image your partner chose similar to yours? Or did it surprise you? Can you tell me anything you found interesting?

Usually, we remember Jesus with good images: Jesus the healer, the good shepherd, the light of the world. However, we should remember that those images are just one side of Jesus. There are also some images of Jesus that we tend to not focus on: Jesus, driving the moneylenders out of the temple, overturning tables and shouting. Jesus, scornfully rebuking the Pharisees. Jesus, refusing to abide by religious customs that stifled his ministry. For some people, he was not an ally but an opponent. His words

did not comfort; they stung. Just as Jesus was a friend to many, the same Jesus was an enemy to many, depending on their wealth, their status and their faith.

These days, interestingly, regardless of wealth, status and even faith tradition, most people think that Jesus is a nice guy. But a nice guy doesn't throw people out of church, doesn't kick over tables, and doesn't get angry at people who have authority. If we don't pay attention to the Jesus who turned the world upside down, it's like eating only what we want. We have to remember the image of the one who came to bring fire to the earth.

Jesus says in Luke 12:49, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" What does he mean by fire? In the Bible the word, 'fire' is used as God's action. There was a fire when God made a covenant with Abraham. Moses encountered the Holy One through the burning bush, a sign of God's protective presence in the wilderness. God also used fire to test, to punish, and to purify. While fire naturally represents God's anger, it also, at times, manifests God's deep love and concern. God used fire not simply to destroy, but to make space to build something new.

What does Jesus want to build by fire? Jesus preached, showed and lived the kingdom of God, which is diametrically opposed to the world we

live in. For example, in the story of the lost sheep, Jesus teaches us what the kingdom of God is like; a caring and a loving community in which the weak, the poor and the marginalized are cared for first. That is good news, as we know, but it is also bad news to those people who don't want to be changed and have no desire to change the world.

Are the teachings of Jesus really good news to you? Are you ready to receive the fire he brings to change you and to change the world with you? Such things are more easily said than done. That was not easy even for the disciples; they learned from him and lived together with him for three years, but still did not understand the world Jesus envisioned. That's why they argued with each other about greatness, and that's why they fell apart and fled when their leader was taken from them. They didn't have courage to change the world until they were filled with the Holy Spirit, which Luke describes as a wind and fire in Acts 2.

How do we experience such a fire that changes ourselves and our community? Let me share a story with you. When I was a youth minister in a Korean congregation, I performed an Easter worship drama with youth based on the Emmaus story in Luke 24. We gathered together to talk about the story and our lives once a week for more than three months. One day one of the youth, Su-Jin shared her story about how she experienced the

love of God. Su-Jin had a younger brother who had autism. She felt ashamed of him, and sometimes didn't like him because her mother had gone through so many difficulties because of her brother. Actually, Su-Jin's mother, who always wanted to attend a worship service, could not come to church as often as she needed, because she did not want to bother the people at the church with her son's outbursts. So Su-Jin's mother started attending a different church which had a special worship service for people like her son, and his sister started volunteering for that service.

One day while Su-Jin was volunteering, everyone in the service was singing a song about God's unconditional love, and she felt God's love for her brother, and that love came to her through her brother. Su-Jin realized that her brother was a gift from God. When she shared this story with the youth group, everybody was moved and felt the same love. So I encouraged her to share her story with the congregation on Easter Sunday, as she played the part of Jesus. You know in the Emmaus story, two disciples met the risen Christ in an unexpected way just like Su-Jin met God in an unexpected way. I thought it would be good for the congregation to meet Jesus in an unexpected way through the testimony of a teenage girl.

It was not easy to convince people, especially the church leadership, that Su-Jin was the one who was supposed to act as Jesus and deliver a

sermon to the congregation. They seemed unhappy about my plan, saying, “Isn’t there any boy who can act as Jesus?” and, “I don’t mind who acts as Jesus, but can a teenager really preach to us all on Easter Sunday?” Even one day before Easter, during a rehearsal, a woman came to me saying carefully, “She sounds too feminine, can you tell her to act more masculine?” Surprisingly, I found out that some of the congregation actually did not like her. I could not understand why. My best guess was that they did not like her just because of her sense of style and strong character.

Anyway, the youth performed the Easter worship drama very well, and Su-Jin’s sermon was the highlight of the service. At the end of the service, we invited the congregation to write down about their own Jesus they have met. And after worship, I noticed some notes saying “I met Jesus again today through the girl who acted as Jesus and shared her experience of God.” As Su-Jin experienced God through her brother who was marginalized in society, the congregation experienced God anew through this teenage girl, who was marginalized in the church community.

Because of Su-Jin, I got to understand what The Good News is all about. God is with the marginalized, and God is with us when we listen to the marginalized. Thanks be to God.