

Advent is about signs – messages – and messengers.

Christians are called to get the message of Jesus Christ out!

Getting the message out into the world is important!

We'll go to great lengths to get messages to people...

“Baby girl delivered early this morning. Everyone is healthy...”

“Mom fell and broke her hip. Surgery scheduled for...”

“Dad took a turn for the worse last night. It's time to  
come home...”

“We have a dinner party at the Nelson's at 6:00 p.m. Don't be late!”

**We live in a world of messages and messengers**, from skywriting to messages in a bottle tossed out to sea. From billboards to TV, radio, voice messages, text messages, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, email, cards, letters, or someone just telling us this is what the next agenda item is.

But woe to the messenger. It is often a beleaguered position. People don't want to hear from the messenger or the prophet when the news is not good. Then the messenger defends themselves with, “Hey, don't shoot the messenger.”

“Shooting the messenger” is a common phrase used to describe the act of lashing out at the blameless bearer of bad news.

The advice "*Don't shoot the messenger*" was first expressed by Shakespeare in *Henry IV*, and later in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Prior to that, it was expressed in

*Antigone* by Sophocles as "*No one loves the messenger who brings bad news.*" The Old Testament prophet Malachi brings judgment news. God will purify his people. Who wants to hear that?

A modern version of attacking the messenger can be seen when people blame the media for presenting bad news about a favorite cause, person, or organization. The fact remains that "*shooting the messenger*" may be a time-honored emotional response to unwelcome news, but it is not a very effective method of remaining well-informed.

Getting rid of the messenger may be a tactical move; but the danger is that it develops into a habit of being dishonest in communications. We avoid responding in a negative fashion. We don't respond at all, becoming silent in order that we're not perceived as hostile. People learn to avoid giving any negative feedback; that's when the "Emperor," or anyone in need of receiving honest feedback, becomes mired in self-delusion. This is not a recipe for success.

One of the unsung messengers of history is the carrier pigeon. Near the time of Malachi, around the 6th century BC, Cyrus, king of Persia, used carrier pigeons to communicate with various parts of his empire. Before the advent of radio, carrier pigeons were frequently used on the battlefield as a means for a mobile force to communicate with its stationary headquarters.

During the First and Second World Wars, carrier pigeons were used to transport messages back to their home coop behind the lines. When they landed, wires in the coop would sound a bell or buzzer and a soldier of the Signal Corps would know a message had arrived. He would go to the coop, remove the message from the canister, and send it to its proper destination.

The job of a messenger is critical. Time is of the essence. The messenger must stay safe. The message must get there and all of it; half the message won't work. John the Baptist had an important message to deliver; a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and that there was one coming after him.

Malachi also had an important message to deliver. In Hebrew Malachi means "My Messenger." Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. It is prophetic language of a very important message to the Hebrew nation, who have returned from exile, yet they find themselves as a minor administrative unit in the vast Persian Empire.

The prophet in just 4 short chapters, only 55 verses, delivers sobering news to the Hebrews reminding them about the payment of tithes, about bored priests, about unfaithful husbands, and about the complaining laity. When deliverance is promised it will come in the distant future when the Lord "will come to his temple." The messenger has brought this message, there will be a day of judgment

and who can endure the day when he comes? For we will all be refined by a refiner's fire to rid us of all our impurities because the day is coming.

In ancient times, when a refiner was working with silver or gold, he couldn't tell the degree of the fire. The only way he knew to ensure all the purities were removed was to look at the hot metal and not until he could see his image reflected in it, did he know that all the impurities had been refined. I believe that not until God sees his image reflected in us does God's purifying stop. God will continue to purify his people. Is that good news or not-so-good news? Did the people repent and change their ways? Did God, does God purify his people?

There were 400 years of silence between Malachi and the first three gospels; Matthew, Mark and Luke. There was 400 years of no prophetic messages. There were no messengers, no new messages.

When we open the New Testament, 400 years later, those first three gospels, all quote this Lukan passage, originally from Isaiah 40, "A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

In ancient times the messenger was Elijah and we hear this reference in our gospel messages. Some believed John the Baptist was Elijah. The disciples asked Jesus, "Are you Elijah?" Who's the messenger of God's covenant? Who's coming to Advent? Is it Malachi? Elijah? Is it John the Baptist? Is it the infant child in a

manger? And what's our role as messengers of the covenant? We, too, have been called to be messengers of the Good News. We have been entrusted to share the good news of the coming of Jesus Christ with the world.

John the Baptist is a prophetic voice to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. John's preaching was an important part of God's plan for Israel. We read in Luke that God is concerned for the salvation of all flesh. That's a message that anyone of us should be willing to share with anyone we meet.

Jesus was a messenger too. He came and lived among us and brought God's covenant, the promise of salvation to this world. The disciples took that message and carried it forward into the world. And we the people have continued to carry that message for 2,000 years. What an honor. What a privilege. We too are messengers of the covenant.

I'd like to close with this story. Sixty-nine years ago, my mother was a young 23-year-old college graduate. Ruth Jenkins had already been on several missionary trips but this time she was going to Japan with three other missionaries. Her missionary group were the first allowed into Japan, four years after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

My mother worked in Hiroshima for a year, rebuilding homes for the Japanese. Her missionary partner was Daisy, an African-American from Mississippi. They appeared as an odd couple, my mother was 5'11" tall, striking

red hair and fair skin. Daisy was very dark, shorter and more rounded. My mom often told us stories about the crowds that would follow her and Daisy around town. My mom often attributed that to their physical differences between themselves and especially with the Japanese people.

When I was a chaplain in a children's hospital, I was sharing this story with a young African-American girl and her mother sitting at her bedside. I explained the crowds that followed my mother and Daisy because of the physical differences. This mother immediately corrected me. She said, "They followed your mom and Daisy because of the message they had brought to them; the message of Jesus Christ and his saving grace."

Last Sunday my sister called me to tell me she had received a letter from a teaching colleague of our mother. She wrote about a Japanese TV station that recently aired a program from the Nagasaki Museum of History. Apparently, during that story they showed a picture of our mother and the other missionaries and told some of their story about what they had done after WWII. We were thrilled to hear about it.

Sixty-nine years later, that message of God's love, hope and reconciliation is still being played out in Japan and around the world. We are called to help deliver that message because we don't know how God will use it for his purposes. Let us go out and share that wonderful Good News with someone this season. Amen.