

Week 2

FROM BAD NEWS TO GOOD NEWS

*"He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear; but with
righteousness he shall judge the poor, and
decide with equity for the meek of the earth"*

(Isaiah 11:3b-4a).

In many rural villages in Guatemala, families tend to be large, and due to poverty, cultural traditions and other factors, daughters are often given away for marriage early. At 12 to 14 years old, girls are matched with husbands who are at least twice their age and sometimes older. Pastor Karen Castillo of the Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala (ALAG) knows many of the girls' stories well. Pr. Castillo hears their frequent concerns about the lack of educational opportunities that can change the future for girls and women throughout Guatemala. Schools are often far from people's homes, and if instruction is available, boys are often given precedence. When girls are excluded from continuing their education, they are also excluded from new opportunities, including the opportunity to make many decisions about their futures.

Holy Scripture assures us that God hears their stories, too. The promise of Isaiah, indeed the promise of many of the writings in the Old Testament, is that God has heard the people's pleas for liberation and salvation and will deliver them (Exodus 3:7-8). God's intimacy with the people of God is such that God is attuned to the many obstacles that undermine the people's well-being.

God's anger is revealed most clearly in those places where injustice and inequity reign – and God's loving concern is revealed equally clearly when the children of God are blocked from enjoying life abundantly.

In the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist echoes this anger when he sees a group of Pharisees and Sadducees gathered among those desiring baptism. "You brood of vipers!" he calls out. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7).

John is not the meekest character in the Gospel, but here, he's about to get medieval before there was a medieval to be gotten.

What was it that so incensed the Baptizer? We get a clue about the fault of the Pharisees and Sadducees later in Matthew, when Jesus denounces both groups: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others ... they love to have the place of honor at banquets ... [they] lock people out of the kingdom of heaven ... [they make] gold sacred ... [they] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith," and so on (23:4-23).

The Pharisees often get a bad rap in the Gospels. They serve as foils for Jesus and the disciples so often that the reader might think "brood of vipers" is John the Baptist's way of going easy on them. In reality, the Pharisees were one of several Jewish groups at the time and, in some ways, weren't quite as bad as they might seem. They understood the life of faith as a life focused on obedience to the Law, so they rigorously held themselves to its high standards. The problem was, they held others to those standards, too, even when the Law seemed unclear or when the literal, traditional punishments for violations were downright deadly. For the Pharisees, being faithful meant obeying the Law and tradition, no matter what the consequences were.

Jesus' teachings in the Gospels present a different understanding of faith. For Jesus and his followers, a relationship with God is not meant to be a burden. In fact, quite the opposite: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Isaiah, whom John the Baptist quotes in Matthew, describes what true righteousness looks like for God's people: justice and equity, particularly for "the poor [and] the meek," those without the social or economic status to demand these things for themselves.

As God draws near through the One prophesied by Isaiah and John the Baptist, the bad news of exclusion is transformed into the good news of hospitality, and the bad news of judgment is transformed into the good news of justice – for them and for the

community. It is from among these people, whose lives are so circumscribed by legalism, tradition and inequity, that Jesus will draw both followers and leaders.

In Guatemala, where poverty, traditions and sexism prevent communities from benefiting from the gifts and skills of girls, the ILAG is helping provide new opportunities. Opened in 2018 at the Augustinian Lutheran Center in Guatemala City, the MILAGRO ("miracle") Women's Education Center is a place for young women from these rural communities to continue their secondary education, faith formation and development of vocational and life skills that will help them be financially independent in the future. With support from ELCA World Hunger and ILAG, the young women at MILAGRO Women's Education Center are part of the work God is doing in their communities, proclaiming the good news of justice, equity and life abundant for all.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) What does it mean for God to hear the cries of people who face oppression, exclusion or injustice?**
- 2) How does the church listen attentively to the voices of people facing poverty or hunger in the community today?**
- 3) What is the difference between seeing faith as obedience to God and seeing faith as liberation?**
