

According to media specialists, there are several questions that need to be answered if you're going to maximize the impact and spread of your announcement. We learn from the text that God's strategy for announcing the birth of his Son was right on target.

Who is your spokesperson? It's a good idea to identify one person who will be the point of contact for the big announcement and who will be the only person who speaks on behalf of the family or organization. Having a single spokesperson keeps the message consistent and focused. Of course, it's most important that the people within the organization are clear about who's speaking on their behalf. Otherwise the message can get muddled and leak out in ways that are not intended.

It's clear that the big announcement God is making to his people in exile in Isaiah 52:7-10 is coming straight from the top: *Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I* (v. 6). God chooses various spokespersons throughout the Scriptures -- prophets, angels and shepherds, just to name a few -- but their message is always consistent and commissioned by God alone.

In this case, the "messenger" who makes the announcement in verse 7 may refer to Isaiah himself who was commissioned to take God's message to God's exiled people (6:1-13). But like a good spokesperson, Isaiah is always pointing to the larger message and not to himself. The words of Isaiah 52 sit intermingled amidst the four "servant songs" of the prophet's writing, where the whole nation of Israel is the Suffering Servant through whom God's message of peace, salvation and redemption will be made known to the world. Scripture reveals, however, that Israel isn't the most consistent spokesperson given that, like all of us, her message and mission became easily distorted by sin and self-interest.

When we read this message on Christmas Eve we read it through the lens of Jesus, God's perfect messenger. The New Testament reveals that Jesus is the one completely accurate, completely worthy and completely consistent spokesperson for God who takes Israel's message of hope and mission of suffering on himself and carries it all the way to the cross.

The good news about the baby in the manger is not just that he is God's messenger, but that He is God in person! The one who brings the message is also the one who will make it a reality. In verse 10, Isaiah tells us that *the LORD has bared his holy arm* to bring *the salvation of our God* to reality, which is another way of saying that God has rolled up his sleeves, and gotten his hands dirty to come among us and do the work himself. God's message will not just be spoken: it will be embodied by the one who is born both fully human and fully divine.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, wrote one New Testament writer, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created worlds (Hebrews 1:1-2). In Jesus, the Messenger is the message!

What are your key messages? No matter how complex the big announcement may be, you should be able to boil it down to three key messages that address the most important questions people may have upon hearing the announcement. Keeping these key messages consistent and repeating them often tends to make them stick in the minds of the hearer.

Isaiah follows this advice by offering three key messages to his people in exile: peace, good news and salvation. The announcement of "peace" was vital for a people who had been torn apart by war and captivity; the announcement of "good news" was like a healing balm for people who had endured nothing but bad news for so long; and "salvation" meant that God would once again reign over the people of God, which was the ultimate hope of a people who had been ruled by many tyrants (v. 7).

When Jesus, God's embodied messenger, was born, those key messages became good news, not only for God's chosen people, but for the whole world. Notice the message of Jesus' birth announcement that the angels gave in dazzling light and song to the shepherds on that first Christmas Eve: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth **peace** among those whom he favors* (Luke 2:14). *I am bringing you **good news** of great joy for all the people* (Luke 2:10). *To you is born this day in the city of David a **Savior**, who is the Messiah, the Lord* (Luke 2:11).

Not only were these key messages about Jesus, they also became the message that he himself embodied and proclaimed: He taught his disciples to offer *peace* to those they met (Luke 10:5), and his first message to the gathered disciples after his resurrection was, *Peace be with you* (Luke 24:36). He preached the *good news* of the kingdom of God, which was an announcement that God's salvation, God's reign and rule, was coming upon the earth. He embodied the work of that *salvation* through his healing ministry, by casting out demons and by loving and interacting with those who lived on the margins of society. The big announcement about his birth wasn't a one-time thing; it's also the message that he commissioned his followers to proclaim and embody with their lives.

We live in a world where peace seems virtually impossible, given the constant images of violence and discord with which we are bombarded every day. There's very little good news to be had on most fronts, and God's reign and rule seem like a very distant dream. The coming of

Jesus reminds us, however, that God's message of peace, good news and salvation isn't just something to be *hoped* for: it's something to be worked out. God came in person to do the work and continues to work through people like us to make God's kingdom a reality on earth as it is in heaven: we are to live and proclaim the *peace* of Christ wherever we go; we are to share the *good news* of his kingdom with anyone who will listen; we are to live as though *God's reign and rule* has already been fully realized on the earth. When we do those things, we begin to embody both the message and the messenger.

What is the timing? Experts say that if you're going to announce bad news, Friday afternoons are the best time to do it since few people pay attention to the news on weekends. Good news, on the other hand, should hit the media on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday morning. It's all about the timing, which can either minimize or maximize the announcement's impact.

The day of the week on which Christmas Eve hits the calendar tends to move around (this year it's on a Thursday, which is perfect). The days of Holy Week, on the other hand, are fixed and particularly the ironically named "Good Friday" where we remember the terrible news of Jesus' crucifixion on a Friday afternoon. Even then, however, the bad news is the good news because it reminds us that the baby who has arrived helpless and in a manger will grow to be the one who turns the bad news of our sin into the good news of his saving grace on our behalf.

On Christmas Eve, we celebrate because we know how the story ends and how it continues: with a Savior who has triumphed over sin and death. As the exiles in Isaiah's day looked for liberation, Jesus also points us to the day in which we will be liberated from slavery to sin and death forever. Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, declares that *in that day they shall know that it is I who speak*, and not merely with words but with the arrival of the world's true king (v. 6). For God, any time is the time to proclaim this truth.

The greatest announcement in history wasn't made over social media, with a mass mailing or with colorful billboards. It was made to a bunch of shepherds in a field in a nowhere place, and the medium was a crying, poopy, leaky, precious little baby born in a barn. God has spoken to us through a Son. There is no bigger announcement than that!

Prayer: Let the just rejoice, for their justifier is born. Let the sick and infirm rejoice, for their savior is born. Let the captives rejoice, for their Redeemer is born. Let slaves rejoice, for their Master is born. Let free people rejoice, for their Liberator is born. Let All Christians rejoice, for Jesus Christ is born. Amen.

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The Big Announcement

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 52:7-10 and *John 1:1-14*

Let's say you've got a big announcement to make. Maybe it's your destination wedding on Turks and Caicos in the Caribbean. Maybe it's the birth of your first child. Maybe it's you're turning 50 or 75 or 100 and you're inviting people to celebrate with you. Maybe you're opening a new business. Maybe it's your retirement party.

Whatever your big news might be, there are a ton of ways to get it out there these days. How do you pick the most effective way of getting out the word? You could go the old school route of sending out invitations or announcements by snail mail. That's classic, and shows that you took the effort. You could send out an "Evite," or a "Save-the-date" notice through SurveyMonkey.com. You could post the announcement on social media sites for your online "friends" to see, but you might miss grandma and old Uncle Steve who aren't tech savvy. You could put the announcement on a billboard, send out a flier, post it on an electronic billboard with a scrolling message. You could hire a skywriter to print your message in the clouds. Whatever it is that you want to announce, choosing the right strategy to get the maximum impact is critical.

So, if you're God, and you have a huge announcement to make, how do you do it? On Christmas Eve, God made the most important announcement the world has ever heard. We gather together to hear it once again, spoken through the words of prophets and the songs of angels. We come to hear the announcement about the birth of a baby in a manger.

Sometimes we miss the message that the announcement isn't so much about his coming, but, rather, it's the fact that he is the announcement! John writes in today's gospel lesson that Jesus is "the Word" of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. The message is the Messenger!

When we look at the Scriptures for Christmas Eve, we see that God was posting this big announcement long before it actually happened. If it takes at least six iterations of an announcement before people actually hear it and respond (as some experts tell us), then God has done due diligence. As the Isaiah reading reveals, God started announcing the birth of his Son some six centuries before it happened, using various media, but the message was consistent throughout.