

THE KINGDOM IS NEAR

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Mark 1:14-20

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.

17 And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

THE KINGDOM IS NEAR

The disciples left everything to follow Jesus. They left their jobs. They left their families. What was it that made them do that? Surely there is more to the story than what Mark gives us.

At least that’s what I used to think.

But, this week it occurred to me that maybe the disciples decided to follow Jesus based upon the message that Jesus preached. Maybe when Jesus came to Galilee preaching the good news, the disciples heard it as truly good news and believed.

What did Jesus preach? He preached that God’s time had arrived; the great and awesome day of the Lord anticipated by God’s people had come at last. The kingdom of God had come near.

And that message required a response from the people. Jesus told them, “Repent and believe in the good news”. (Mark 1:14-15)

If the disciples really believed that, if the disciples really believed that heaven had come to earth in Jesus, then following Jesus was more important than anything else they could do.

Following Jesus was more important than their job.
Following Jesus was more important than their family.

And apparently that is exactly what these first disciples believed. When Jesus called these fishermen, they did not hesitate.

“Immediately” Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed Jesus. “Immediately” James and John left their father, Zebedee in the boat with the hired men in order to follow Jesus.

Some talk about this being an impulsive decision. But, maybe it wasn't impulsive at all. Maybe it was the natural reaction of someone who had caught a vision of the coming kingdom.

THE CALL TO REPENT

The call to follow Jesus was also a call to repent. The word translated “repent” also means to go in a different direction or to change your mind. In this sense the call to repent was good news.

We say that the leopard can't change his spots that we are who we are and nothing can change us.

But, Jesus said that we are wrong. Jesus said that it was now possible to change.

We can go in a different direction. We need to go in a different direction.

Now don't misunderstand. We can't do this on our own. But, we don't have to do it on our own.

A door from heaven has been opened, and the Creator of heaven and earth is about to recreate everything, including us.

Jesus didn't want people to feel guilty and bogged down in the past.

Jesus wanted people to turn around and go in a different direction. Jesus wanted people to follow him on the path to a new future.

Jesus wanted people to believe and act upon the good news.

God's time had come. The kingdom of God had come near.

IMMEDIATELY

In the ministry of Jesus God was going to reclaim His kingdom. In Jesus the world would once again see the glory of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. When that happens there can be no more business as usual.

Do we believe the message that Jesus preached is still true?
Do we believe that the kingdom of God has come near us here and now?

Do we believe that is possible for us to change and go in a new direction?

Are we willing to drop everything and follow Jesus?

Mark's gospel has a sense of urgency. In fact, Mark's favorite word seems to be "immediately." For example, in today's lesson for example, Jesus "immediately" calls the disciples and "immediately" they follow him.

Some have suggested that maybe Mark wasn't a very good writer. But, I think Mark's "immediately" reflects how he saw the gospel.

For Mark the gospel wasn't just any story. The gospel was *the* story.

He tells us in the very first verse. This is the story of the Son of God. (Mark 1:1) This story was so important that all other stories had to take a back seat to this one.

I'm afraid we have lost the sense that our time has been invaded by God's time.

Mark's "immediately," Mark's sense of urgency is not always a part of modern Christianity.

After all it has been a long time since Jesus appeared in Galilee and proclaimed that the good news that the kingdom of God was near.

For many of us the kingdom of God seems very far away. And the call to repentance seems like bad news instead of good news.

We don't want to go in a different direction.
We would prefer that Jesus would just bless us and leave us alone.

But, it doesn't work that way.

THE KINGDOM COMES TO EARTH

You see, we don't believe that the good news ends with the death and resurrection of Jesus. On the contrary we believe that the story is just beginning.

Jesus still comes to Galilee, those ordinary, work a day places where we live. And he still calls common people like you and me to go in a different direction. He still calls us to follow where he leads.

We will never find the courage to do that unless we believe what those first disciples believed. They believed that God was in Christ.

They believed the story portrayed in the baptism of Jesus. The heavens were ripped open, the Spirit of God descended like a dove and the voice of the Almighty said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11)

In the baptism of Jesus the chasm between heaven and earth was breached. The love of God had been turned loose on the world in a new way.

And the process of recreation had begun.

We express this each week when we pray the Lord's Prayer. We pray as Jesus taught us saying, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

It's easy to believe in heaven. It's harder to believe in God's heavenly will being done on earth, especially when we see all those who would oppose God's will.

Those first disciples did indeed show courage and faith in leaving everything and following Jesus. In Jesus they saw the heavens ripped open and the Spirit of God descending.

RESTORING FAITH IN THE KINGDOM

But, there would come a time when the kingdom of God would not seem so near for these disciples. Bold Peter would turn into a coward and deny his Lord. James and John, the so-called sons of thunder would slink away and hide when their Master was taken into custody by the authorities.

The immediacy of God's kingdom would be replaced with a sense of despair and defeat. They would ask, "How could this happen? We must have been wrong about Jesus."

But, as we mentioned a few weeks ago, Jesus didn't leave them hiding in fear and shame. He sent them a message by means of an angel. The message of the angel at the tomb was "Jesus is going ahead of you. He'll meet you in Galilee, just as he said he would."

The place where it all began is the place where it begins again. Little Galilee becomes the site of new life and new hope. The risen Christ meets the broken disciples in Galilee and in that place they are restored.

I wonder if in some ways the story of those first disciples is very much like our story. There are times when we believe that the kingdom of God is near. There are times when we feel the Spirit of God descending on us like a dove. There are times when we change in response to that message. We do turn and go in a different direction. We do follow Jesus.

But, there are also times when we fail Jesus and sometimes we even run away.

The message that Jesus preaches seems so unrealistic and even dangerous. So, we try to downplay all that talk about forgiving our enemies, lifting up those who are broken by life and caring for the stranger.

We reinterpret what Jesus had to say about sacrifice and taking up a cross. Maybe Jesus doesn't call us to leave our nets behind. Maybe Jesus just wants us to be better and more satisfied fishermen.

The message that once seemed so urgent suddenly becomes a relic of the past.

The message that once seemed so urgent becomes a story about something that happened way back when but not something that has meaning to us here and now.

THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

This past Monday we celebrated a holiday in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King. I celebrated by rereading one of his sermons. It was a sermon written a year before he was killed. And in that sermon he used a phrase that seems right at home in this passage, "the fierce urgency of now."

You think things are bad now. 1967 was worse. The assassination of a president, an unpopular war and the deterioration of race relations left had the nation in turmoil.

And whatever our views may have been on the events of the day one thing was true of liberals and conservatives alike. We were all pessimistic about the future. But, into that cauldron of pessimism a preacher dared to speak a word of hope and challenge.

Dr. King wrote that we should, "...go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall ... speed the day when *every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low ...*"

The great enemy of faith is the idea that we can put it off until tomorrow. Jesus said that the time for action was here and now.

In verse 15 of our lesson for today we read that the “time is fulfilled.” Peterson playfully translates, “Times up!” The word used for time is the Greek word “kairos”. That word signifies the time that changes everything.

You know what I mean. It was the day you said, “I do”. It was the day the nurse handed you that baby and called you “momma.” The world was never the same after those days

Karoline Lewis, a seminary professor told about the premature birth of her son. She wrote,

“He was born at 31 weeks, 3 pounds, 10 ounces, and I had yet to take my childbirth classes. Within 12 hours I went from being six months and three weeks pregnant to being a parent, from woman to mother in 12 hours.

There was no going back over my ‘What to Expect When You are Expecting’ notes, and no review of the nursery design.”

For Karoline the unexpected birth of her child came to signify what it meant for those first disciples to follow Jesus.

It was sudden, unexpected. As Mark would put it, it happened “immediately”. There was no time to reflect and consider. The kingdom of God had come near, and that changed everything once and for all.

Jesus’ disciples knew about the day when God would change everything forever. The Scriptures predicted such a day. Maybe they even longed for that day.

But, like many things we long for we always expect that we will have more time, more time to get ready.

That’s not always true.

Like a thief in the night, John the Baptist suddenly arrived in the desert preaching, “Times up. The Messiah is coming. Repent and prepare for the day that is coming.”

And wasn't long before they arrested John, and Jesus began preaching, “Times up. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.”

FULFILLMENT AND CHALLENGE

The coming of Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy. All the gospels make this claim. For example, John the Baptist's ministry is interpreted by Mark to be the fulfillment of the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah. He is the one who prepares the way for the Lord.

But, the time of fulfillment is not exactly what God's people expected or even wanted. God's kingdom is quite different from the kingdoms of the world, and that makes everyone uncomfortable.

It is an ominous sign that the ministry of Jesus begins after John is arrested, arrested for proclaiming nearly the same message that Jesus proclaims.

You see ... the kingdom of God was a challenge to the kingdoms of the world from the very beginning. And the world wanted nothing to do with this kingdom.

Herod wanted to kill the one who was born King of the Jews when he was just a baby. And when Jesus was crucified what did the sign say that hung over his head? The sign read, “The King of the Jews”. This was the charge against Jesus.

In the early church when these disciples of Jesus proclaimed the good news, those in power did not find the news to be so good.

Telling the people in charge that, in the final analysis, they weren't really in charge got the disciples into hot water. Declaring war on poverty, hatred and militarism did not win the disciples any converts among the powers that be in the ancient world.

If we can believe church tradition, almost all of the disciples that Jesus called died for their beliefs.

Today the followers of Christ still threaten those who would abuse power. The disciples of Jesus still look at things in a different way and are not afraid to speak truth to power because they know that the kingdom of God is near.

There are still Herods and Caesars in this world. There are still people who value greed over compassion. There are still people who promote hatred instead of love.

But, the disciples of Jesus see a new day coming. The disciples of Jesus know that the kingdom of God is near.

And that causes them to drop everything and follow him. That causes them to fish for people instead of just fishing for fish.

JESUS IS LORD

There was a simple one-line creed that bolstered the faith of the disciples in the early church. They said, "Jesus is Lord."

That creed sounds simple and harmless to us now, but in those days it was a creed meant to counter a blasphemous statement made by the Roman Empire. They required all their subjects to say, "Caesar is Lord." As long as they would make this one statement they could worship whatever gods suited their fancy.

But, Christians could not say that. They knew better. They knew that there was only one Lord, and his name was Jesus. In him the kingdom of God had come near. He had turned their life around, and put them on a new journey of faith and hope.

They could not say Caesar is Lord even if it cost them their life. They knew in their heart of hearts that Jesus was Lord.

Today when we follow Jesus we too must say Jesus is Lord. But, we must do more than say it. We must live it.

Following Jesus is not a spectator sport. Following Jesus is going on a journey of faith. And following Jesus is learning to fish for people. (Mark 1:17)

THE PELICANS

A minister told a story about some pelicans in northern California. Pelicans are naturally great at getting fish.

But, these particular pelicans were hanging out near a fleet of fishing boats. The fishermen would pull into the harbor and clean their fish right on the spot, throwing the heads and the leftovers into the water.

Well, for the pelicans this was good eating. And they began eating the leftovers instead of going out and fishing. They just sat by the harbor and waited for the fishing boats to come in.

Things changed. The fishermen found they could sell the fish waste so they stopped throwing it into the water.

But, the pelicans didn't change. They just sat by the water and waited for the fishing boats to give them a free meal.

All the while the pelicans were growing thinner and thinner.

Eventually the wildlife officials came in to check out the situation, and they came up with a plan. They brought in pelicans from another area to join the flock and teach the starving birds how to fish again.

From time to time we in the church act like those pelicans. We forget that Jesus calls disciples to fish for men and women. Jesus calls disciples to preach the good news and make the kingdom a reality for those who haven't heard.

And when we forget that, we find that spiritual leftovers do not last forever. We begin to starve spiritually.

The gospel loses its urgency for us. The "immediately" of Mark's story is lost and replaced with the humdrum of the everyday.

I pray that all of us will learn to hear the good news afresh. In Jesus the kingdom of God is still near. And that changes everything.

Repent and believe.

Amen.