

THE KINGDOM IS NOW

Mark 1:14-20

Third Sunday after Epiphany (Series B)

January 21, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Third Sunday after Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 1, verses 14 through 20. It is on page 707 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus picks up preaching right where John the Baptist left off. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Mark 1, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”**

¹⁶ Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, **“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”** ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear saints, the Scriptures have good news for us. The kingdom is now. This is what Jesus preaches in the gospel lesson. The kingdom is now. He does not say, “The time is almost fulfilled,” or, “The kingdom of God is coming.” He says, **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand”** (1:15). The kingdom is *now*. It doesn't mean a physical kingdom descends from heaven. The kingdom of God isn't so much a place as it is a person and the sphere of dominion he has. The kingdom of God exists wherever the King, Jesus Christ, is exercising his kingly reign. From the moment Jesus began his public ministry and started exercising his kingly reign over sin, death, and the devil, the kingdom of God on earth has been a present reality.

Jesus' preaching is connected to the ministry of John the Baptist, which was now over. John had been arrested. He spoke truth to power, and it didn't go well for him. There was a love triangle among the children of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas stole the wife of his brother, Herod Philip. It was a complicated mess; that sort of thing usually is, so we won't go into the details. But John the Baptist had something to say about it, and the Herod family didn't like it. So Herod Antipas arrested John, and later had him executed.

The arrest of John the Baptist seems to coincide with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. John's preaching and baptizing had been leading up to the revealing of Jesus as the Messiah. He had been speaking of the one who would come after him (1:7). That was John's role—to be the

messenger and prepare the way for the Christ. He built anticipation. And when that work was complete, John was arrested. Now whether or not the arrest was ordained by God to usher John off the stage, we don't really know. But it has that effect. John is out of the public eye. People can't follow him anymore; he's in jail. And the stage is wide open for Jesus to come and begin his ministry.

So Jesus came into the region of Galilee. This, by the way, is the exact territory Herod Antipas controlled. Jesus isn't afraid to walk right into Herod's kingdom and preach the exact same message of repentance that John got arrested for. Jesus' preaching picks up right where John left off. The message is, *Repent*. The difference is, while John proclaimed that the kingdom was coming, Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom was now here.

So Jesus begins his public ministry saying, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"** (1:15).

These are the first recorded words of Jesus in *The Gospel of Mark*. And it's always interesting to note the first words of any main character in a story. Whenever you read a good novel, go back to the first chapter. Or whenever you finish binge watching a show on Netflix, go back to the first episode. And pay attention to the first words out of the main character's mouth. Sometimes it might not mean anything, but usually, if the writers know where they want to go with the story, they put some thought into the first words of the main character. It's one of the first pieces of character development, and sometimes it tells us where the story is going.

All four of the gospel writers seem to do this. They all give the same history of Jesus' earthly life, but they have different themes, and they emphasize different aspects of Jesus and his ministry. And they do, of course, overlap quite a bit.

For Mark, one of those themes—and it certainly overlaps with some of the other gospels—is the present reality of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

The Jews had been waiting for the Messiah to come and establish his kingdom, so when Jesus begins his public ministry, he says, *This is it*. "The time is fulfilled." That is, *The things spoken by the prophets are now being fulfilled. The period of the reign of God on this earth is right now*.

If you're familiar with the term "eschatology," that's what we're talking about. "Eschatology" is the study of the last things. Jesus is talking about the end times here.

We're often tempted to think of the end times as being somewhere off in the future, as if it's always coming but never really here. Maybe it's because we want to have more time before the end. But Jesus teaches us to expect the very end of all things at any moment. Any second could be the last second of this earth.

Or maybe we have a hard time believing we're in the end times because we just thought it would look different than this. We thought the reign of God on this earth would mean everything is all better, but everything is not all better. So we tend to think of the end times as still being off in the future.

But two thousand years ago, when Jesus began his public ministry, he said, *This is it*. **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."** And that last part—the phrase, "The kingdom of God is at hand"—doesn't mean, "The kingdom is right around the corner." It doesn't mean, "The kingdom is *almost* here." Sometimes the English phrase "is at hand" can

mean that something is almost here. But that's not what Jesus is saying. The Greek language has a special kind of verb to describe a past action that has present implications. And that's the kind of verb that's used here. Literally, this statement means, "The kingdom of God has drawn near and is now here." Jesus says the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth is a past event, and since it has arrived, it is now here, and it is here to stay. The kingdom is *now*. And this is good news. That, after all, is what the word "gospel" means. It simply means "good news."

But maybe this doesn't actually seem like good news to us. Let me explain. It certainly sounds like good news that the kingdom of God has arrived. And it is good news. But when we stop and think about this, we realize that the kingdom arrived two thousand years ago. And all the things we might expect to change because of the arrival of the kingdom—you kind of think they would have happened by now. But we still have wars, disease, hunger, and disasters. And everyone is still dying. We kind of hoped that the presence of the kingdom of God on earth would put an end to this stuff. We kind of hoped that the Messiah would subject all the rulers of the world under his dominion so that we wouldn't have wars, genocides, and threats of nuclear attack. And maybe Jesus could get all the doctors to work together so we could finally cure cancer. And he could show everyone his power so that every person in the world would believe in him. Everyone would become a Christian, then they would stop sinning so much, people wouldn't cut us off in traffic anymore, and we wouldn't even have to lock our doors at night.

When you think about it, most religious—or even political movements—are an attempt to create some kind of heaven on earth. A lot of Christians get caught up with trying to do this too. That's what we want. We want this world; we just want it better. So when God says he is going to establish his kingdom on earth, we think, *Great! Bring it on! That sounds wonderful!* But then Jesus comes, he says the kingdom is here, and we say, "Where?" Things don't look like they've changed very much.

Now make no mistake about it: there will come a day when Jesus rights every wrong and removes every last shadow of evil. There will come a day when he establishes perfect peace and justice. But that will not happen until the Last Day, when Jesus returns to raise the dead and judge the living and the dead. He will take his believing saints into his new creation, and we will reign with him forever and ever in perfect peace. This new creation will be perfect because there will be no more traces of sin or the effects of sin, also known as "death." This is what Jesus will do at the Last Day, and this Last Day could be any day.

So there is an "already, but not yet" character to the kingdom of God. We have the kingdom of God now. It is in this kingdom that we receive mercy, grace, and forgiveness. But we are also looking forward to the consummation of this kingdom on the Last Day.

The place where we get hung up is that we want the kingdom of God to make a bigger difference in the way the world is now. After all, we are people of this world. It's hard for us to set our minds on the world to come, when we have never experienced it. All we know is this world, and we're in love with this world. We don't want to give it up. We just want it to be better. And that's not bad. If you have an idea for how to make the world a better place, by all means, go for it.

But the problem with expecting the kingdom of God to make a bigger difference in this world now is that we underestimate our own sinfulness. We do not realize just how depraved we are. So we fail to acknowledge that every breath we take is a gift of God's grace. And every

evil that occurs in this world is the result of sin. That doesn't mean that every painful thing that happens to you is the direct result of something you did. Some things are, but if you don't clearly see a direct link, don't go looking for one. I'll give you a couple examples. If you drink too much and get in a car accident, those things are probably related. But if a tornado comes and blows your house away, that is not because you let your dog poop on your neighbor's lawn. We believe in natural consequences, but we do not believe in Karma. Many things are simply the result of the fall into sin.

So the Scriptures teach us that everything wrong with the world is the result of sin. So to remove all the pain from the world, God would have to remove all the sinners, and that would mean the end of us. There is no heaven or utopia until every last trace of sin and death is removed. So for now, we are who we are, and the world is what it is. The kingdom of God is now, and we receive certain benefits from it—namely the forgiveness of our sins. But what it will be has not yet been seen. As long as sin is allowed to remain in the world, the kingdom of God will manifest itself in mercy and forgiveness, but not necessarily in political or cultural power.

There will come a Day when Jesus comes and eradicates every last trace of sin and death from his people. We long for that Day, and we pray for that Day. But when that Day comes, the era of repentance will be over. And that is why that Day tarries—because God “is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

So in the present form of the kingdom of God, Jesus says, “**Repent and believe in the gospel**” (1:15).

In this gospel lesson there are three responses Jesus calls for because of the presence of the kingdom of God. They are “repent,” “believe,” and “follow.”

First, repentance. This age is an age of repentance. And it is an age of repentance precisely because the kingdom of God has come. Without the kingdom of God coming in the person of Jesus Christ, there would be no repentance.

But Jesus has come. He has offered himself as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. He rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and he sent his Holy Spirit to work repentance and faith in the hearts of those who hear his Word. So we repent and believe in the Gospel. That is, the Holy Spirit works sorrow in our hearts over our sins, and he assures us that our sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake.

So Jesus instructs us to “**Believe in the gospel.**” There is good news. The kingdom of God is here. It has blessings for you. There is good news for you. Your king has come. Believe in him. Trust him. The word “gospel” means “good news.” But when we're talking about “the gospel of God,” we're not just talking about any good news. There are many things that could be considered good news. But the gospel of God is very specific. It is the best news of what God has done to solve our greatest problems. The gospel of God is the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins, and returning again to raise the dead. This is the best news, and this is what Jesus teaches us to trust in. This is the faith that will carry us through this life and into the next.

So Jesus teaches us to repent, to believe in the gospel, and then also to follow.

THE KINGDOM IS NOW (Mark 1:14-20)

In this text he specifically calls his disciples. He calls four of them away from their fishing enterprises in order to follow him, and he promises that they will become fishers of men. Now Jesus doesn't do this to everyone. He does call all of us to follow him. But he doesn't call all of us to leave our day jobs. The world needs fishermen. It also needs farmers, teachers, nurses, and all sorts of other things. If we all dropped our nets and left our boats, it would be chaos. You'll notice that Jesus didn't ask Zebedee, the father of James and John, to follow. He also let the hired workers stay. For many of us, Jesus calls us to follow him in the vocations he has already given us. And this, really, is where most of the "fishing of men" occurs. For most of us, evangelism—that is, proclaiming the gospel of God—takes place in our workplaces or in our families. The most important work of evangelism will probably take place in your homes as you teach your children the Word of God. And God might give you opportunities among your coworkers or neighbors. The best thing you can do to prepare for this is simply learn the Word of God. Become an expert in the Gospel. And then, when you see circumstances arise in the lives of those around you, you will know how to apply the grace of God to their lives. Evangelism isn't a formula. It's not a program you take door to door. For some it means preaching. For others it means applying the Gospel when your friend tells you about a cancer diagnosis or a death in the family or something their conscience is troubling them about. And the only way to be prepared is to learn the Gospel of Jesus Christ backward and forward and inside and out. There's really no substitute for learning God's Word. Jesus instructs us to follow him. And this simply means that we learn from him. The word "disciple" means "learner."

And Jesus promises his disciples that he will make them become fishers of men. Honestly, this isn't so much about you and me going out and trying to catch people with the gospel, although that is certainly a good thing. This thing about becoming fishers of men is first and foremost a fulfillment of prophecy. In Jeremiah 16 the LORD declares that the days are coming when he will send for fishers to go and gather his people from all the places he had driven them (Jer. 16:14-16). By calling fishers of men, Jesus is offering a sign to accompany his proclamation that the kingdom of God had arrived. So he calls these literal fishermen to follow him and learn from him. And then, after Jesus was crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, these disciples went out to all the places God's people had been driven, and they proclaimed that the messianic kingdom of God had arrived. And so they fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah.

The kingdom of God has arrived, and it is now here. This is good news. The kingdom of God may not be what we want it to be. The external peace and prosperity—we just don't see it yet. As long as we live with a sinful nature, that's how it will be. So the kingdom may not be what we want it to be. But it is exactly what we need it to be. It is a kingdom where the forgiveness of sins reigns supreme and the Holy Spirit works repentance and faith. So we rejoice in these gifts. We trust that our King knows how to exercise his authority. We strive to live faithfully in the vocations he has given us. And we look forward to and pray for that Day when our King will take us into his new creation to reign with him in perfect righteousness forever and ever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.