

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 28, 2024

Kingdom in Motion

Mark 1:14-20

One person, whose church had hard wooden pews, tells about the congregation's excitement when the pastor announced that the Ladies Fellowship had committed to refurbishing the pews with cushions. The he chuckled, "Now, my sermons can be thirty minutes long."

After the service, the organist gave the pastor a check to help defray the costs of the cushions—but not before adding, "Just in case you weren't joking about the thirty-minute sermons, could you please have the organ bench cushioned, too?"

In first-century Galilee, no one had the luxury of sitting on pew cushions. But we will have to say that based on what's provided to us in today's text from Mark, Jesus' first sermon was short, memorable, and direct. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (v. 15). Certainly not a thirty-minute sermon. More like a thirty-second sermon.

Jesus' concise message reveals what he and his ministry are all about—the "kingdom of God." This phrase occurs many times in the Gospels. And even though the specific phrase is rare in the Old Testament, the bedrock conviction that God rules, that God is sovereign, undergirds the way that God's people Israel relate to him and live by faith in his saving purposes. Someday, God's rule over Israel would usher in the age of justice and peace. In today's reading from Isaiah, we hear the prophet reaffirming this fundamental part of Israel's faith: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (52:8).

In one sense, God's rule always exists in heaven. But God's greater purpose is for his reign to hold sway on earth, which includes this present life in this present world. So when Jesus, after his baptism and temptation, launches his public ministry of proclamation, he begins by declaring that the reign of God "is near." There are various ways of translating that term. It could be rendered as the kingdom of God "has come near," or "is at hand." Wherever we come down on translation matters, the basic sense remains that the time has arrived for God's rule to be established on earth.

Since that time has now arrived, it brings not only salvation but judgement. Thus the call for repentance. "Repent and believe the good news." To many, the term "repent" sounds sort of antique and out of place in a culture where the language of sin and disobedience has receded. The Greek word basically means "to change one's mind." Behind it lies the Hebrew verb, "to turn around." In other words, to change your heart, will, and conduct. I like the way that Dallas Willard summarizes it: "*Repent* just means to turn back on how you are thinking about things and to reconsider."¹ Not just because it's a good idea, or because Jesus is a really persuasive preacher, but because the kingdom of God has come upon us.

God reigns, and wills that you turn away from sin and toward him, and go in the direction that his reign is going.

Dallas Willard says that as a child, he lived in an area of southern Missouri where electricity was available only in the form of lightning. But during his senior year of high school, the Rural Electrification Administration extended lines into the area, and electrical power became available to households and farms. According to Willard:

When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life—daylight and dark, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it—could then be vastly changed for the better. But we still had to believe in the electricity and its arrangements, understand them, and take the practical steps involved in relying on it.

You may think the comparison rather crude, and in some respects it is. But it will help us to understand Jesus' basic message about the kingdom of the heavens if we pause to reflect on those farmers who, in effect, heard the message: "Repent, for electricity is at hand." Repent, or turn from their kerosene lamps and lanterns, their iceboxes and cellars, their scrubboards and rug beaters, their woman-powered sewing machines and their radios with dry-cell batteries.

The power that could make their lives far better was right there near them where, by making relatively simple arrangements, they could utilize it. Strangely, a few did not accept it. They did not "enter the kingdom of electricity." Some just didn't want to change. Others could not afford it, or so they thought.²

As Willard acknowledges, this isn't a perfect illustration of Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God, and the preaching that John the Baptist did in advance of that. But it does show us that how you and I respond to the new reality that has come upon us through Christ makes all the difference. Repent and believe the good news.

Though this is the heart of Jesus' message, the story in today's text is more than just an account of one man and his mission in the world. As soon as he captures the essence of Jesus' preaching, Mark moves quickly to tell us about the recruitment of others who will participate in Jesus' ministry. Jesus calls two pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John. We don't know much about their background. They were probably prosperous fishermen, established members of local society, with some education. Mark's emphasis is less on the biography of the four and more on the way that they respond to Jesus' call. They drop both occupation and family obligations in order to follow him. Whatever the details of this disruption looked like going forward, the point is that they abruptly, and with total commitment, signed on with Jesus. They were willing to give up something in order for the good news which had been brought to them, to be brought to others.

Mark's terminology is very revealing. He says of Peter and Andrew, "At once they left their nets and followed him" (v. 18). Then he describes Jesus' summons to James and John this way: "Without delay he called them..." (v. 20). "At once." "Without delay." Though rendered differently in English, the original Greek term is the same in both instances. It's a word that essentially means "immediately." This is one of Mark's favorite words. It's used in his Gospel more often than the rest of the New Testament combined. The stress is on the urgency, the immediacy, the importance of Jesus' presence, and with it the call to become his disciple. This call is more than just a request for volunteers or an opportunity to have an impact in the world. It's a divine summons with a divine purpose. And it calls for a response now.

Mark Galli has pointed out that the “now of discipleship” isn’t something that has to be anxious, nervous, and fearful, like the demand for results that’s often heard in the business world. Instead, he says, “The now of discipleship is more of a realization, that yes, this indeed is the time to do the next thing Jesus calls us to do.”³ The “nowness” of Jesus’ call has a special intensity in today’s text, at the beginning of his ministry, when Peter, Andrew, James, and John are first summoned. But there would be many days of discipleship ahead for them and his other followers. Responding to the “now” of Jesus’ call, though it had a distinctive beginning, would also be a lifetime endeavor.

Reflecting on what life was like during 2020, the year of COVID-19, coupled with other manifestations of great social unrest, editor Todd Brewer emphasizes that it was a great opportunity for the church to rediscover some of its central beliefs about sin, repentance, and redemption. True, that time period revealed once again humanity’s lostness and brokenness. And yet, Brewer says,

[W]e are not the Church of Chicken Little but the Church of Jesus Christ. We do not run around screaming that “the sky is falling.” There is no panic in heaven. Over the chaos of this world reigns the King of kings, Jesus the Resurrected, before whom every knee will eventually bow, whether they like it or not. Every governmental authority now—presidents, kings, prime ministers, you name it—are in lame-duck administrations. Their time is ending. Put not your trust in politicians or parties or ballot boxes. Christ and his kingdom are everlasting. And into that kingdom he calls us all to find forgiveness, life, and peace.⁴

“The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” Mark gives us both the heart of our message and a glimpse of the beginnings of the community in which we live out this good news. The first four would eventually become twelve, and out of their participation in the ministry of Jesus others would come into the kingdom. Others would eventually include us.

If you’ve committed your life to following Jesus, you’re part of a kingdom that is to come. But at the same time, because Jesus himself is the presence of the kingdom, the reign of God has also come near. So in addition to being not yet, God’s rule is also now. The present is where the risen Lord shows up in your Galilee, speaking the good news and summoning you to what he wants you to be doing now.

Pastor Chris Seay tells about a Sunday when he was preaching about the kingdom that is coming. On the way out of the service, a young man grabbed him and said,

Pastor, the kingdom [of God] is already here. Every Sunday I used to be in the same neighborhood. I used to come down here to a bar called Emo’s, and I’d start every night with a drop of ecstasy on my tongue and wash it down with Bicardi 151. That’s what I did Sunday after Sunday. Now I come [to a worship service] instead, and I finish the evening with the body of Christ on my tongue, and I wash it down with the blood of Christ. This is the kingdom of God.

Seay adds, “This man is experiencing the kingdom; he lives in its presence. We may not recognize it, we often don’t see it, but it is right here, and we long to get past the mundane existence of religion and get a taste of the kingdom.”⁵

As the Lord Jesus comes our way and walks among us here today, may each of us hear his promise about what’s ahead in his kingdom’s future, but also heed his summons to what’s right in front of us, and to what his reign demands of us now. His kingdom is in motion. Repent and trust in this good news.

¹ Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2014) 15.

² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) 30-31.

³ Mark Galli, "The 'Nowness' of Faith." *Peripheral Vision*. January 19, 2024. <https://markgalli.substack.com/p/the-nowness-of-faith> (January 25, 2024).

⁴ Todd Brewer, "The Church in 2020." *Mockingbird* (October 16, 2020).

⁵ Chris Seay, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011) 22.