

Good News
Sermon for East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church
January 22, 2012
Rev. Jim Stover

Text: Mark 1: 14-20

Theme: In announcing the kingdom of God, Jesus is telling us that there is a different reality, a different way to live, filled with justice, peace, hope and love.

Ted Smith writes that, “Mark begins like an alarm clock, persistently declaring the time and demanding some response.”¹ There is no flowing introduction to Mark; no genealogies, beautiful birth narratives, or even philosophical discourses about darkness and light. A mere fourteen verses into the first chapter, John the Baptist has already come and gone; Jesus himself has been baptized and tempted in the wilderness; and now Jesus’ ministry begins.

Mark, the shortest of the four Gospels, is not interested in taking time to lay out all the details. He leaps right in with Jesus announcing the main theme of his ministry, “the kingdom of God has come near.”

Nor is Mark interested in giving a fully chronological account of Jesus’ life and ministry. It is most likely that these first four disciples whom Jesus calls in our passage today had heard Jesus preaching and teaching before he encounters them on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. So when Jesus calls to Simon, Andrew, James, and John, they are responding with amazing enthusiasm to the opportunity to be a part of the work of the kingdom of God.

But what is this “kingdom of God,” and why does it inspire such a response from these first disciples? The phrase “kingdom of God” occurs sixty-six times in the New Testament. Matthew’s version, the “kingdom of heaven,” appears another thirty-two times. Clearly, this is a central theme for the whole New Testament, and Mark’s Gospel as well. Thus, understanding the nature of the kingdom of God is one of the central questions of our faith.

Essentially, the kingdom of God is a declaration that God is in charge of our world and, as a result, we can have hope for our world, our lives, and the lives of

¹ Ted A. Smith, “Homiletical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (year B, vol. 1), ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 285.

those we know and love. And out of that hope can come acts of peace, justice, and love.

Jesus spoke into a world dominated by the kingdom of the Roman Empire, which demanded people live in certain ways as to serve that kingdom. Various groups in Palestine at the time were trying to find a way re-establish the kingdom of Israel, and they called upon people to live in a way that resisted the power of Rome and supported Israel, including strict observance of biblical laws.

But Jesus called for loyalty to a different kind of kingdom – a kingdom that was not about armies or borders or violence or taxes or sharp divisions between social classes or strict obedience to laws. But rather a kingdom where all know that they are loved and valued equally by God, where all work together for justice and peace, and all live in joy and in hope. And, for Jesus, this was not just some “pie in the sky” ideal, but a declaration that this was an in-breaking reality based upon the true sovereignty and power of God.

And that question of sovereignty is indeed the central question. If, in the time of Jesus, you believed that Rome was in charge and that would never change, you kept your head down, paid the oppressive taxes, and lived in fear of Roman soldiers. You never questioned, you never challenged, you just tried to keep going. But if you believed God was in charge, if you believed Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, you knew you could live differently. You knew you could love your neighbor as yourself, you could help those in need, you could resist injustice, experience God’s love, and live in hope.

This is the central theme of our message today: Because God is ultimately in charge, we, too, can live differently. If we believe that the God who loves each one of us as precious children is ultimately in charge of our world, then we, too, can break out of the cycles of greed, selfishness, self-absorption, violence, hatred, division, injustice, doubt, shame, and fear that seem to so powerfully pervade our world today. Instead we can have hope for our world, our lives, and the lives of those near and dear to us, and we can enact the peace, justice and love of the kingdom of God.

This is the “good news” that those first disciples responded to along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. This is why they left their fishing nets, their livelihoods, their homes, their families behind – because they caught a glimpse of

a world filled with God's justice, God's peace, and God's love. And this is the same good news that our passage calls us to respond to today.

But what does responding to the call of the kingdom of God really mean for us today? Dallas Willard in his book *The Divine Conspiracy* gives us a great illustration:

“As a child I lived in an area of southern Missouri where electricity was available only in the form of lightning. We had more of that than we could use. But in my senior year of high school, the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) extended its lines into the area where we lived, and electrical power became available to households and farms.

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, hot and cold, 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 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 heaven 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 scrub-boards 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.”²

And so that power is available to us as well. We have the opportunity every day to “plug in” to the power of the kingdom of God that can and does continue to transform our lives and our world. We can plug in through prayer and through studying Scripture, and we can plug in by stepping out in faith into acts of peace, justice, and love.

And we need to keep plugging in every day to find the hope and the love that keeps us going. For there are things in this world that would drive us to despair, that would try to tell us to give up because this is all there is. Sometimes

² Dallas Willard, “The Electric Kingdom” in *1001 Illustrations that Connect*, ed. Craig Brian Larson and Phyllis Ten Elshof (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 73-74.

that message comes with the suffering and death of a close friend or family member. And sometimes that message of despair comes from larger events in our world.

To give just one example, even during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, some within our own Presbyterian denomination are laying the groundwork for forming a separate denomination. But because of the kingdom of God, we still have hope for Christian unity. As Ruthanna Hooke writes:

“First and foremost, Christian unity... is fundamentally God's gift to us, a miracle that God will perform beyond what we can do by our own efforts... It is essential, in all the work that we do for Christian unity, that we recall that this is really God's work and mission, in which we are participating, rather than being our own independent work. Our unity is grounded in God and sustained by God, rather than being grounded and sustained by ourselves. Among other things, remembering this crucial fact reminds us not to lose hope in work for Christian unity, even amidst conflicts and setbacks, since it is God who is bringing about this unity, and will accomplish it in God's time. Hence our first and most important task in the work for Christian unity is to pray for that unity – to ask God to bring about this state, which we cannot by ourselves achieve.”

Indeed we must pray. We must pray for Christian unity, pray for the struggles and sufferings of our friends and neighbors, pray in the face of injustice throughout the world, pray that God will keep alive in us the vision, the dream, the ultimate reality that God is in charge.

This was the call to which those first disciples responded with such amazing enthusiasm, and the call that is issued to us. The call to believe the good news that God is ultimately in charge of our world; the God who loves us ultimately has our lives and the lives of all we know and love in God's own hands; and as a result, we, too, can live so as to enact the peace, justice and love of the kingdom of God.

I'd like to end today with a quote today from one of my favorite authors, Brian McLaren, which I think encapsulates so well our message today: Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God tells us "that good will prevail by peace, love, truth, faithfulness, and courageous endurance of suffering... In this view, no good deed will be forgotten or wasted, so we should start doing the next good thing now, faithfully continue, and never give up until the dream comes true. Even if doing so will cost us our life, we must press on, because death is not the end, and even death itself cannot stop the advance of the peace and love of God."³

In Jesus' name. Amen.

³ Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 146.