

Mark 1:14-20 (New International Version)

The Calling of the First Disciples

14After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.
15"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"
16As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.
17"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."
18At once they left their nets and followed him.
19When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets.
20Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

There are no punctuation marks in the Koine Greek, the language of the New Testament. The reason as far as I can figure out is Koine Greek has different verb forms to indicate when a period, comma, question or an exclamation is appropriate. When Koine Greek is translated into English, the translator must decide which punctuation mark is appropriate, and it is often based on the mood of the verb. Sometimes that is easy to decide, but at times it is not. When the Bible states that it is verbally inspired we recognize that it is talking about the original Greek, not the English translation. Furthermore, frequently the writer, as in the case of our text, writes a direct quote of Jesus, and we realize that when a person speaks he doesn't use punctuation marks. Some of you of my vintage may remember Victor Borge, the Danish comedian who humorously proposed a phonetic punctuation system for English so that as a person spoke he could express the punctuation that his words were trying to express. He made a lot of money doing it, even though everyone knows that we don't need punctuation marks when we speak since by the inflection of our voice we usually can express our emotion.

What is intriguing to me in these verses of Mark's Gospel only one statement has an exclamation mark: "Repent and believe the Gospel!" But as we read this section which quotes Jesus, I think most of us would say that there is an urgency and command implied in most of the sentences. Mark quotes Jesus as saying, "The time has come. The time is near. "Repent and believe the Gospel!" ... "Come follow me." "I will make you fishers of men." Wouldn't you say that all of those sentences are urgent or are a command? Andrew and Simon Peter did. They left their fishing nets and followed Jesus. So did James and John, who not only left their fishing boat, but their father Zebedee and the hired workers and followed Jesus. Furthermore, if those words were urgent 2000 years ago, they are even more so today.

This weekend we are observing what we might call our **Outreach Festival** in which we emphasize the same reality that Jesus was seeking to impress on his first disciples. I hope that all of us may sense the same urgency that Jesus sought to impress on his first followers when he says to us

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NEAR!

Let's examine those words first by observing the statement "**The kingdom of God.**" and secondly that "**The Time Is Near.**"

The phrase "Kingdom of God" is one that dominates the ministry of our Lord Jesus. He uses it many times and in many circumstances. Every time he does, it should give us pause. What does it mean? Mark, the writer who brings us this account of Jesus' ministry, uses the phrase in connection with Jesus' love for little children. He says, "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these," and says that unless "*we receive the kingdom of God like a little child we shall never enter it.*" While some people theorize that Jesus is emphasizing that little children are innocent and that we, too, must be innocent, the fact is that Jesus never says that little children are innocent. They may tend to be more innocent than we are, but the innocence of little children is a myth. They aren't so by nature, and neither are any of us adults! Someone has rightly observed that if you want to see how all wars begin, give one toy to two three year olds.

What Jesus does emphasize is that we are to receive the kingdom of God just as a little child receives everything it has from its caregivers. We must receive the kingdom of God from our gracious and merciful God, who gives the Kingdom to us as a gift. It is not earned. It is not deserved. The *kingdom of God* comes to us as a gift, and if anyone tries to get it any other way, it will never be his or hers! "Unless you receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, you will never enter it"

The other passage that I believe clarifies what the *kingdom of God* is can be seen in a statement by the Apostle Paul, who in Romans 14: 17 says this: "The Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking (in other words it is not received on the basis of what we do or don't eat or drink). Rather, it is a matter of "**righteousness, peace and joy in connection with the Holy Spirit.**" To understand more fully what is meant by "the kingdom of

God" we must understand these three terms, *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost*, which is essential to the Kingdom.

Righteousness is a so-called "forensic" term, that is, a term that comes from the courtroom. It pictures the grim reality that we are all answerable to a Judge. This judge is not a human judge, who can be fooled or bribed, or who may be lenient or inconsistent in enforcing the law, or ignorant about the law. This Judge is God who gave the law and from whom nothing is hidden. He demands that *we* keep that law perfectly. He is a Judge who is perfect and who demands perfection of all who comes before Him. Everyone is to come before Him and must be righteous, that is, not guilty: innocent under God's law. In order to be part of this Kingdom of God a person must be holy, perfect, without sin. The kingdom of God is righteousness, that is, it's open to people who are in God's eyes, righteous, perfect, pure and holy. Yes, you're right. We all by nature fall short of that. Sad, but true. You may look just fine to your fellow citizens of Lake Mills, but that's not how you look to God. "All have sinned," says God's Word. (Romans 3:23.)

Thankfully, there is another fact that the Bible tells us about God. He is a judge who loves us perfectly. The Bible declares, "God is love." (1 John 4:8.) Jesus says that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son so that all who believe in him would not perish but have eternal life. The one way – the only way - He could make us perfect, or righteous, was to give His one and only Son. The one way he could reconcile his perfect justice with His perfect love was to send us His Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem them who are under the demands of the law. When Jesus died on the Cross of Calvary, He who was the holy God and the holy Man became sin for us so that we could, by his death for our sins, become the righteousness that God demands. All who believe in this Savior are declared righteous not because of their deeds or character, but because of the sacrifice of Jesus, which was declared valid by Christ's resurrection from the dead. We are, according to the God-inspired testimony of St. Paul, justified by faith, a faith given to us by the Holy Spirit. So when St. Paul says the Kingdom of God is Righteousness, he adds that this righteousness is in connection with the Holy Spirit. It is ours by God-given faith.

Note also that the kingdom of God is *peace*. Again, it is St. Paul who says, "Since we have been justified, declared righteous, through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." One of the dominant results of that faith which brings us *righteousness* is peace, peace with God. In the Bible we are confronted with the two opposing positions related to finding peace with God. Our human reason says we sinners must do something in order to be saved. The Word of God says Christ, the promised Savior, saved us and we have that righteousness by faith in Him alone. It is not hard to see how faith in Christ alone can give us peace, while looking to our deeds, words or thoughts, should fill us with uncertainty and despair. How can we ever have peace? Jesus declares, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness." The Bible points us to Jesus and says, "He did it for you." Jesus is our Righteousness, we are his sin. He became what he was not so that we could become what we were not." In him true righteousness is found. Our deeds can and should be our way of thanking God for what he has done for us through His Son, our Savior. Our deeds, however, can never earn or merit our salvation. When we use them that way, we lose peace with God. Think of Paul's words: "Since we have been justified (that means, 'declared righteous') through faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom. 5:1)

Finally, St. Paul teaches us that the Kingdom of God is *joy* in the Holy Spirit. When I hear the word, "joy" I am reminded of the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice!" Because Jesus brings us righteousness and gives us peace in knowing that we have full and free salvation through him, we can find joy in the Lord no matter what the circumstances in our lives. In fact, the Lord commands us to "rejoice in Him, and rejoice always". We are to heed that command always for our own comfort and assurance. Look at your life the same way that the Hebrew reads his Bible. He starts at the end of life and goes forward to where we are now. We know how our life will end – in heaven's glory, the glory of God's Kingdom in eternity. Therefore, what happens between now and then we know will be used by for our good as God brings us to our home in heaven with him." Jesus said to his disciples that their real reason for joy is this: "Your names are written in heaven."

The Kingdom of God promises us righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Everything we need for time and for eternity is given to us all, freely and fully. It's not by our merits or deeds, but through our Lord Jesus Christ. "By grace you are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Note the other point that our Savior makes in this text: "***The Kingdom of God is near.***" He adds, "Repent and believe the Gospel." That is said with a present imperative. It's a command to do it NOW. A look at our Savior's ministry shows us that "now" was a dominant word in his life. His very first words, his first sermon, so to speak, begins with the words, "Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." God's people in Judah tended to live in the past, much in the way we often do, yearning for the good old days. They remembered the days of David and Solomon. We remember the days of our youth or health. Or they lived in the future, hoping to find a way to throw off the rule of the hated Romans. We live in the future, hoping that everything will get better for us financially or health-wise, in the future. In fact, the Jews rejected Jesus because he made it clear to them that he never would oppose the Roman rulers. Many people today reject Jesus because they expect him to make us healthier or more prosperous, or "thinner or more clever at dinner." They were so occupied with the past and with the future that they would not listen to the Savior who stood in their midst to fulfill the promises that God had given to his people. In refusing to live in the present, they neglected to recognize the Messiah when he came.

We need to learn the lesson that Jesus taught from the very beginning of his ministry. The Kingdom of God is near. Now is the day of salvation. Now is the time to hear and believe the good news. Now is the time to turn away from anything that would cause us to lose sight of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. Now is the time to confess our sins and to turn in faith to our Savior. Before we reach out to others with the Gospel we must first receive in believing hearts the assurances of our own salvation in Christ. How fitting it is that we celebrate this Outreach Day by receiving our Lord and Savior's Supper of Holy Communion as he comes to each of us saying, "Here is my body and my blood, given and shed for you for the remission of your sins." The time is near when the Lord will come again either to take you to heaven or to call this world to an end when all people will stand before their Judge.

I was so struck Wednesday morning when we pastors met for our usual brief weekly meeting. I, of course didn't know Laurie White well at all. I met her, but Pastor Rath and McKenney did know her well and they were obviously shocked by her untimely death. It wasn't our time to see her leave her young family, but it was the Lord's time. It was a lesson to all of us. Live now! Live each day as your last. Now is the time to receive Christ's righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. We are confident that Laurie White is in God's Kingdom of glory. Let each of us receive the Kingdom's righteousness, peace and joy now so that each of us may say, "Lord Jesus, if it is you will to come quickly, let your will be done."

There is an urgency, however, not only for ourselves but also for others who are not here to learn from you that the Kingdom of God is near. Christ died for all so that they too may know that Jesus is their Savior and so to believe and be saved. Their end is also near and how are they to believe if we who have the Light of the Gospel do not bring that light to them? You have the Light of Christ in your life, therefore you have a light to shine and you have others to shine the light with you. You also know that this Gospel is a power in your life, and therefore you know that it can be a power in the lives of others. Just as Jesus proclaimed to others the Gospel, so we, members of his family, have the same privilege to proclaim it to others. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." It was in the same context that he said, "A city on a hill cannot be hid." St. Paul is such a city on a hill, and if all of us let our Light in Christ shine, the Gospel of Christ will shine clearly to our community.

The Christian believer must have a restless spirit while enjoying rest supreme. We have learned the Way to eternal life in Christ, for he is the way, the truth and the life. We know that there are many others who haven't learned the truth and we must remain restless until they too have the opportunity to hear the good news and turn in faith to their only Savior. **The kingdom of God is near.** Now is the time to reach out in every way, by prayer, by word, by our deeds of love and at every opportunity.