

"The Time is Fulfilled"

Early next year I plan to start a series on the Gospel of Mark, and so our sermon today will be a sort of introduction to that series. But I thought this passage would be a fitting one for today for two reasons. First, I think this is a very fitting passage for Christmas. The gospel of Mark doesn't have an account of Jesus' birth, but instead this opening chapter in Mark begins with an announcement of Jesus and his ministry. When we think about the birth of Jesus, we cannot help but think about it in light of why he came. Jesus, the Son of God, entered into this world to engage in a ministry. And it is the start of that ministry that is announced and summarized here in the first chapter of Mark. And so we will look at how this chapter describes the start of Jesus' ministry, and how it summarizes why he came into this world.

And the second reason why this passage is a fitting one for today, is that today I myself start ministry here among you. And so as I begin to take up the teaching ministry here at Trinity, I think it is proper to consider what that teaching ministry is founded upon. It is founded upon the teaching ministry of Jesus which he began approximately 2000 years ago. Jesus came into this world to announce that the time had been fulfilled, that the kingdom of God was at hand; and that in turn we must repent and believe in the gospel. My ministry among you, and in fact the very ministry which you all are a part of, is founded upon the kingdom ministry of Jesus. And so as we have a sort of new start to this ministry here in Novato, we are reminded of the start of Jesus' ministry, the very reason why he came into this world. And so I think this is a very fitting passage to consider both two days before Christmas, and today as I begin to take up the regular preaching and teaching ministry here at Trinity.

Looking then at this passage, we'll divide it up simply into two sections, first, verses 1-13, and then verses 14-15. First in verses 1-13, we'll look at the coming of the king, as announced by the ministry of John the Baptist. Second in verses 14-15, we'll look at the coming of the kingdom, announced by the king himself at the start of his ministry. So again, we'll look first at the coming of the king, announced by John the Baptist, and second at the coming of the kingdom, announced by Jesus at the start of his ministry.

Beginning then with the coming of the king in verses 1-13. Kings often have heralds that go before them, announcing their coming, and we see that is the case with Jesus in Mark chapter 1. In these opening verses, we see John the Baptist heralding the coming of the king. John the Baptist, fulfilling the role described by the prophets Isaiah and Malachi, announces that he is preparing the way for the Messiah. The ministry of John the Baptist is in preparation for the ministry of Jesus.

John's explanation of his ministry here with his quote from Isaiah would have been stimulating to his audience. He is quoting Isaiah chapter 40 which is a passage of restoration. It is a prophecy of God leading the Jews back from their captivity, restoring them back in the Promised Land. By John the Baptist saying that his ministry is in preparation for this divine restoration, he is declaring that God's people had not yet tasted of this restoration promised in Scripture! This is striking because the Jews had already been allowed to return from their Babylonian captivity back into the Promised Land. Many might have thought this prophecy from Isaiah 40 had already been fulfilled. Yet, the Jews were still under foreign

occupation, at this time, under the hand of the Romans. Clearly the Jews had not received a full geopolitical restoration. Certainly the Jews at the time had probably wondered about prophecies like Isaiah that promised restoration of the Israelite kingdom. They had seemed to be fulfilled in part, but clearly missing the full grandeur promised in Scripture. And so when John announces that his ministry was the forerunner to the kingdom restoration, surely it would have sparked people's attention. They had been waiting for the coming king who would usher in the promised kingdom. And yet, it seems that many of the Jews were looking for the wrong kind of restoration, for the wrong kind of king and for the wrong kind of kingdom.

But John the Baptist was not the coming king. Rather, his ministry was looking forward to the coming king... to Jesus. And yet his ministry was clearly a foretaste of that ministry which Jesus would bring. John's ministry shared much in common with Jesus' ministry. John had a ministry of repentance, based on the promise of the coming Messiah. John proclaimed the good news of the forgiveness of sins, clearly a hallmark of the gospel. John had a ministry of water baptism, which Jesus himself received in this chapter. And this ministry was clearly bearing fruit, with people from all over the surrounding regions going out to the desert to hear John, to confess their sins, and to be baptized!

And yet John the Baptist, though standing so close to Jesus, pointing forward to him, was in many ways worlds apart. John the Baptist in a sense belonged to a different era. He was the culmination of all the Old Testament prophets. Like all God's leaders before him in the Old Testament, he was looking forward. He was looking forward to that day when there would be a transition from the Old to the New... Where we as God's people would stop putting our faith in the promise of a coming Messiah and start putting our faith in the Messiah who has already come!

Don't get me wrong - John the Baptist was standing at a pivotal point in history. In a sense he belongs to both eras, both to the Old Testament and the New Testament. That is why his ministry had so much in common with Jesus' ministry. But with the coming of Jesus, something new had come. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. And we see this evident in our passage. We've mentioned a few of the similarities between John's ministry and Jesus' ministry, but look at all the *differences* between their ministries:

One difference: look at his baptism, for example. In verse 8, John the Baptist says that he baptizes only with water, but that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. In baptism, John only performed the outward sign, but John was powerless to make his baptism seal that which it signified. The power of baptism would come with Jesus who would baptize people ultimately with the Holy Spirit.

A second difference: look at the location of John's ministry compared to Jesus'. The text makes a point to contrast this. John ministered in the wilderness. People went out to him. Jesus, on the other hand, after overcoming temptation in the wilderness, left the wilderness, and according to verse 14, came to where the people were in Galilee. John ministered in the wilderness where the people had to come to him; Jesus went to the people, ministering among them where they were.

A third difference: look at how John lived. John lived a sort of ascetic lifestyle, living in the wilderness, eating locust and honey, wearing clothes made of camel hair. His lifestyle reflected his message of repentance and mourning of sin. Yet, Jesus came "eating and drinking" (Mt 11:19; Mark 2:18-20). Jesus came as a rejoicing bridegroom who bore the good news of the coming of the kingdom.

A fourth difference: look at how John describes his status compared to Jesus. In verse 7, John says that Jesus is mightier than him, and that he is not even worthy enough to untie his sandals. This comment by John puts him in the lowest possible position in comparison to Jesus. According to ancient Jewish tradition, someone's disciples would do just about anything for their teachers, except untie their sandals; that was a task reserved only for slaves. Yet, here John says he's not even worthy enough to be Jesus' slave! John and his ministry was ultimately inferior to Jesus and his ministry.

Let me clarify my point here: There were aspects of John the Baptist's ministry that were both similar and different from Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist served to transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament. He represented the climax of the Old Testament saints who were awaiting the coming king. And John had the privilege to witness this coming king.

More than that, John even baptized this king in verses 9-11. This marked a pivotal transition. At Jesus baptism, more than just John the Baptist was identifying Jesus as the Messiah. At Jesus' baptism, all three persons of the Trinity are present at this pivotal point at history. Here at the Jordan River, we see the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove, and God the Father himself identifies Jesus as his son! John's baptism of Jesus marked the transition from John's ministry to Jesus' ministry. All the baptisms that John had done came to a climax by baptizing the one who would truly baptize God's people.

From this point on, the focus in Mark is removed from John the Baptist and placed on Jesus. According to verse 12, the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness for 40 days. Here in the wilderness, just prior to the start of Jesus' teaching ministry, he does that which the rest of humanity had failed to do. With echoes back to the Garden of Eden and even the 40 year wilderness wandering of God's people, Jesus overcomes the temptations of the devil. He demonstrates that he is righteous and without sin. This short event of Jesus' wilderness temptation stands at the start of Jesus ministry just as the cross and resurrection stands at the end of Jesus ministry. Don't miss the significance to both of these two book ends to Jesus' ministry. Here Jesus shows himself to be the one who would keep God's laws. He shows himself to be the second Adam. He shows himself to be the conquering king. And so by the time we get to verse 14 in Mark chapter 1, we've seen quite a number of things that all point to one fact: the King has come.

And so now we'll look at the second section of this passage, verses 14-15, looking at the coming of the kingdom. In these two short verses we see Jesus announcing the coming of the kingdom at the start of his ministry. Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." These are just a few short words, but how profound they are. They summarize the teaching ministry of Jesus, and they tell us how to respond. They even tell us the significance of Christmas.

Think of the first phrase, "the time is fulfilled". At the start of Jesus' ministry, he announces a milestone in redemptive history. This is a great turning point in history. Notice that he doesn't say that *Scripture* is fulfilled. That would have surely been true, but here Jesus emphasizes that the *time* is fulfilled. This is the pivotal point in history that God's people had been waiting for! People had been waiting for the King and kingdom to come. Now the time had arrived; the moment everyone had been waiting for! This is what we celebrate at Christmas: The completion of an era and the start of something new. That which all the prophets looked forward to, even John the Baptist, had arrived. Jesus, the Son of God, and King of kings, had come into the world. And as Jesus announces the

fulfillment of the times, he begins his ministry with the words that all the saints were hoping to hear: "The kingdom of God is at hand".

"The kingdom of God is at hand" - We can't miss the importance in this statement. Jesus' teaching on the kingdom really is the bulk of his teaching during his earthly ministry. We often think of Jesus teaching with regards to the gospel, the good news of salvation. This is true. We even call Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the four "Gospels". Obviously, Jesus taught about the gospel. But listen to a few statistics I ran: The word "gospel" in both the noun and verb forms, only appears approximately 23 times in the four Gospels. The word kingdom, however, appears approximately 118 times. Clearly Jesus taught a lot about the kingdom. That was the bulk of his teaching ministry. Now of course Jesus' teaching of the gospel is not at odds with his teaching on the kingdom; these two concepts are very closely related, and as we study through Mark we'll definitely see that. But we must recognize that Jesus teaching ministry was largely focused on describing this coming kingdom which he says here is "at hand".

I think Jesus focused his teaching on the kingdom, in part, because many of God's people at that time misunderstood what God's promised kingdom was all about. Many were looking for a geo-political kingdom. They were looking for God to restore a national Israel around the former borders of the earthly Promised Land. It's understandable why so many people thought this. The prophets typically had described this coming kingdom using the language of the Old Testament. They used the language of the Old Testament types and shadows to point to a greater kingdom that was coming. And so people were inclined to think about the coming kingdom, only from the perspective of the old earthly kingdom of Israel. They looked back to the glory in the days of King David, and said, "if only our kingdom could be restored to its former glory". But God had in store something greater. The kingdom God was promising through his prophets would be far greater than the previous kingdom in the Old Testament. Though the prophets spoke about restoration of the kingdom, using language from the Old Testament kingdom, they also described this kingdom as something that would be better than the old kingdom; for example: a kingdom where people would no longer sin, where there would be everlasting peace, universal dominion, and under a covenant which they could not break! (i.e. Is 65:25, Jer 31:32-34, Dan 9:26).

And so through the prophets, God used the language of the Old Testament kingdom of Israel to describe the coming kingdom, but he hinted at this kingdom being *more* than just an earthly kingdom. Some in the Old Testament understood this, at least in part. Just read Hebrews 11 for proof of that (which we did in a bible study a few months back).

And so as we begin our series through Mark in the new year, we'll be learning a lot about this kingdom that Jesus announced here. We'll see how Jesus challenged the notion that God had merely desired to restore ethnic Israel in a geo-political earthly kingdom. Instead God had a much better restoration in store. But for now, let me begin to describe this kingdom for you:

There are different ways we can consider the kingdom of God. In one sense, we can think of the kingdom of God as the general authority God has over all as the creator of the universe. But in the gospels, the sense is usually more specific than that. It usually has to do with Jesus' relationship as King to his chosen saints who he came to redeem and bring into a glorious eternal inheritance. And so when we think about the kingdom in this more specific sense, we see three aspects of the kingdom, which I could describe as: internal, external, and eternal.

Internally, we see the kingdom of God manifesting itself already in the saints. Luke 17:20-21 describes that when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; 21 "nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." And so in one aspect, the kingdom of God is an internal reality as God works his salvation inside us, making us people who love God and his laws.

Externally, we see the kingdom of God manifesting itself through the visible church. The church is made up of saints who have tasted of the kingdom inwardly by the Spirit. And per the Great Commission, the church is to enlist more disciples, teaching them everything that Jesus taught, which of course includes his teaching on the kingdom. As we bring people into the church visibly, invisibly these converts are spiritually becoming citizens of God's heavenly kingdom. Now it's important to note that the church itself is not identical with the kingdom, but rather it's where the kingdom, to the extent that it has already arrived, is manifested here on earth. We see Scripture distinguish between the church and the kingdom just before Jesus left earth and ascended into heaven. In Acts 1:6, the disciples ask Jesus, saying, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. 8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And so here Jesus distinguishes between the church and the kingdom. The church has a kingdom task to witness to Jesus and the coming kingdom to the ends of the earth. It is manifesting the kingdom externally on earth, but the church itself is not identical with the kingdom. The final realization of the kingdom is yet to come. And so in one aspect, the kingdom of God is a shown forth externally through the visible church.

But the ultimate aspect of the kingdom of God is the eternal sense. It is a heavenly eternal reality that is already breaking forth into this world through the lives of believers in Christ's church. The kingdom is already being realized in part through Christ's Word and Spirit. And yet, though the kingdom is already beginning to be realized through our relationship with Christ, the King of this kingdom, we recognize that there awaits a final consummation of this kingdom. The kingdom in its fullest has not yet fully arrived. When it does arrive, that is when all God's enemies will be fully vanquished. That is when sin will be done away with once and for all. That is when God will dwell with his people for all eternity, not just by the Spirit, but dwelling with his people in the New Jerusalem, in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

And so as you can see, the concept of the kingdom of God is complex and wonderful. There are ways in which it is already being realized here and now in believers and in the church. And yet there are ways in which it has not yet been realized. When we talk about the "already" and "not yet," this is what we talking about. We are saying that the kingdom has already come, but has not yet come. It is semi-realized. It has been inaugurated with the first coming of Christ, and will be consummated with Christ's second coming when he returns. Christ, in a real sense, has already secured the kingdom, because of his life, death, and resurrection, where he conquered Satan and redeemed his people. Now we look forward to when he will bring us into the final realization of this heavenly inheritance; to the heavenly kingdom, which he has in store for us.

This is what Jesus means by saying in verse 15 that the kingdom is at hand. You can find various translations of this verse, saying that the kingdom is at hand, or that it is near. The word in Greek is a verb that has the idea of approaching.

And so it is saying that the kingdom has approached; it has come near. Jesus is saying that the time for the kingdom has come. When he announced this, Jesus was saying that we have reached the "threshold" of eternity; that the great future has been reached" (Ridderbos, 48ff). All the prerequisites in redemptive history have been met for the start of the kingdom to come. The time has been fulfilled for the kingdom to come. Now with the coming of the king, the kingdom has begun to come as well!

And so when Jesus announces that the time is fulfilled, and that kingdom of God is at hand, you can understand then why he finishes by saying, "Repent, and believe in the gospel." If anyone is going to be a part of this kingdom, it will only be through the gospel. The good news of the coming kingdom is especially good when hear Christ's message of forgiveness. The gospel tells us that we can have forgiveness of our sins because Christ has died on the cross in the place of sinners. The gospel tells us that we can be reconciled to God, because Christ has kept the law on our behalf. This salvation; this forgiveness of sins; this reconciliation to God; this participation in the kingdom, is held out to all who will turn from their sins and come to Christ for forgiveness. This is why Jesus says, repent and believe in the gospel.

And this is why Jesus came into this world some 2000 years ago. On Christmas we remember the birth of our Lord, and we therefore remember why he came. He came as king to proclaim the coming of the kingdom, and to secure that kingdom for his chosen people. That was his ministry, and that is now our ministry. That is the ministry I start among you all today, and it is the ministry which you all, as members of this church, are a part of. Our ministry is a kingdom ministry, because Christ's ministry was a kingdom ministry. Our ministry is founded upon Christ's ministry, because ultimately it is Christ who is working through us his church. Ultimately we are not doing some new ministry like Christ's ministry, but Christ, who is ascended up in heaven, continues his kingdom ministry through us his saints here on earth.

Think about how amazing that is. If John the Baptist said that he was not even worthy to untie Christ's sandals, how much more humbled must we be! We have been given the responsibility to be Christ unto the world. We have been called to minister in Christ's name, spreading forth his teaching of the coming kingdom, and proclaiming the gospel to all the nations. How unworthy we are, and yet our confidence is in Christ, because he is working this in us, through his Word and Spirit.

And so may we begin this ministry together even today, from this very moment. This moment now, I would like to call forth this very response that Jesus has demanded in Mark 1:15: Repent and believe in the gospel. If you are sitting there in the pews, and have never really repented and believe in the gospel, I call you to do so today. Come into the kingdom of God. Take hold of the salvation that comes with Jesus alone. Repent and believe.

And let me clarify what that means. Don't take these simple words in verse 15 too lightly. We often gloss over these words. Repent and believe, it says. Repentance is more than confession. Belief is more than knowledge. In light of the gospel, in light of the coming of the kingdom, Christ calls you to repent; to turn from your sins. You can translate this word in Greek as "be converted". You are called to begin to change your ways in the light of the gospel. And when Jesus says to believe, he is not talking merely about some knowledge you are to acquire. Belief includes knowledge, but it also includes assent and trust. You are being called to conviction. Be convinced of the gospel, trust that it is your only hope, and your only way to be saved from your sins and to enter into the kingdom of

heaven. Repent, and trust in Christ for your salvation! And this response, of course, belongs not only to our initial point of conversion, but it is part of our lifelong response as Christians. Saints, we must all live a life of faith and repentance in light of the coming of the kingdom.

Saints of God, what a great privilege we have to go forth in this kingdom ministry together. May Christ be with us by his Word and Spirit. Amen.

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