

Mark 1:14-20

Epiphany 3B + January 22, 2012
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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An Entirely Different Kingdom

The Word of the Lord from Mark 1:14-15: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Time for a New Kingdom

History is full of final straws. A king rules and people grumble. The king keeps ruling and the people keep grumbling. The tension increases until the situation is ripe for rebellion and bloodshed, as the people measure their strength and contemplate revolution. The king is busy calculating too, to make sure that he has the loyal forces necessary to continue the course. Still, he doesn't want to give the people an excuse: he doesn't want to provoke them with an act of legislation or provide them with a martyr. Things like oppressive tax hikes or the execution of an opponent have a way of becoming the last straws and rallying points that lead to violence and bloodshed. Things can go bad quickly from there, and that's when the king is even more vigilant than usual.

In our Gospel lesson, Herod has just rolled the dice and put John the Baptist in prison. He's not happy about it—he's afraid of John. But he just can't allow John the Baptist to go running around preaching that Herod's new marriage is a sinful one, what with his adulterous union to his brother's wife and all. What John is saying is all true, mind you—and he preaches it not to foment rebellion but to call Herod to repentance, but a king just can't have critics like that speaking inconvenient truths, so he's put the popular prophet behind bars. How will the people react? This is a tense moment for Herod, and you can bet he's got his spies working overtime to see if the people will rise up or just accept the arrest of John.

What happens next sounds like it could be a big problem. A man arrives in Galilee and starts proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." It's not just any man, either, but the man Jesus from Nazareth. This isn't just a follower or colleague of John the Baptist; no, John declared that it was his calling to prepare the way for Jesus—that Jesus was the One with divine power and authority. So now that John is behind bars and done talking, this Jesus shows up and He starts talking; and if Herod was afraid of John, he's probably a little nervous about Jesus...

...Especially when Jesus starts saying things like, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." It's time for a new kingdom, says Jesus, and a different kingdom means a different king. It sounds like the rallying cry for a revolution, as if Jesus' next sermon is going to be, "Let's get rid of King Herod and so that God might rule over us instead." And if the multitudes that loved John the Baptist decide to rally behind this Jesus, then Herod could have a serious problem on his hands.

You can bet that all of Galilee, both friend and foe, are hanging on to Jesus' words. If it is time for this kingdom of God to be at hand, then how will it come about?

So Jesus tells them. He says, "Repent and believe in the gospel."

Huh. It's not your usual revolutionary speech. It's not "take up your arms, draw your swords and prepare for battle." It's repent and believe in the Gospel. Repent—by the grace of God, turn from your sin. Believe in the Gospel—believe in the Good News that the long-promised King has come to save you from your sin. Every kingdom has enemies, and this new kingdom is no different. But the enemies of this

kingdom that Jesus proclaims are not Herod or Pilate or Caesar: the enemies of this kingdom are sin and death and devil. Sin and death and devil are not going to be defeated with swords and rebellion against human rulers: they're going to be defeated by the shedding of the Savior's blood on a cross. In this new kingdom, Herod is not the enemy nor the competition: Herod is a ruler of an entirely different kingdom, and this Savior comes to redeem him. "Repent and believe in the Gospel?" This should allay a lot of Herod's fears.

Now, a king is nothing without followers; and having proclaimed that this new kingdom has come, Jesus begins to recruit. He doesn't go after Roman soldiers, temple guards or other trained killers. He goes for fishermen. He picks up Simon and Andrew, James and John. He'll gather a few more, like a tax-collector, along the way, but His "army" consists of 12 men who generally get little respect and possess no fighting skills. Herod has nothing to fear from Simon and Andrew, James and John...unless his own troops are composed of mackerel or tuna. If this is a kingdom about believing the Gospel, it doesn't need an army. It needs mouths—mouths to speak the Gospel.

There's one more consideration: a king is nothing without a kingdom, and that means territory. Herod had better be on the lookout, because groups have been known to carve out a bit of land and set up their own little community; or perhaps this Jesus still plans to take over Galilee by non-violent means. But no, this is a different sort of kingdom: it doesn't have a set location. This kingdom moves around: wherever the King is, that's where the kingdom is. A kingdom of repentance and faith doesn't require land because it's not about crops, water, steel or other material things. Why, someone can conceivably be a penitent who believes in the Gospel, and still serve faithfully in the palace of King Herod.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." These are Jesus' first words, His first sermon, in the Gospel of Mark: they set the stage—they define the King and the kingdom. Contrary to the fears of Herod and the hopes of Herod's enemies, this new kingdom is not about conquering Herod and Caesar. It's about conquering sin, death and devil for all people, Herod and Caesar included. It's not about gathering soldiers, wealth, power or land: it's about forgiving sins and giving eternal salvation.

Throughout the Gospels, you see the King Jesus going about the establishment of His kingdom. He does not fight, but He speaks. He works wonders and heals: but He doesn't say, "Now you owe Me a favor that I'll call in later," but "Follow Me, because I have more to give." He feeds five thousand miraculously; but He doesn't use food as leverage to field an army. In fact, when they try to make Him a king like all the other kings of earth, He refuses and goes on His way. Significantly, a Roman centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant: Jesus does so, and He doesn't require the centurion to switch alliances and renounce Caesar. Instead, Jesus would have the centurion be a Roman soldier and a penitent Christian at the same time.

This is a completely different King and a completely different kingdom. He is no threat to Herod or Caesar: on the contrary, He tells people to pay their taxes to Herod and Caesar. In fact, the more people follow Jesus, the better citizens they will be for Herod and Caesar both: for they will be penitent Christians who submit to human authorities and acknowledge that they are placed there by God.

It's so tragically ironic, then, that Jesus is crucified for being this different king. His crown on earth is made of thorns, and his throne is a cross. The accusation above His head on the cross declares Him worthy of death because He is the King of the Jews. He's crucified on the orders of a reluctant Pilate: in fact, when Pilate interrogates Jesus, Jesus tells Pilate that Pilate has authority to rule only because He has given it to him; and then *Jesus submits to Pilate's rule and allows Himself to be killed*. This is a remarkably different kind of king indeed.

If all this doesn't set the kingdom of God apart, Jesus' death is not a defeat. It is His victory. By His death, He defeats sin and death and devil. By His sacrifice, He has salvation for all who repent and believe in the Gospel: the Gospel that God forgives them for the sake of Jesus.

II. The Kingdom of God on Earth Today

One of the greatest struggles for the Church on earth today is to remain the Kingdom of God: Christians are always tempted to become another earthly kingdom in one form or another. Another way to put it is this: the Lord Jesus Christ would have His Church continue to proclaim repentance and the Gospel, for that is the Good News that turns sinners into the forgiven people of God. As long as we are in this world, though, the Church will be tempted to turn from a message of sin and grace to messages of worldly matters. When it does so, it becomes just another kingdom, and usually a bad one at that.

Here is how it should be: the Church continues faithfully to preach the Lord's Word. People hear the Word and believe, and thus become citizens of the kingdom of heaven. But people are still members of kingdoms in this world, and they are to be good citizens there, too. Thus, as citizens of God set free from the slavery of sin, they labor in this world to do good by loving their neighbor. Throughout history, then, you'll see a pattern: wherever the Church is, there's an increase in education, respect for women, the unborn, humanitarian efforts and the like. In other words, wherever the kingdom of God is found on earth, the kingdoms of the world improve. But, and here's a very important point: making the world a better place is not the mission of the Church. Making the world a better place is a byproduct of Christianity as people set free from sin love their neighbor, but it is never to be the focus of the Church. The focus of the Church is always repentance and the forgiveness of sins, always the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified.

The Middle Ages give an obvious historical example. Over time, the Church had gained enough power and wealth that it positioned itself to run society. The Church taught that it was the privilege of the bishop of Rome to crown kings, to set prices and control the economy, to field armies and wage wars. This power was waning at the time of Martin Luther, though the claims had not ceased. When Luther wrote that the mission of the Church was to preach the Gospel, he was sentenced to death by the Church—the Church sought to use its worldly power to stamp out the preaching of salvation by grace alone. It's just one example of a big temptation: Christians are always tempted to leave the Gospel because they want Christianity to be about changing earthly kingdoms and secular matters.

One example would be elections in our nation. As we draw closer to the next presidential election, there will be news stories about Christian leaders who say that we must have a Christian president to rule over our nation, and that it is better for a Christian not to vote than to vote for a non-Christian. Ironically, those denominations which most condemn the Roman Catholic Church for claiming the right of the bishop of Rome to preside over secular matters will usually insist that we must have a Christian president to govern our nation. It is the same teaching in both camps: it is the teaching the Kingdom of God exists on earth because Christians establish Christian rulers and Christian nations by enacting Christian laws.

Now, don't get me wrong: I'm all for Christian rulers and laws that reflect the moral law of God. On this "Life Sunday," we acknowledge that elective abortion is a terrible sin in our nation, and Christian citizens do well to work for laws to protect the unborn. That is good, but it is not how the Kingdom of God exists in this world: the Kingdom of God exists in this world wherever the Gospel is preached, and wherever the Gospel is given in Baptism and Holy Communion. If that takes place in a nation that is predominantly Christian, then the Church is there. If that takes place in Nazi Germany, Nero's Rome or Achmajinedad's Iran, then the Kingdom of God is there. It's an entirely different kingdom. Thus, I'm told that Martin Luther remarked that, when it came to rulers, he would take a competent Turk (a Muslim) over an incompetent Christian. Even as we continue to pray for our nation, to say that a president must be a Christian in order to be qualified to be president is a statement of false doctrine. The United States is not the kingdom of God: it is a kingdom of this world in which we happen to live, and in which—

thankfully, at least for now—the Church is allowed to proclaim the Gospel freely. But the Kingdom of God is an entirely different kingdom.

A more pop-cultural example would be the recent hype about Tim Tebow, starting quarterback for the Denver Broncos and vocal evangelical Christian. To his credit, Mr. Tebow has not (to my knowledge) ever said that he is a good football player because he is a Christian—others, however, have made that leap. The truth is that Mr. Tebow is not a good football player because he is a Christian, but because he is 6'3", built like a fullback, can run fast and throw a ball a long way. There are other quarterbacks with no claim to Christianity with far better numbers and abilities, yet there will always be Christians who want to argue that the Christian faith makes one a better athlete. The evidence simply is not there. Now, Christianity might make athletes into better *people*, because they repent of their sin and trust in Christ; and that might make them better at their vocations. But that is again a side effect of the Christian faith—not the focus of it. The focus of the Church is always repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

This is a stone over which you will stumble, too: you'll want to measure the relevance of Jesus by matters of this world. You'll want to measure the effectiveness of the Kingdom of God by whether or not your sickness is healed or your pain relieved, by whether or not the tensions in your family are resolved or you succeed in your line of work, by whether or not the laws of the land reflect God's moral law. You'll want Christ as King if He works out all of your concerns in the kingdom of this world; and if "all" He does is forgive your sins and give you eternal life, you'll be tempted to be disappointed.

Now, the Lord rules over this world, and He is concerned with your life in this kingdom. He may grant healing and deliverance. He may resolve tensions in your family or grant you a glorious career. He may do so miraculously, working wonders. He may change whole nations—look at Nineveh in our Old Testament lesson! Or, He may do so as a side effect of repentance and the Gospel: for if repentance leads you to forsake drunkenness or gluttony and that brings you better health, then that is a blessed result. If repentance leads family members to confess their sin and work to serve one another, that is a blessed result as well. But these results are not the focus of the Church: repentance and the Gospel are. If the Lord allows pain or sickness or tension to remain, it does not mean that He is a weak king. He is the almighty King who rules over all things; and while your fortunes in the kingdoms of this world will rise and fall, there is no doubt of the forgiveness and life He has won for you.

Remember: Jesus is king of an entirely different kingdom. It is not about wealth or power or success for you here on earth. It is about life eternal in the kingdom of heaven. It is not about your works and labors to achieve rewards, but about His death on the cross as a sacrifice to win that salvation for you. You are a citizen of this kingdom by the grace of God, by repentance and faith in the Gospel. This kingdom is at hand, because your king is as near to you as His Word and Sacraments; and where the King is, there is His kingdom. This kingdom of God is yours forever, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen