

Sermon Text: Mark 1:14-20

As we come into the sermon, it is interesting in that I decided to sort of preach the basics of this lesson, and Kit Adkins did the classical version of this lesson, which I'm not going to do. I've done a little foundational work, and it hit me as a marvelous thing in God's providence, as I was speaking to my father yesterday, his 73rd birthday, and he's not in very good health, and for the very first time in 25 years, my father asked me, and I do mean this, he asked me for the first time in 25 years, "What are you preaching on tomorrow?" When you hear my sermon, I think you will appreciate that God has prepared me to speak the basics of the Gospel. My father has many questions, and is, I suppose, a seeker in faith more than an adherent of the Christian faith.

I like the story about a man who went to an astrologer, and later he told his friend what the astrologer had said. The astrologer had said to him that his wife's second husband would be rich, brilliant, and handsome. The friend said, "Well, now, didn't that upset you to hear that news, that sort of prediction?" He said, "Yes, it did. It upset me very much. I had no idea that my wife had been married before!" We do often focus on the wrong things.

Now, we have heard this passage so often that most of you could write the sermon for me. The disciples were called. They dropped what they were doing. They became fishers of men and women and children. Fishing for people with the Gospel as bait and the church as the live well, I guess, if you take that analogy a little further. Well, you've heard that before, and that is not what I'm preaching today.

I'd rather focus on first things first. What does Jesus mean, "The Kingdom of God has come near?" What does He mean when he says repent? What does He mean precisely when he says, "Believe the Gospel."? Jesus spoke quite a bit about the Kingdom of God. It has come near in Jesus Christ, but more is coming. We pray for the "more coming" every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, don't we? "May thy Kingdom come" is implied. "May thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." We pray for it as a coming reality because it is not yet fully here. Just as we are becoming holy and set apart for God's use, but not yet fully there, just as we are growing toward light, internal and external, which reveals the mind of Christ in us, growing toward that day, but it is not yet fully realized, and we believe, Lord, yes, we believe, but at the same time, we often pray, "Help me in my unbelief." In short, God is not finished with us yet. We all have some growing to do, and perhaps we have some growing to do before we are ready to go and make disciples. We cannot just decide to make disciples, and by our own power and cleverness, change people's hearts. We cannot even change our own hearts. New hearts and new life belong to the continuing creative power of God alone.

The Kingdom of God has come near in Jesus Christ at God's initiative, not ours. We can join in, and when we do, the Holy Spirit takes up residence within us, and we become as the apostle Paul said in last week's Scripture "a walking, talking, breathing, loving temple of the Holy Spirit." That's important! I cannot emphasize enough how grand the idea was. I don't have words to express how important the temple was in Jewish worship. It

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was thought that God resided within the temple. You'll remember the detail of Jesus' crucifixion that, as he died on the cross, the temple curtain that separated the holy of holies where God was thought to reside, from the unclean outer world, as Jesus died, as it was finished, that temple curtain was split in two. The symbolism is that God was let loose in the world, no longer contained, but loose to dwell in all places and all people who invite him in. This is important to understand the Gospel and the way we are to become fishers of people. Jesus was God in flesh dwelt among us. Through God's Holy Spirit we have to make God known in our flesh, in our lives, in our decisions, in our thoughts, in our hearts, in our priorities, in our expenses of time and talents and treasure, and just as Jesus gave completely of Himself to build God's Kingdom and to make God known, we, submitting our selfish will to God, can actually become traveling, moving, loving temples of God's Holy Spirit revealing the good news of forgiveness and grace to a hurting world.

The apostle Paul experienced such a strong change in his life when he submitted to God's will that he wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Are you there yet? I think each of us has a ways to go. Maybe we are the temple more of self than the temple of the Holy Spirit, and if so, then we pitch nothing for God, and we tend more to use others than to disciple others for Christ. Now what I'm dancing around is the idea John Wesley called "sanctification." There I've done it! Now, half of you have just shut down. When I use a big, theological seminary word, a lot of people say "Oh no." Main Street is an educated congregation, and I trust you will keep listening.

That reminds me. A youngster one time said, "Mom, Mom, I want to go see this movie. I want to see this movie." The mom said, "No, we're not going to see that movie. It's funny, but I don't think you'd enjoy it. All the jokes would be over your head." The boy said, "Mom, that's okay. We'll sit in the balcony."

Sanctification is not over your heads. It means to give yourself so completely to God that God's Holy Spirit begins to shine through your life, and then you and I become the bait for people who dwell in darkness, for people who yearn for God's light. The more God shines through, the more those earnestly seeking God will be drawn to you, and then you will have an opportunity to speak about and to share your faith. I know that scares us! Scripture addresses that. It says, "Do not be afraid, God will give you words when you need them." I do encourage that you be honest whenever you share your faith. I do discourage rehearsed questions and rehearsed answers. That seems very insincere. I do encourage instead sharing honest struggles and honest triumphs and how God has led you this far, and how it is that even in the midst of your chaos you have a sense of trust and peace and hope, a glow of God about your life. That is a witness, and that will make disciples, and that is what we are called to do, but not before we are ready. If making it through the day, if making it through the day is what you pray for more than making disciples, then of course you have a ways to go. You may still be trying to drive your life by yourself and just drag God along behind for the ride. We must have God out front and follow. We must trust and submit our will to God at God's will, and then things will take a very different turn! A different turn, a change over a lifetime is what we are called to, and we have seen and we have known some of the saints of the church, and we can call them to

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mind. Even in our own families, people we have known, who have had a glow about them, but you know they did not start out life that way. If you had known them when they were five years old, they would have been another five-year-old. Faith takes time. Life is short. Give priority to faith as it deserves.

Something is happening on this earth. You know, we want peace. We all do. We say we do, but there is no peace. We have laws so that we can get along, but we break the laws. We know what is right, but we end up doing the opposite even as each individual. We are selfish as a world and as each person in it. We are sinners. We hurt ourselves and we hurt others by serving us and ignoring even God – cut off, turned in upon ourselves – selfish sinners all! So Jesus calls us to turn around, repent, and that’s what repent means. Repent does not mean, “I’m sorry.” It means to turn around, to take another direction back towards God. I have seen people change and turn around radically. If you think that does not happen, it does! It happens only with God’s help. Being nice or even trying to be good is not Christian faith. We must repent. We must turn toward God. We must follow God to enter and to build up His Kingdom.

The coming Kingdom of God is a sheer gift of grace. We can only join in on what God is already doing and submit our will to God, and turn and follow instead of trying to drag God along the way we want to go. If nothing you have ever read in the Bible or devotional materials or nothing you have heard or nothing you have done has lifted up your heart to God and given you a certain sense of lightness, a sense of freedom and warmth, of love and a desire to forgive, if your faith does not attract others and gives you nothing to share, if your faith does not do this for you, then it is time for a growth spurt! Perhaps time for repentance in the truest sense of turning toward God.

Wesley said, “Such faith that gives no joy is like painted fire.” Fire painted on a portrait gives no warmth! Wesley found faith is more than just pardon and forgiveness. It is also participation in what God is doing. Just as those disciples participated, so can we! By ramping up our surrender and allowing God to fill us further, and become a brighter beacon of the Gospel for those we meet. “The Kingdom of God is at hand,” said Jesus. It’s not up there some place! It’s not out there some place! It’s not over there some place! It is at hand! It is near! The Kingdom of God, the reign of God, the rule of God, and the power of God, the presence of God, the love of God is within our grasp, and can be within our hearts. The truth of the Gospel is within us, or it’s meant to be. Repent. Turn. Return to God. Instead of self, believe in the Gospel, Jesus commands in today’s lesson. The Gospel is the good news. The Gospel is that God was in Christ, making peace by the blood of His cross.

God is still present today, and Jesus continues His ministry through the Holy Spirit. Belief is not, as some people simplify it down to, checking a box on a piece of paper. Belief is not simply saying, “I am gullible enough to believe what Jesus said, and so God will reward my gullibility.” It is not that! No! God rewards true belief and true faith, which is what I believe about God and Christ and how I live because of what I believe. It is two parts. True belief shows up in all areas of your life. True belief is what drives your life,

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what informs your decisions, and what boundaries you choose – good from evil, right from wrong. What you truly value is revealed in many ways. First, by your budget. When you add up your expenditures over the last year and do your taxes, you see where all your extra money has gone. There also is your heart. When you look at your calendar from last year, and you see where all your free time has gone, there also is your heart. Where your talents are used, there also is your heart. If you spend your life and your treasure and your talents on self then where is God in your priorities, where indeed are others in your priorities?

Sin in its barest form is selfish desire. If you do what you want, when you want, and forget whom it hurts or whom it costs or whom it takes away from, then you sin. Completely self-directed, completely self-absorbed, completely absorbed in your own plans, desires, and use of all your resources, that is the definition of sin. That cuts you off! It cuts you off from God, and it cuts you off from others. You become as a black hole, as a gravitational field where things are drawn in, but nothing goes out, not even light can escape a black hole. It takes and takes, and gives nothing in return. Sin ultimately implodes in a meaningless, disconnected, miserable non-life. The true life, which flows from true belief, begins with repentance and is God-centered, not self-centered. When we know ourselves as sinners, and when we know Jesus Christ as Savior, as a complete Savior over sin and death, that gives us new direction and new priorities.

Robert Browning wrote a poem called “Karshish.” It’s about the resurrection of Lazarus. Browning tells us that when Lazarus returned to life, he was somehow strangely different. People around him were anxious about all sorts of things that no longer concerned Lazarus at all. On the other hand, many things that deeply concerned Lazarus did not seem to matter to the people around him. The point is that resurrected-Lazarus saw life in a whole new perspective. His vision was God-centered, and everything about his life fell into a different place. When our response to Jesus’ call to repentance leads us to God’s loving presence, we experience a kind of resurrection, a reorientation. We become wonderfully different. Our priorities change. Our former loyalties and attachments take on new meaning. We become more able to care than to blame, more able to give than to take.

A boy was once having his tonsils taken out, and he was very frightened, and he asked his father if he could go into the operating room with him. The surgeon said yes. It wasn’t a big procedure so he was in there. As the little boy went to sleep, and under anesthesia, he said, “Dad, Dad, you’re going to go with me all the way, aren’t you? You’re going to go with me all the way?” His dad said yes.

Down in the deepest level of your soul, you need to discover that God has gone all the way with us. He has seen our sins. He has conquered our judgment and died our deaths. So you can breathe easy now, you can live now for God. Your self, your true self, and your eternal soul are taken care of. You can feel free to live for God. As you rejoice in that experience and that good news, you will not mind dropping all else that used to be important when you hear Jesus say, “Follow me.” Amen.