

Sermon for 3 Epiphany, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

So begins the preaching of Jesus in the gospel according to St. Mark. In this version of the story of Jesus, these are his first words. If you have a bible at home with the words of Jesus in red letters, this will be the first red in Mark. This is not simply a coincidence. This is a summation of Jesus’ message. It could be argued that the whole rest of the book is an expansion, an extrapolation, of this one sentence. So it is worth taking some time to unpack this declaration.

First of all, we so often use the term “gospel” that we sometimes don’t think about what that means. The word simply means “good news.” But what good news? We usually think of the gospel as the story of Jesus, but this is Jesus himself, at the beginning of his ministry, preaching the gospel. So the good news has to be something prior to his death and resurrection.

The good news is actually not new news. It is old news. In a sense, it is the same message that the patriarchs and prophets and the whole nation of Israel was entrusted with from the beginning. The psalmist captures it in the text we sang this morning from Psalm 130: “O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption.”

The good news is that God is not out to get you! He isn’t just sitting back waiting for you to screw up. He loves you. And this isn’t a sappy, Romantic love, an emotion that will fly away at his next whim. This is a serious, steadfast love, a state of will that does not waver no matter how much evil we do. “He shall redeem Israel from all their sins,” the psalmist says. “For there is forgiveness with you; therefore you shall be feared.” In other words, “It is not your power, Lord, that is the most awesome thing about you; it’s the fact that you forgive the way you do.”

And so, because of this good news, Israel waits. “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning.” The psalmist trusts in God’s love for him, and therefore has hope. He waits for the Lord to forgive and redeem him in his own time, but he also knows that God has promised to redeem his people from all their sins. He will not be satisfied until the whole creation is set right. And so he also trusts and waits for God to fulfill his word.

And then Jesus comes along, and the first thing he says is “The time is fulfilled.” In other words, “For all of you who are waiting for God to set everything right, it’s time.” Israel has been waiting for hundreds of years, and Jesus essentially says, “OK, I’m here. Let’s roll.” That is also good news.

And then he says that “the kingdom of God is at hand.” Now the word that is translated kingdom here could actually be translated *kingship* as well. The word means both the “rule of the king” and the “realm over which he rules”. Jesus is himself the kingship of God and he is about to demonstrate and exercise his rule in a variety of ways. He will heal, he will cast out evil spirits, he will forgive sins. Finally, Jesus will exercise his authority by going to the cross and sacrificing himself to “redeem us from all our sins.” And by this conquest over the pretender and usurper, Satan, Jesus extends the rule of his kingdom into the hearts and wills of all of us who will submit to his authority.

You see, Satan likes to take our sinful passions and spin them into a cage where we feel trapped and forced to obey him. But Jesus bought us at the price of his own sinless blood. He has paid the price, so that we can be free from sin. Jesus has flung open all those cages. And we belong to him now.

That’s why we can do the work of repentance. If God were not for us, we would be paralyzed by our sinfulness. But because he has paid the price of our freedom, because he is always ready to forgive and help us back onto the road of obedience, we can return to him. The Father is always waiting for the return of his beloved children. If we trust in that, we can always turn around and head back home.

So my question this morning is this: What is in your life that is keeping you from God? It feel like a big thing. Maybe you have some secret addiction. It may feel like a little thing, but it’s nagging at you, and you feel like there’s a wall between you and the goodness of God. Whatever it may be, if there’s a wall, it’s your wall, not God’s. God is continually tearing down his side of the wall. He is always looking for you to turn back to him.

Every time you come to receive communion, every time you accept Jesus’ body and blood, he is in the sacrament, calling to you, “Come, follow me. Repent, and trust the good news.”