

Title: "The Good News of the Kingdom of God!"

Text: Mark 1:14-20; Matthew 13:24-35

Turn with me to the Gospel of Mark today, to chapter 1:14-20.

- Listen as I read to you of the way that Jesus began his ministry,
 - after he had come back to Galilee his baptism by John in the Jordan River,
 - and temptations by the devil in the wilderness.
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We have been re-introducing Jesus this Fall.

- And last Sunday I sought to do that by introducing you to the cultural and political context in which Jesus lived.

He "who was in very nature God, but did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,"

- but gave it all up to take on the very nature of a servant and to be found in human likeness,"
- well the "human likeness" he took on was that he was born and raised as Jew in 1st Century Palestine,
- and lived his human life under Roman occupation.

And that Roman occupation was a big deal to 1st Century Jews in Palestine.

- They were God's people in God's holy land,
 - but were being ruled by Roman Governors, and subjected to ungodly, unjust, immoral, often blasphemous treatment.

It's in that context that Jesus comes along and starts preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God.

"The time has come!" Jesus says. "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

"What?! The Kingdom of God is near?!"

In Jesus' day in Palestine, those were revolutionary words!

- People thought Jesus was saying that Rome was about to be overthrown!
- That God was going to re-establish the Kingdom of Israel.

So as we saw last week, everyone in Israel wanted to know:

-Who is this guy Jesus? What is his game plan?

-Which political party does he belong to?

But what we see in the Gospels again and again, is that Jesus doesn't join any of the existing political parties.

-He doesn't take anyone's side in the various debates about Roman occupation of the Holy Land.

He continually does something altogether different.

-He calls people to follow Him into a new way of thinking,
-and a new way of living.

-He calls people to become citizens of a whole new kind of Kingdom,

-and to join him in a "mustard seed" kind of conspiracy which will ultimately turn all the Kingdoms of the world upside down....or right-side-up."

I want to re-introduce us to Jesus today by exploring more of what he meant when he came preaching "the good news of the Kingdom of God."

Now a few minutes ago we read from the Gospel of Matthew some parables in which Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to wheat and weeds growing in a field,

-or a mustard seed growing to become a large bush in the garden,

-or yeast which a woman mixes into her dough to make it rise.

Jesus used these parables to try and open people's minds to a new way of thinking about God's "kingdom."

-The people in Jesus' day thought of God's Kingdom as the nation of Israel.

-It was "Land of Promise."

-It was a piece of earthly real estate located right there in Palestine between Egypt and Syria, and between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert.

You and I tend to think of God's Kingdom as heaven above,

-which we may go to when we die, but which has little to do with the "real world" where we live in the here and now.

But neither one of those conceptions is exactly what Jesus is talking about.

-He is talking about reign and the rule of God.

Jesus would proclaim that wherever God reigns and rules as King, that's where the Kingdom of God is.

-And certainly God reigns and rules as King in heaven, so the Kingdom of God is there.

-But Jesus came into Galilee preaching that the Kingdom of God was now NEAR, right here on earth.

And it wasn't because he was standing on the real estate known as the Holy Land,

-but it was because God was reigning and ruling in His life right then and there.

So because God reigned and ruled in Jesus' life,

-everywhere he went the Kingdom of God was present.

-And so those who were standing near to Jesus, were standing near to the Kingdom of God.

And everyone Jesus called to follow him, were being called to join him in that Kingdom,

-and begin living with him in that kingdom,

-and begin learning to live as citizens of that kingdom.

And that is how the Kingdom of God began to grow and expand: person by person, slowly but surely.

-Like a mustard seed growing in a garden.

-It starts so small, and looks at first so insignificant,

-but then it grows and grows until it sort of takes over the whole garden and even birds can come and nest in its branches.

Or it's like a woman putting yeast into her dough.

-The yeast is so tiny, but just a little bit of yeast can leaven the whole loaf and cause the dough to rise.

Or like wheat in a field of weeds, the Kingdom of God grows right up in the midst of the evil ways of the world.

-The people of the Kingdom are out there living right in the midst of everyone else.

- And sometimes you can't tell who is who.
- But Jesus says, "God knows, and He will be the one to ultimately bring in the harvest and separate the wheat from the weeds.

That's the way the Kingdom of God works, Jesus says.

- It's like that.
- It's not like joining a political party and taking on Rome with force.
- It's not like trying to turn the world upside down by our own strength and wit and ingenuity.
- It's not like building up our arsenal of weapons, and a huge army, navy and air force trained to use those weapons.

It's about people, one by one, becoming citizens of a new Kingdom altogether.

And it's about those people beginning to live a new kind of life right here in the world:

- a new life lived by a whole new set of values and priorities.

And my friends, the rest of the New Testament is an outline of what those new values and priorities are,

- what they look like, how they get lived out in the community of those who are citizens of this new Kingdom.

Jesus outlines that new life and those new values in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Book of Acts describes what this new community looks like as they begin to live that new life out.

- The Letters of Paul and Peter and John all continue to teach and encourage the believers on what the new life is all about
- and what it means to live as citizens of this new Kingdom.

And at its core, it's simply about living out that Jesus Shema: loving God and loving others,

- and then making disciples of others who will do the same.

And Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, that it's even about loving our enemies!

You see, He says that as citizens of the Kingdom of God,
we learn to forgive.

-And we learn to love and accept others because we have
been forgiven and loved and accepted by God.

That's what got us into the Kingdom in the first place,
-and that's what gets other people into the Kingdom, too.
-So, go do for others what I have done for you, Jesus says.

And so later the Apostle Paul would write in his letters,
-that this means that as citizens of the Kingdom,
-we are to get rid of our anger, malice, slander, and mean-
spiritedness.

-Instead, we are to put on grace, and kindness, compassion,
gentleness and patience.

You see, the Kingdom of God is not about fighting power with
power, it's about entering in to the fray in weakness.

-It's about dying on a cross.

-It's about laying down our life for others.

-It's about discovering that its when we are weak, then in
Christ we are strong.

In our culture today, with the popularity of Star Wars and Lord
of the Rings, we would say:

-It's like Luke Skywalker laying down his light saber in front
of Darth Vader and not giving in to the temptation to
hate.

-It's like sending little Hobbits into Mordor to overcome the
power of evil by destroying the ring of power instead of
trying to wield it.

You see, those are also great images of the upside down
nature of the Kingdom of God,

-where love triumphs over hate,

-and mercy triumphs over judgment,

-and grace triumphs over sin.

Those are the values of the Kingdom of God, and Jesus lives
out the life of the Kingdom from the moment of his
conception in Mary's womb.

- He who was in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
- He did not consider the power of God something to be wielded,
- but instead made himself nothing, he gave up the power to be born as a helpless infant,
- and ultimately went to the cross to allow the world he loved to actually reject and crucify him.

Yet, therefore God exalted Him, and raised him from the dead,
-and seated him at His right hand in power and glory,
-and gave him the name that is above every name.

That is the way of the Kingdom of God.

- And we are invited to enter that Kingdom.
- We are invited to become citizens of that Kingdom.
- We are invited to live our lives here on earth, in the midst of whatever earthly realm we find ourselves born into,
- as subjects of the true King, God Himself, who rules over all Kingdoms.

And we are brought into that Kingdom by trusting in Jesus,
God's Son, who opened the doors to that Kingdom by his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

He is the One who atones for our sin, clothes us in His righteousness, fills us with His Spirit, and calls us by the power of His Spirit to walk in His ways.
-Not in our own strength and ability, but in His.

This is how we are to live in the midst of this broken world.
-We are called to live with a new understanding that we are first and foremost citizens of a different Kingdom.

It's a kingdom in which God reigns and rules as King.

- It's a kingdom in which God's love and grace flow freely and are the highest value and priority of the citizens.
- It's a kingdom in which God's will is readily obeyed in response to having received His love and grace.
- It's a kingdom which has no borders, and is open to people of every nation, tribe, and people group on earth.

-It's a kingdom that continues to grow person by person, family by family, community by community,
-and it slowly spreads from shore to shore until the whole earth is full of the glory of God's Kingdom as the waters cover the seas.

It started with Jesus.

-Just one Jewish carpenter from Nazareth, who spent three years proclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom,
-and bringing that Kingdom with Him wherever he went.
-Healing people and casting out demons as signs of the Kingdom's presence and power.
-Inviting people to follow Him and begin walking with him.

And the mustard seed conspiracy has not stopped growing yet

Here we are in Malden, Massachusetts, 2000 years later and we are still seeking to follow Jesus as citizens of the Kingdom of God in this place and in our generation.

And quite practically, what does that look like for you and me on a daily basis in this world in which we live?

1. Every morning when you wake up, believe the good news that in Christ you are a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

Put your trust in Him every morning, noon, and night,
-and practice believing that you are actually a citizen of His Kingdom.

2. Every morning invite the Holy Spirit to continue His work in you of empowering you to live as a citizen of God's Kingdom.

The Apostle Paul says it is a process of learning to "no longer be conformed to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds."

That's what enables us more and more to discern what God's will is in this crazy, mixed up world.

-And that is what we are trying to figure out on a daily basis:
-What is God's will for me today?

- What are His priorities for the way I live my life today?
- How does He want me to handle the situation I face at work?
 - I want to bite my co-worker's head off, so how can the Spirit empower me to somehow love my enemy instead?

You see, every day be inviting the Spirit to empower you to be transformed into a person who lives as a citizen of God's Kingdom.

3. And every day, be grateful.

Live a life of thanksgiving for the grace and mercy and love that flows freely in God's Kingdom to you and me every day.

We do not earn it or deserve it, but it is there for us...always.

- Receive it, and be grateful,
- and enjoy being a citizen of such a kingdom,
- enjoy being the grateful subject of such a King.

Let's pray.