

CASKET EMPTY

Part 8 - Messiah

Mark 1:14-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 19, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:14-20, NRSV)



Last summer I took a friend of mine, Sam, to see a baseball game, his *first* baseball game. Sam is from Kenya, where they don't play much baseball. He's a very smart guy and yet as I sat there trying to explain the rules of the game that was unfolding before us, I was reminded how very difficult it is to explain the game of baseball to somebody who doesn't know any of the rules. It's not enough to say that the point is simply to hit the ball with the stick. I watch somebody trying to hit a ball with a stick in cricket and still have no idea what the game of cricket is all about.

Similar confusion will result if you try to understand Jesus without first understanding the story of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament.¹ If nothing else has been gained by this journey through the Old Testament this fall, I at least hope that as we now look at how the story continues with Jesus in the New Testament the backdrop of Israel that we have been given will help us see things from a whole new perspective.

As the Old Testament ends, it ends with great expectation. It reminds me of a woman who is over nine months pregnant, well past her due date. She is

literally ready to burst with expectation for what is to come. That is Israel as the Old Testament ends.

For one, the story of creation made clear that God intended a world that was good and abundant with life, a world where a deep peace and harmony existed between the Creator and his creation, and even within creation. But the world in 1st century Israel, just like the world we live in today, was far from this original ideal. We live in a world of spoiled goodness. But there are echoes of that once intended world in every human soul, stubborn rumors of a lost Eden, and the hope that it might be recovered some day fills us with expectation.

For 2,000 years Israel had been waiting to see the covenant God made with Abraham fulfilled. As the Old Testament ends, Abraham's family now numbers as many as the stars in the sky! But when would God bless all other families on earth through Israel? Even today we see so many who seem not to be blessed.

At Sinai it became clear that the hearts of the Israelites were always going to be tempted to worship the creation rather than the Creator. We all love our idols. Yet, even as we are unfaithful, God remains faithful, even to the 1,000th generation. So when will God come and change our hearts and help us worship him and him alone?

For nearly 1,000 years Israel had been waiting to see the covenant God made with David fulfilled. One of David's descendants was promised to ascend the throne and reign for eternity, finally ushering in God's Kingdom to earth. And do we not still long today for God to take charge of our world and set things right?

When Israel was hauled off into exile in Babylon, God promised them that he would not forget them and that, in time, they would be brought home. Even when they got home, however, the land eventually came to be occupied by yet another foreign power. And don't you also feel today that we are somehow far from our true home, living in a world that is occupied by a spiritual power bent on keeping us from all that God has intended?

¹ N.T. Wright makes this comparison in *Simply Christian*, (Harper, 2006), p. 71.

Finally, the Temple taught Israel that God was indeed breaking into our world, settling his presence with his people. But was that presence and blessing limited to just a building in Jerusalem, and to one people, the Jews? When will God break fully into the world, settle his presence in every square inch of creation?

You see, as we meet Israel at the beginning of the New Testament we meet people who, like us, are pregnant with expectation. There is this wild sense of anticipation that this world of shadows, and almosts, and close calls, and what ifs, is destined at some point to give way to the bright sunshine of a world to come which will be finally free of evil, free of pain, free of injustice, and free of death.²

The entire Old Testament story leans forward to one who would come to bring all this about, one the Jews came to call Messiah. That's a Hebrew word that literally means, 'the anointed one', the agent of God who is appointed to the task of affecting the lot of those God has chosen. Translated to Greek, the word 'Messiah' is 'Christ'. As the New Testament begins, creation itself is pregnant with expectation for the coming of the Christ.

In fact, have you ever paid attention to how the New Testament begins? It begins by looking backwards. Matthew's Gospel opens with a genealogy, a detailed and careful recounting of how Jesus of Nazareth, the one born to Joseph and Mary, is directly descended not only from Abraham but also from David. Mark's Gospel begins with words from Isaiah, an ancient prophesy that heralds the coming of the Messiah. Luke's Gospel begins with an announcement to another childless old man and his wife, Zechariah and Elizabeth, that they are about to have a son who will at last usher in God's Kingdom. Finally, John's Gospel begins with the boldest declaration: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."** As the New Testament begins it's as if the doctor is saying to the expectant mother, the time has come.

When Jesus does arrive on the scene, his message is the same. The passage we just read from Mark 1 includes the very first words Jesus speaks in that Gospel account. Having just been baptized and tempted in the wilderness, and having received word that John, the one

sent to herald his arrival, had completed his work, Jesus goes public in Galilee, proclaiming, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."** It's a proclamation that fits in just one verse in Mark, but it's one verse that is absolutely loaded. Here, in fact, we find a beautifully concise summary of Jesus' most essential message.

"The time is fulfilled!" Jesus begins. That word for time here is the Greek word 'kairos' and it is chosen intentionally, chosen instead of the other Greek word for time which is 'chronos'. Chronos is successive or sequential time, the sort of time recorded on clocks and calendars. Chronos is quantity of time. Kairos, by contrast, is quality time, time that is pregnant with promise or possibility, time when everything changes because it's the right time, time when Heaven breaks in to earth, God's time. So when Jesus says that the time is fulfilled he's saying that everything from now on is going to be different.

So what is going to be different? Jesus is clear: **"the kingdom of God has come."** From this day forward, the rule and reign of God will have come to earth, because that's what happens in a kingdom, right? In a kingdom the king or queen is sovereign. A king does not make suggestions, lobby for support, or try to get enough votes to pass legislation. No, a king merely needs to speak and his words become, in their speaking, the law of the land. If a sovereign king declares that everybody in the kingdom must wear yellow socks on Tuesday, then everybody in the kingdom must wear yellow socks on Tuesday or face whatever consequences the king determines are fit for those who would oppose his sovereign rule and wear purple socks. Which one of us wouldn't want to be king or queen for even a day, to have our will realized in every way!

We don't think about kingdoms much these days because we don't live in one, at least in the political sense. But kingdoms still exist, even here in America. In fact, you are king or queen of a kingdom yourself. Did you know that? You see, a kingdom is the realm in which the one on the throne can exercise his or her effective will, where what you want to see happen happens.³ In my little kingdom I have limited control over my body. I can tell my hand to do whatever I want it to do and it does not argue. I can think kind or nasty thoughts about you, whatever I choose. I can choose pizza or tacos for dinner, my choice. I can worship God or forget about God. There are

² Language borrowed from a sermon by Bruce L. Edwards, "The Gospel of Homesickness: Out of the Shadowlands", Bowling Green Covenant Church (March 18, 2007). Read the text in full at <http://www.cslewisreview.org/the-gospel-of-homesickness/>

³ I'm indebted to Dallas Willard for helping to put these ideas into words. See *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper, 1997), 21-33.

consequences, of course, to the ways I exercise my effective will, but nobody else gets to vote on how I do so. I'm in charge of this little kingdom just as you are in charge of your little kingdom.

This is, in fact, what it means to be human. Humans, you see, are unique in creation because only humans were made in God's image.⁴ And God is a sovereign King. In God's Kingdom, the range and scope of his effective will, what God wants done, is done. Trees, which are not made in God's image, don't have a kingdom. They do only what their Creator made them to do. Dogs and cats don't have a kingdom either. Animals, which were not made in God's image, only act according to instinct and training. Some of you, I know, will disagree but even you will admit that when a dog is mean we don't blame the dog but the way the dog was raised, and when we do so we agree without knowing it that even our beloved pets aren't acting with free will. Humans alone in creation are created in God's image and so alone reflect God in this way. Having a say over your choices and will is part of what it means to be human, so much so that when these things are taken away from a person, when people are enslaved in one way or another, we say that to do so is dehumanizing.

With all this in mind, think again about what Jesus is declaring is about to happen – the Kingdom of God has come to earth. The rule and reign of God has come to earth. Heaven has always been within the range of God's effective will. Mass shootings do not happen in heaven. It's not God's will. Earthquakes that kill hundreds do not happen in heaven. It's not God's will. Cancer, broken families, envy, loneliness, heartache, drug addiction, some people hating other people, racial inequity, prison sentences, the abuse of women and children, division, guilt and shame – none of this is in heaven because heaven is within God's Kingdom and none of this is the King's will. And Jesus says – listen for it! – the Kingdom of God has come to earth! With the coming of the Christ, the rule and reign of God has broken into earth, the range of God's effective will expanded into his creation. With the coming of the Christ, the one towards whom all of the Old Testament leans in pregnant expectation, God has set in motion his plan to bring heaven to earth so that all things on earth ultimately live, and move, and breath according to his will, as he first intended they would.

So where is it, you ask. If the Kingdom of Heaven has come to earth, where is it? Clearly this neighborhood we call earth doesn't look at all like what we imagine the neighborhood heaven must be like. Well, pay

attention. Again, Jesus says, “**the kingdom of God has come near**”. It's coming, but not yet fully come. It's in our midst, but not yet fully realized.

Dallas Willard was a Christian writer and philosopher who once told the story of growing up in southern Missouri at a time when electricity, as he says it, was available only in the form of lightning, and they had more of that in those days than they could use! But when he was in high school the Rural Electrification Administration extended power lines into the area where he lived, finally making electricity available to those households and farms.

With that change, a very different way of living presented itself to those people. Their relationship to fundamental aspects of daily life could be vastly changed for the better – daylight and dark, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing and preserving food. But each family still had to believe in this new reality called electricity and its arrangements, and then take the practical steps necessary if they were going to come to utilize it and rely on it. Admitting the analogy is a bit crude, Willard says that farmers in those days and in that place effectively heard this message: “Repent, for electricity is at hand!” Repent from your kerosene lamps and lanterns, your iceboxes and cellars, your scrub-boards and rug beaters, your foot powered sewing machines and your radios with dry-cell batteries.

Strangely, Willard says, some people would not accept it. They chose, as their divine image bearing souls allowed them to do, to not “enter the kingdom of electricity.” Some didn't want to change. Others couldn't afford it, or so they thought.⁵

In the same way, though this is Jesus' declaration, whether you believe it or not is ultimately up to you. With the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, which resulted in his ultimate death and resurrection and his conquering of everything, mainly sin and death, everything which have forever stood in the way of us living in the abundant and eternal way God has always desired us to live, the power has been made accessible to every last one of us – every family on earth! – to begin to live into a glorious new reality that begins here but stretches on into eternity. This reality is not realized all at once. Every family in rural Missouri didn't move instantly into the age of electricity. But those who choose to subject their own little kingdoms to the coming of this greater Kingdom will find that even here, even now, even in this place, we will begin to

⁴ See Genesis 1:26

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 30-31.

experience heaven on earth, the effective will of God realized in our own lives and in our own communities.

It's our choice, however. **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near,"** Jesus declares. It's happened. We didn't make it happen. But now we have to respond. And so he adds, **"Repent, and believe in the good news."** It's happened, but it's up to us to embrace.

Generally, we don't like that word 'repentance'. It's a shame that it's been used in ways that obscure its true meaning. Because to repent means simply (and literally!) to turn around, to change your heart or your mind in such a way that the change shows up in your life. The doctor tells you that if you don't change your eating and exercise habits you won't live to see your grandkids grow up. You believe her and, in response, you go on a diet and join a gym. That's repentance. It's not always easy, but that's what it is.

In the Sermon on the Mount we find the heart of Jesus' teaching about what life in God's Kingdom will look like. His teaching there has been called by some the "Sermon of For Instances."⁶ What does the Kingdom of God look like? Well, for instance, the poor in spirit will be blessed, those who mourn comforted, those hungering for things to be right will be satisfied, the merciful receive mercy, the peacemakers find they are called children of God, the law is fulfilled completely, forgiveness replaces resentful anger, enemies love one another, commitments are honored, promises kept, the poor are lifted up, ultimate judgment is left to God alone.⁷

By the grace of Christ, flowing in and around us now in the world because of his death and resurrection, this life, this Kingdom of God, is increasingly available to those who will turn around – repent! – and change their minds to believe that it is so. As pastor and writer John Ortberg writes,

Imagine having a mind cleansed of all the debris that blocks our best intentions. Imagine if each time you saw another person your first thought was to pray for him or bless her. Imagine what it would be like if, any time you were challenged or anxious, your reflexive response would be to turn to God for strength. Imagine, if you're a married man, that whenever you looked at any other woman other than your wife you would see her as if she were

your sister or your daughter. Imagine genuinely wishing your "enemies" well.⁸

What if we truly became convinced in our minds and hearts that Kingdom of Heaven was so close it could be experienced in Christ, convinced enough to get off the thrones of our own little kingdoms so that the true King could occupy those spaces and begin to exercise, in our lives and in our communities, his effective will? Jesus taught us to pray for his kingdom to come, on earth as it is in heaven. Why would he teach us to ask for something unless he knew our prayer would, in time, be answered?

But we must repent *and* believe, because if you're on the wrong path it's not just enough to realize it and turn around. You actually have to then start moving down the path that leads in the right direction! As James 2:17 declares, **"So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."**⁹ Faith is the substantive display of belief. If we truly have repented, truly have come to be convinced that what Jesus declared is the truth, we will respond by going after him wherever he leads us. We will need his help every step of the way, of course, but we will go wherever he goes.

And do we not see this beautifully exemplified in the very next verses as Simon and Andrew, James and John, men who had spent their entire lives headed in one direction, suddenly have such an enormous change in heart that they are led to go off following after Jesus in an entirely new direction!

The story is told of the great English poet John Betjeman who grew up with a father who was constantly pressuring him to succeed him in the family business. John, however, wanted to be a poet. His father told him it was a stupid dream, and that it was his responsibility to enter the family business not only make a living but to sustain the family's honor. He was the fourth generation and simply must carry it on. Well, Betjeman refused, believing he had another calling, a calling which ultimately led him to become a Poet Laureate with a memorial that stands today in Westminster Abbey.¹⁰

How many generations had the families of these men been fishing for fish on the Sea of Galilee? Certainly more than four! And in those days, in that culture, taking on the family business was an absolute given from which nobody deviated. There were not high

⁶ Term coined by Dr. Leander Keck of Yale Divinity School, in a lecture at Fuller Theological Seminary on April 9, 2002. Cited by Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 137.

⁷ Read Matthew 5-7.

⁸ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Zondervan, 2002), 181.

⁹ NRSV

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 7.

school career fairs for Peter and Andrew to attend. James and John weren't given aptitude tests to discover what line of work might best suit them. No guidance counselor ever said, "You know, James, I think you'd make a fabulous CPA." No, these men knew their lot in life, fishing for fish. It was safe and secure. If things got difficult they just had to work harder.

But then along comes this carpenter from Nazareth declaring that everything is different. The time is pregnant with new possibility. The rule and reign of God has broken in from heaven to earth. A deeper, richer reality is now accessible like never before. And without understanding what it all meant – I'm certain they didn't! - these fisherman repented. They turned around, had a change of heart. And then they believed. Nothing wrong with fishing for fish, but that wasn't God's call for them. And so they dropped their nets and left their boats, leaving behind the old direction of their life to follow after Jesus in a whole new direction.

We are the same. History, on the grandest scales and in the small corners of our personal lives, will just continue to repeat itself over and over and over again, strapping us to a merry ground that is always in motion but going nowhere fast. Do you realize, however, that the time is now pregnant with new possibility? Nothing has to stay the same. The Kingdom of God is near, power made accessible to every one of us not only to go to heaven when we die but to begin to experience the rule of reign of God today, glimpses and tastes of Heaven here in our own lives and communities.

Listen to me. God, in Christ, is closer to you than you realize. He has come near not to condemn but to save, to set free, to make right. I believe that he is calling you to a new life, to become a new person, to give yourself away in new ways for the sake of a broken world he loves. Yes, God has given me a kingdom but the truth is I'm not a very good king. Whether you realize it or not, you aren't either.

Today is a good day to get up and off that throne, to vacate it and invite Christ to take a seat and to take over from here. He does not promise to make things easier. We know how hard things got for those first disciples and we shouldn't expect an easier road for disciples today. But he does promise that he will lead us to life, an abundant and eternal life he wants not only for us but for the whole world. And when all was said and done, not a single one those first disciples would have said they regretted their decision to go after Jesus. Neither will a single one of us if we make the same decision.

And so I declare to you today in the name and power of Jesus Christ, that the time is fulfilled and that the kingdom of God has come near. So let us repent, every one of us, and believe, in our minds and hearts but also with our lives, this good news.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Do you believe it's impossible to clearly understand Jesus if we don't first understand Israel? Are the Old and the New Testaments unequivocally connected in this way?
2. Read the text from Mark 1:14-20 again. What do you notice here?
3. Jesus declared that the time is 'fulfilled'. What do you think he means by that?
4. When you hear the phrase 'the Kingdom of God' what do you think about? Where is the Kingdom of God? How does one know it when one's found it? The Kingdom of God has been described as the rule and reign of God. Is that a good description?
5. Why does Jesus call us to repent *and* believe? Is he saying the same thing twice for emphasis or is he suggesting that repenting and believing are two different things?
6. If your life is a kingdom, who's on the throne today?
7. If repentance is turning around, changing your heart or mind, what is one specific way that God is calling you to repent in your life right now?
8. Do you believe the Kingdom of God is near? Why or why not?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why would these fisherman leave everything to follow Jesus? Would you ever do something like that?