

The Kingdom of God Has Come Near
Mark 1:1-15
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As followers of Jesus, you and I live in the era that has been called “the already, but not yet,” because God’s kingdom has already come with the arrival of Jesus, but his kingdom won’t be fulfilled until Jesus returns for his Church. If that idea sounds familiar to you, you’ve been paying attention 😊. “Already, but not yet” is also the Church’s focus in Advent as we celebrate Jesus’ first coming as a baby and anticipate his second coming for his Church.

Last summer, as our staff and I discussed our preaching schedule for 2023, we agreed it would be good to preach through one of the four Gospels at the start of this year. As I began to look more closely at Mark’s Gospel, I realized it could work for us to focus on the first part of Mark’s Gospel in January and February and then home in on Jesus’ last week of his life during Lent—the six Sundays prior to Easter.

I’ve titled this first part of our study of Mark’s Gospel “Glimpses of the Kingdom,” because over the first ten chapters of his book, Mark repeatedly communicates the Good News that God’s kingdom has come near with the arrival of Jesus. Mark’s Gospel begins with the words, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet.” And in verse 15, the last verse in our text today, Mark writes, “Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

As is his practice, Mark wastes no time in getting to the point, letting his readers know that his purpose in writing is to share the Good News of Jesus and that the kingdom of God has come near. Before we dig into verses 1-15, I’ll provide some background on Mark’s Gospel.

The NIV Commentary summarizes Mark’s writing style with these words: “Mark’s Gospel is a simple, succinct, unadorned, yet vivid account of Jesus’ ministry, emphasizing more what Jesus did than what he said. Mark moves quickly from one episode in Jesus’ life and ministry to another, often using the adverb ‘immediately.’”

Mark, along with Matthew and Luke, are known as the synoptic Gospels, because of the synopsis or summary they provide of Jesus’ life and ministry. The first three Gospels: Matthew,

Mark and Luke, share many similarities with each other, and they differ significantly from John's Gospel, which is more theological in nature. John selectively picks and chooses the events he shares to fit his theme rather than giving a broad overview of Jesus' life and ministry like Matthew and Luke do.

Since the time of the early church, it has been widely accepted that Mark's Gospel is the Apostle Peter's account of what he saw Jesus say and do firsthand—that Mark's Gospel was based on the preaching of Peter and was arranged by Mark. So who was Mark?

Mark's mother, Mary, was a prominent early Christian. We know her home served as a meeting place for the believers, because in Acts 12, when Peter was miraculously released by an angel from prison, he went immediately to Mary's house, where he knew a group of believers were praying for his safety. Mark, known as John Mark, as a young man was an accomplice of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but when the missionaries encountered difficulty Mark deserted them and returned to Jerusalem. Sometime later, Barnabas, who was Mark's cousin, wanted to take Mark with them again, but Paul wouldn't hear of it. Paul and Barnabas had such a strong disagreement that they parted company—Barnabas took Mark with him, and Paul chose Silas to go on a different route. In later letters that the Apostle Paul wrote—Colossians and 2 Timothy—we learn that the broken relationship between Paul and Mark was repaired. Paul asks the Church at Colossae to welcome Mark, and in his second letter to Timothy, written from prison, Paul asks that Mark be sent to him because “he is helpful to me in my ministry.”

Tradition has held that Mark's Gospel was written from Rome in the early to mid 60s of the 1st Century AD, which would make it the earliest Gospel. For the first 30 years or so after Jesus' death, Christians pretty much flew under the radar of Rome. Christian beliefs weren't accepted by the Empire, but neither were Jesus' followers persecuted. The Empire's view of Christianity changed when Nero became Emperor, and around 64 AD, Christians began to be systematically persecuted—apparently as a scapegoat for the failures of Nero's administration. It's believed that Peter and Paul were executed by Nero somewhere in the window of 64–69 AD. Mark may well have been with Peter (and possibly Paul) at this time and could have written

and sent his Gospel then. We do know that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome in 70 AD, and Mark's Gospel appears to have been written prior to the fall of the temple.

Unlike Matthew and Luke's Gospels, which seem to have been written for biographic purposes to complement Paul's letters by giving details to 1st Century Christians about Jesus' life, Mark seems to write with a pastoral purpose in mind. He wrote to the Church at Rome, which was made up mostly of Gentile believers (non-Jews), seeking to provide comfort and assurance for them as followers of Jesus living amidst persecution that was growing more intense all the time.

The NIV Commentary points out that Peter's sermon in Acts 2:22–24, which he preached on the day of Pentecost, serves as the basic outline for Mark's Gospel. Peter preached:

Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. (Acts 2:22-24)

Mark's opening words in his Gospel, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God," are likely the Gospel's original title. That 14-word opening verse is loaded with meaning that boldly proclaimed Jesus' superiority over any human emperor or ruler. As we begin our study of Mark, it's important for us to recognize the revolutionary nature of what Mark was writing. There are three important phrases in verse 1, which declared Jesus' sovereignty. The word translated "good news" or "gospel" is *euangelizo*, a word used to describe good news from the battlefield or regarding the emperor—who was believed to be a deity. Mark's initial readers would have been surprised to hear the word gospel used in a context other than in reference to the emperor. In his opening, Mark also identifies Jesus as "the Messiah." The term "Messiah" had strong god-like overtones which, in that culture, were only associated with the emperor. Finally, Mark designates Jesus as "the Son of God." The

phrase “Son of God” today is widely associated with Jesus, even by people who don’t follow Jesus or may not believe in his deity, but at that time across the Roman Empire, the phrase “Son of God” was reserved only for the Holy Roman Emperor.

Due to the skepticism with which many of us view rulers, it’s hard for us to actually imagine our rulers as gods, but in the ancient world and even in some cultures today, it’s quite common. I won’t read to you the entire decree because it’s very wordy and the language is archaic, but here are some of the words and phrases that come from a decree Caesar Augustus made about himself as he was preparing to assume the throne in Rome. Notice the god-like language used for Augustus:

- Augustus is the perfect consummation of human life.
- Augustus is filled with virtue for being a benefactor among men and women.
- Augustus has been sent as a savior for us and for those who come after us. He will make war cease and create order everywhere.
- The god’s birthday (referring to Augustus) was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings that have come to all through him. From this day forward, Augustus’s birthday will mark the beginning of the year when elected officials will resume public office.

Augustus and his loyal followers may have viewed him as a god, but Mark’s opening line of his Gospel pulls no punches in telling his readers there is only one God, and contrary to what they’ve been led to believe, it’s not the emperor or any human being; it’s Jesus Christ. Over the course of his Gospel, Mark shares glimpses with his readers of what the Kingdom of God looks like by giving them glimpses of the kingdom. As we walk through the sermon today, I want us to reflect on what some of the implications are for us that God’s kingdom has come near in the person of Jesus.

I’ve arranged for two of our teens to read Mark 1:1–15 for us:

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”—“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

I mentioned in my intro that Mark doesn’t waste any time getting down to business. He immediately introduces Jesus as God—the Messiah—and declares that God’s kingdom has arrived by tying Old Testament prophecies from Malachi and Isaiah to the words of John the Baptist. “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” is a direct quote from Malachi 3: 1, and “And a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him,’” comes from Isaiah 40: 3. In verses 3–8, Mark goes on to summarize John the Baptist’s words and ministry that were a forerunner of Jesus’ ministry.

In his commentary on Mark, N.T. Wright likens Mark’s introduction of John the Baptist and John the Baptist’s words to a sleeper being woken from a deep sleep by a bright light and

having cold water thrown on their face. The Jewish people were anticipating the coming of a Messiah but not in the way John the Baptist said. Mark's bold announcement would have caught many people off guard.

John the Baptist called on the Jewish crowds to perk up and get ready for the Messiah's arrival by repenting of their sins. John called them to prepare for the coming of the King and the establishment of the kingdom of God. N.T. Wright notes that in England, the joke is that wherever the Queen goes (now the King), she smells fresh paint. Everywhere the British monarch goes, people are on their best behavior and they're doing all they can to make sure everything is just right. In essence, John the Baptist's message was, "Get yourself cleaned up and prepared, because the true King is coming."

In verses 9-11, Mark recounts a very short but greatly significant occurrence: Jesus' baptism by John and God the Father's words of blessing as Jesus came up out of the water. As Jesus was coming out of the water, He saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit of God landing on Him like a dove. At the moment of his baptism, Jesus glimpsed a new reality, and that view, along with God's words, changed everything for Him. The voice of God from heaven declared, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

N.T. Wright points out that while in one sense, Jesus' baptism was unique to Him, the words God spoke over Jesus are the same words our Heavenly Father speaks to each of us who are in Christ. I love what N.T. Wright says in this statement:

The whole Christian gospel could be summed up in this point: that when the living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. God looks at us and says, 'You are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you. (N.T. Wright, "Mark for Everyone")

Jesus was now prepared to be sent out into the wilderness, where He would be tempted by the enemy, Satan, to take shortcuts to becoming King rather than walking the path of difficulty and suffering that God had in store for Him. And as you and I hear God's words of blessing spoken over us—that we are his son or daughter in whom He is well pleased—we also

are prepared to live in a different reality, God's kingdom, where we "walk by faith, not by sight." We're prepared to go on our faith journey, withstanding the enemy's temptations and lies, as we embrace the identity that has been spoken over us by our Heavenly Father.

This introductory section of Mark concludes with the news that after John the Baptist was imprisoned Jesus began his official ministry of proclaiming in preaching and through his actions, "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" John being "taken out," so to speak, was Jesus' cue that it was time for his ministry to begin. The new thing God was doing in sending Jesus demanded a response. It called for people to repent, and in the succeeding verses, we see that it led the disciples who Jesus called to join Him to say "yes" to leave behind their lives of commercial fishing to fish for people with Jesus.

Jesus' message, "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" had significant implications for Jesus' 1st Century audience, and it has significant implications for us as well. I'd like to have us think through this in several ways. First, reflect on the significance of God looking at you and declaring, "You are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you." Are you able to grasp that truth deep in your soul? Can you set aside your flaws, past failures, weaknesses and current struggles and accept that if you are in Christ, God looks at you and says, "You are my beloved daughter or son, and I'm delighted in you." As you grasp that truth this morning, how does it change your view of yourself, and how does it change your circumstances and your perspective?

Secondly, I'd like us to reflect on the implications of God's kingdom being here now and Jesus being the Lord of our lives. Have you heard the statement, "If Jesus isn't Lord of all, He's not Lord at all?" How does that impact you? As you reflect on Jesus' Lordship, is there an area of your life that you struggle to give Jesus full Lordship over? Is there a step the Holy Spirit is asking you to take to dedicate this aspect of your life fully to Jesus?

Mark wrote his gospel with a sense of urgency. He was calling his readers to respond to the Good News that Jesus was King, and Jesus' arrival meant God's kingdom has come. Jesus' coming and the arrival of God's kingdom isn't a general truth that's disconnected from us. It calls for a response from each of us. How will you and I respond to Jesus' Lordship and the reality that God's kingdom is here?