

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Responding to the Good News"

Scripture: Psalm 61:1-5, Mark 1:1-20

Opening Hymn: Blest be the God of Israel 752, God of grace and God of glory 490

Closing Hymn: Lord of all power 626

Children's Hymn: Those who wait on the Lord 662 or We are marching (with Xhosa lyrics) 639

Choruses: Cry of my heart, Step by step

Rev. Steve Filyk

January 12, 2020

3rd Sunday after Christmas

Baptism of our Lord

Last week I was getting antsy.

I was impatient for Christmas to be over,
and all the decorations put away.

It's not like I didn't enjoy the celebrations...

We had a wonderful Christmas here at St. Andrew's

My family had a wonderful Christmas at home.

All the presents, the goodies, the visits from relatives...
We watched movies and played board games...
Christmas was wonderful.

But at a certain point I was finished with the holidays.

I wanted the whole family back in our regular routine.

And so I was delighted to come home last Sunday afternoon

And see Amy taking the decorations off the Christmas tree.

I grabbed the pruning sheers

And delimbed that tree with relish

(we weren't going to drag a shedding tree across the house).

Amy seemed more solemn, reverent,
As she ushered those limbs outside.

PAUSE

So did you enjoy Christmas?
Were you happy to get back to business as usual?

It is interesting to consider that desire
To get back into a regular routine,
To go back to business as usual.

If Christmas IS that world changing event
we have proclaimed this season,
that reminder of how God has become one of us
it would seem that business as usual is not an option.

PAUSE

Today we begin a journey through the Gospel of Mark.

According to one authority
The Gospel of Mark “is attributed to [Mark] the Evangelist,
an associate of [Paul]and a disciple of [Peter]...

It is the shortest and the earliest of the four Gospels,
presumably written during the decade
preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Most scholars agree that it was used by [Matthew] and [Luke]
in composing their accounts;
more than 90 percent of the content
of Mark's Gospel appears in Matthew's
and more than 50 percent in the Gospel of Luke.

[And] Although the text lacks literary polish,
it is simple and direct..."ⁱ

It IS simple and direct.
You probably noticed that in today's lesson.

In a short span of twenty verses:
The book is introduced;
we encountered the ministry of John the Baptist;

Jesus is baptized and then tempted;
Jesus announces his ministry,
And calls his first disciples.

The Gospel of Mark moves at a whirlwind pace.

The key verse to today's passage
And maybe the entire book
Is found at verse 15:

"The time has come...
The kingdom of God has come near.
Repent and believe the good news!"ⁱⁱ

Jesus announce a new state of affairs breaking into the present.
A new kingdom has been unveiled,
a new reign is being revealed.

It's a kingdom unlike those of Greece and Rome
That the people had experienced.

It's a kingdom unlike those of Washington or Beijing
that have yet to come.

The kingdom of God is less concerned about empires and edifices
And more concerned about individuals embracing God's rule.

As if to demonstrate the validity and authority
and arrival of this new kingdom,
Jesus invites two sets of brothers to join him
And as soon as he utters the word
They leave their nets and follow him.

At the outset of Mark Jesus announces a turning point in history
That comes with the revelation of his presence.

Many of you have experienced this kingdom.

You've encountered God's reign
In an answered prayer or in a miracle,
In a call to faith or the discovery of a vocation,
in a word of divine encouragement or divine rebuke.

Many of you have experienced this kingdom.
So, what does it mean for us that this reign has begun?

In Jesus' announcement, the "indicative claim
that the kingdom is at hand,
That God is graciously at work"
leads to an imperative "to repent and believe".ⁱⁱⁱ

That is, in response to what God has done and is doing,
We are called to repent and believe.

Repentance.
We often associate repentance
With feeling bad and saying we're sorry.

Earlier in the passage we are told
That people were confessing their sins
In response to John's message.
That's all part of repentance.

But the deeper part of repentance
is about our orientation to life.

"Repentance means of change of mind
that leads to a change of behavior.
In repentance a person's intellectual and spiritual horizons
are radically reshaped... so that there is a change
of heart and behavior."^{iv}

The arrival of God's kingdom demands repentance.
And it also commands belief.

When we say we 'believe' in something
We are often acknowledging its feasibility or validity or existence.
"I believe in ghosts", someone might say.

But while faith includes intellectual assent
It means much more than that.
Belief is dependence and reliance.
Belief is loyalty and trust.

Belief is more akin to the confidence
that you have in your daughter or your neighbor;
the one who checked in on you daily when you were ill.

Belief is more akin to the confidence, reliance, trust
That you have in that individual
than your interesting theories about UFOs.

God's kingdom demands repentance,
And it commands belief.

PAUSE

In today's passage Jesus tells us that a new era has begun.
This means that even after Christmas
There is no more business as usual.

Rather than falling back into those old routines
That deaden our senses (like binging on trashy tv)
We are invited into new life-giving habits
(like caring for our neighbors).

We are following Jesus.

Rather than sharing what's left over
Of our finances and our energies
(There's not much left come January)
We are giving God the authority to alter calendars
And budgets—to change our priorities.

We are following Jesus.

When Simon and Andrew,
James and John, hear Jesus' voice, everything changed:
They left their nets and followed him.

They were following Jesus.

So can we expect 2020 to be business as usual?
Can we expect life to go back to normal
When we box up the decorations
And hall the Christmas tree outside?

Not a chance.
For “the time has come...
The kingdom of God has come near...”

And by God's grace nothing remains the same.
Amen.

ⁱ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica "Gospel According to Mark" <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gospel-According-to-Mark>

ⁱⁱ Mark 1:15 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee Barrett "Theological Perspective, Mark 1:14-20" Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

^{iv} Walter J. Abraham "Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Gospels* 173