**THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR  
Mark 1:14–20**

***“‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near.  
Repent and believe the good news!’” (v. 15)***

In today’s world, it appears that things are getting worse, that not offending people has become more important than truth, and that people who speak the truth according to their consciences face consequences. But we should not lose hope, for it was at such a dark time when John was imprisoned for speaking the truth that Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God near. In today’s passage, Jesus announces the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God and calls his first disciples. We’ll learn about the meaning of the kingdom of God and how to receive it, as well as about the calling to follow Jesus and how it relates to God’s kingdom.

1. **The Kingdom Is Near (vs. 14–15)**

As we studied last week, John the Baptist was a righteous prophet who boldly challenged people to repent and prepare their hearts to receive Jesus. John fearlessly challenged even King Herod, rebuking his many sins including his immoral relationship with his brother’s wife. So Herod threw him into prison. But did the work of the gospel stop there? Look at verse 14: “***After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.***” Wicked men could not stop the work of God. Jesus began his Galilean ministry, proclaiming the good news of God. As we learned from the previous passage, the good news of God, or the gospel, is the joyful message that God has come in the person of Jesus Christ to save sinners who believe in him.

Mark summarizes Jesus’ proclamation of the good news in verse 15. Let’s read it all together again: “***‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’***” Jesus’ message here has three parts; let’s think about each one.

First, “***The time has come***”. This was a call to awakening. The period of waiting was over, and now, the time they were waiting for had arrived at long last. So what were they awaiting? Ever since people first sinned against God, God had promised a Savior to defeat the power of the devil and redeem fallen humanity. As the Israelites groaned under their miserable slavery and oppression in Egypt, all humanity suffered in bondage to sin, awaiting God’s redeemer. The Jews especially waited eagerly for the Messiah to come like Moses and rescue them from all their oppressors. God had promised the people of Israel that a king from David’s line would establish a kingdom over Israel that would never end (Jer 23:5, Isa 9:7). In Daniel 2, God gave King Nebuchadnezzar a vision, which Daniel interpreted, concerning future world power nations and culminating in the coming of God’s kingdom. Daniel 2:44 says, “*In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.*” That time of the coming of God’s kingdom through his promised Messiah had come at last.

Second, “**The kingdom of God has come near.**” Many Jews expected that the kingdom God had promised would be an earthly, political kingdom, just like the kingdom of Israel during the reign of King David. However, this is not what Jesus had come to do, for the kingdom of God is not like earthly kingdoms. Jesus said to Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world*” (Jn 18:36). So what is the kingdom of God? Most generally, a kingdom is where a king reigns, the domain wherein he is obeyed and honored as king. So we can think of the kingdom of God as the spiritual domain, spanning across ethnicities and earthly borders, comprising everyone who reveres and obeys Jesus as King.

We all desire a perfect leader, one who will rule with justice and righteousness and fix all our problems. Obama promised hope and change, and now Trump claims that he alone can fix America’s problems. But the truth is that no earthly leader can usher in the peace and prosperity the human heart longs for. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and only his reign brings true peace, peace unlike the world offers that the world cannot take away. When the kingdom of God comes into our hearts, we can experience such peace, and also freedom, power, and joy.

Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10) was a wealthy tax collector, but he was miserable, a slave to his greed. Having traded his human dignity for money, he had been ostracized from Jewish community and branded a traitor, and he had discovered that money could not grant the happiness he had pursued. But when Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was passing through town, he saw a glimmer of hope. Jesus called Zacchaeus by name and went to stay at his house that day. Zacchaeus gladly welcomed Jesus into his home and into his heart as King. Zacchaeus was freed from greed and completely repented, giving away half his possessions to the poor and vowing to repay anyone he had cheated four times the amount. The kingdom of God came into his heart, restoring his dignity and ushering in peace, joy, and contentment that no amount of money could purchase.

The kingdom of God can also refer to the manifestation of God’s authority and power. Jesus told his detractors in Luke 11:20, “*But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*” Jesus’ divine work of preaching authoritatively, healing infirmities, and exorcizing evil spirits demonstrated that God’s kingdom had come powerfully in their midst. The prophet Isaiah had foretold that when God came to save his people, “*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy*” (Isaiah 35:5-6a). Jesus’ miraculous healing ministry indicated that God had come down to rescue his people and establish his kingdom.

One confusing aspect of the kingdom of God is that though it is already established, it is not yet fulfilled. Even though in Jesus, the kingdom of God *had* come near, still Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “*Your kingdom come*” (Lk 11:2). So even while we live as citizens of God’s kingdom, we await Jesus’ second coming when he will fully assert his dominion over every part of creation and all his enemies will be subjugated. So the kingdom of God also refers to the new heavens and new earth, the glorious eternal hope to which we look forward.

Third, “**Repent and believe the good news.**” Jesus teaches the way to receive the kingdom of God: through repentance and faith. To repent here refers to turning from an existing object of trust, such as oneself or false gods. It is not merely confessing specific sins, but admitting that one’s whole life direction is fundamentally wrong. It means acknowledging that one is a sinner and incapable of saving oneself. To believe is to commit oneself to a new object of faith. It is to trust in Jesus as one’s personal Savior for forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Belief involves the mind, for we assent to the facts about Jesus presented in the Bible and agree with his teaching, but if there is no impact on our lives, then it cannot be called belief.

Repentance and faith are inseparable—like two sides of the same coin. Repentance without faith is merely remorse and doesn’t lead to a truly changed life. Remorse sounds like this: “I know I’ve made some mistakes, and in retrospect I would have acted differently, but I’m only human; we all mess up sometimes.” In contrast, we see a picture of true repentance in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. Jesus told of a young man who wanted to live apart from his father, so he took his inheritance, moved to a distant land, and wasted all his money partying. But when he hit rock bottom, he made a decision to leave his miserable life and throw himself at the mercy of his Father. Luke 15:21 gives the prodigal son’s heartfelt confession: “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*” His father embraced him and threw a feast celebrating his son’s return. The prodigal son’s confession of guilt was matched with his action of turning from his old life and returning to his father, trusting in his father’s mercy and love—that is, faith.

Conversely, belief without repentance is nothing more than intellectual assent. In Mark’s gospel many demons confess Jesus’ identity as, for example, the “Son of the Most High God” (Mk 5:7), yet because they don’t turn from evil, their eternal fate is wrath and judgment.

Jesus told Nicodemus that “…*no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*” (Jn 3:3) and taught him that the way to be born again is to believe in Jesus (Jn 3:15). True belief that leads to seeing and entering the kingdom of God starts with believing in Jesus, and it results in new birth, that is, living a new life.

Jesus invites us to enter his kingdom and receive new and eternal life in him through repenting and believing the good news. The kingdom of God comes to anyone who repents and believes the good news no matter what kind of sinner they may be, like the prodigal son or Zacchaeus. The way of salvation is very simple; God’s intent it not to make it hard to enter his kingdom, but to open the doors wide. So what does it look like when people respond to Jesus’ invitation? Let’s take a look.

1. **Jesus Calls His First Disciples (vs. 16–20)**

Immediately after summarizing Jesus’ message, Mark shows how four fishermen responded to Jesus. Look at verses 16–18: “***As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 17 ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ 18 At once they left their nets and followed him.***” The men whom Jesus called to follow him had already heard his teaching about the kingdom and his call for repentance and faith. Jesus now turned it personal by asking them specifically to follow him as his disciples. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, “The call to follow implies that there is only one way of believing on Jesus Christ, and that is by leaving all and going with the incarnate Son of God.” So Jesus’ invitation to follow him was not something above and beyond what he asked everyone, but it was a rephrasing of the same gospel proclamation. Repentance and faith in Jesus is to break with one’s old way of life and to follow Jesus, making a personal commitment to him in response to his call. Every Christian faces the same invitation to follow Jesus as his disciple. Through this brief encounter, we can learn about what it means to be Jesus’ disciple.

From the very first chapter of Mark’s gospel until the end, Jesus’ disciples are a part of Jesus’ life story. Raising disciples was a large part of how Jesus spent his short time in ministry. We can even say that training the Twelve was the focus of Jesus’ ministry, for when he preached to the crowds, he used parables, but later he explained the meaning to his disciples (Mk 4:34). Discipleship was Jesus’ primary method of evangelizing and spreading the kingdom of God.

When Jesus asked his disciples, “***Follow me,***” he was inviting them to trust in him for their salvation, to come to him and have fellowship with him, to learn from him and follow in his footsteps and continue his work after he left. The Twelve literally followed Jesus around wherever he went, listening to his teaching, asking him questions, seeking to know him more. They went through fierce storms with him and faced hunger and thirst together. Jesus didn’t stay where it was safe and comfortable but went where the Father led him, even to the cross. Nowadays, Jesus isn’t here with us physically, but he is spiritually present on earth, and he still invites us, “Come, follow me.” This involves leaving our comfort zone and stepping out in faith and obedience to go where Jesus sends us.

Look at verse 17 again: “***‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’***” Jesus had a wonderful hope for four fishermen. Before Jesus came to them, they struggled to catch fish, working for their daily subsistence and to build their own kingdom. They were nobodies, fighting just to make a living, with no thought of living for anything greater than themselves. But when Jesus saw them, he saw great potential, not because of who they were, but because of what he could do with them. He saw how instead of fishing fish into their nets, they could fish people into God’s kingdom. He saw that they could be apostles, evangelists, and disciple-makers.

We can think of fishing for fish as representing a worldly lifestyle, chasing the riches and pleasures of this life. What many people seek in life is to get an education, find a career, raise a family, and work until retirement, when you travel and play golf. But fishing for fish is so small and insignificant compared with what God has in store for us. At the end of your life, you've eaten up all your fish, and you have nothing of lasting value. Jesus has a great hope and vision for our lives; he wants to use us for eternal, kingdom work. Fishing for people means inviting souls into God’s kingdom and raising them as Jesus’ disciples, and it is eternally significant. Jesus considered one soul valuable enough to purchase at the cost of his blood. And Jesus gives us the opportunity to work for what he valued, alongside him. We should learn God's value system to value saved souls of God's people most of all and work for them, for the work of expanding God’s kingdom through discipleship is the most glorious and meaningful life. Fishing for fish may store up treasure in the kingdom of this world, but fishing for people stores up treasure in heaven and builds God's kingdom.

I'm reminded by this story of how God called David and Moses from tending sheep to lead God's people. Just as shepherding sheep taught necessary qualities for shepherding God's people, so fishing for fish trained good qualities for fishing for people, such as teamwork, persistence, and courage to brave the stormy seas. I suspect every legitimate occupation has lessons we can learn from them to apply to God's work. Students can learn to study the Bible. Teachers can learn how to teach it. HR directors can learn to select and train promising disciples. Healthcare professionals can learn compassion for sin-sick people. God has a purpose in each of our lives to spread the kingdom.

Let’s look at how the fishermen responded to Jesus’ call. At once, Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed him (18). Without delay James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him (20). The nets represent possessions, employment, earthly security, and one’s old way of life; Zebedee is representative of family and friends. Jesus’ disciples left all this to follow Jesus, and for them it was a bargain. Jesus is worth all our commitment; his kingdom is worth leaving everything to gain. Jesus later taught about the value of his kingdom in Matthew 13:44, “*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.*”

One man who took Jesus up on his offer to follow him was Charles T. Studd. Studd was one of the so-called “Cambridge Seven”, a group of men whom God called to the mission field while they were still college students. Charles was a remarkably skilled cricket player from a wealthy family, and could have lived a comfortable life of sports fame in England, but he knew Jesus was calling him to something different. Charles gave away his family inheritance and served as a missionary in China, India, and Congo. When asked about his decision to face the hardships of mission life, he famously responded, “If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.” The willingness of this popular, athletic, wealthy young man to forsake the comforts of home to spend his life bringing the kingdom of God to the poor and unreached inspired many others to similar decisions of faith.[[1]](#footnote-1) Studd personally testified that Jesus made good on his promise in Matthew 19:29 “*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.*”

The time has come; now is the time when Jesus is inviting us to enter his kingdom and to live for his kingdom. Jesus asks us to repent, believe the good news, and follow him as his disciples, being ready to leave anything for his sake. When we submit to Jesus’ kingship and follow him, the kingdom of God will reign in our hearts and spread through our lives. May God’s kingdom come in this church and at the U of M and throughout this nation!

1. Sources: *The Fuel and the Flame* by Steve Shadrach and <http://www.eaec.org/faithhallfame/ctstudd.htm> retrieved 9/10/2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)