

A sermon preached on the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany, January 21, 2024
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Jonah 3:1-5, 10. Psalm 62:6-14. 1 Corinthians 7:29-31. Mark 1:14-20

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Do you find that you don't always understand what God is doing in your life and in our world? You are not alone. All of wrestle with these things.

In today's gospel it must have been very confusing for the people who heard Jesus speak publicly for the first time. Perhaps they were attracted to this new rabbi's face, his energy, his personality, or presence, but they must have had real difficulty understanding what he was trying to communicate.

Mark says that after John was arrested, Jesus walked to Galilee, in the north of Israel and began proclaiming the good news of God. When you think of God, do you think about God as good news for your life, good news for our war torn, angry, divided, hurting nation and world? Perhaps Jesus came to bring a depth of good news that we have not yet fully understood.

In the time of Jesus, the Roman Empire controlled Israel and most of the Mediterranean world. Watching Roman soldiers patrolling the streets every day and having to pay exorbitant taxes to the Romans did not feel like good news to most people. Where is God? Why isn't God helping us? Why isn't God liberating us from Roman control? Jewish people had lots of doubts and questions about God and the Jewish scriptures and what the religious leaders taught and how all this connected with their daily lives. So what did Jesus say to those struggling and questioning folks?

Mark gives a concise summary of what Jesus taught: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

If you were in the crowds who heard Jesus say: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" what would you have thought? Do you understand those words? What do they mean to you right now as you hear them?

Let's explore these words. Jesus begins, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." Down through the centuries, Jewish poets and prophets had been talking about God's promise to come and straighten out the messes made by human beings in every generation. God constantly called people to change their way of thinking and living and to follow God's way of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. God promised when people lived in harmony with God's ways, God would bring peace and justice, healing for the sick, food for the poor, love and joy in places of despair. But nothing changed. The same old violence and wars, rich folks greedy for more money and power at the expense of everyone else seemed to be the tragic story of life on this planet.

Jesus disrupted this same-old/same old pattern when he said, now the time is fulfilled, the time has come when God is going to begin working in new ways through Jesus, just as God's Spirit promised through the poets and prophets. A new season is beginning. The kingdom of God has come near, right here, right now.

The crowd must have wondered, What does the kingdom of God mean?

The Greek word for kingdom is *basileia*, which refers to a region controlled by a king. But what would God's kingdom look like? Was Jesus going to be the new king for the Jews who would defeat the Romans and take control of the whole Roman Empire?

Jesus kept using this confusing phrase, "the kingdom of God" throughout his ministry. In fact, the most frequent topic Jesus talked about in the Gospels was the kingdom of God. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus said, "Seek first, above everything else, the kingdom of God and everything else you need will be taken care of".

Jesus taught his disciple how to pray saying, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We continue to pray this same prayer. It describes God's kingdom as what things will be like when everyone and everything in the universe lives in harmony with God's will and purpose on earth as in heaven. That would certainly be good news!

Yet the language of kingdom is difficult for us to understand in our generation. Some scholars have begun to call it "the reign of God", an image of God as ruler over the universe so that everything functions on earth as it does in heaven, fulfilling God's loving will and purpose. Other scholars have used the phrase the "kin-dom" of God, meaning that we are all kin, part of the same family with God, kin with all human beings, with all creatures, with the whole planet. We are all related, all interconnected, all functioning in relationships with everything else as God has designed. Does it seem strange that Jesus would talk about everyone and everything being related or connected in God's kingdom?

I am not trained as a scientist but let me venture out of my comfort zone for a moment. Do you know that quantum physicists tell us that everything in the universe is made up of interconnected relationships? Each atom is made up of the inter-connected relationships of protons, neutrons, and electrons. So an atom is not one isolated thing. Each atom is the inter-connected relationship of three particles. And all atoms are in relationships with all other atoms which make up the entire universe.

Biologists and chemists study how all life, all elements inter-relate with each other in the ecology of the universe, the earth, the animal kingdom, human communities, the micro communities of germs and microbes. And scientists who study the cosmos speak of the ways in which the galaxies, stars, black holes all are interconnected energies from their big bang beginning up to this moment and continuing to evolve into the future.

Now, you may think that I've taken us into a science class and a long way from today's Gospel, but perhaps Jesus is speaking from this cosmic perspective as he is preaching to the crowds in Galilee. Perhaps he is inviting folks, then and now, to look at life and engage with God and all life from a much larger perspective, instead of from the narrow perspective of what we normally think about with our little individual lives and understandings. Perhaps Christ is trying to help us understand that God is always intimately involved in evolving the cosmos through relationships with human beings, with animals, with atoms and galaxies. Perhaps God is inviting us all to engage in a new quality of interactions, in loving harmony with God, with ourselves and among all our interconnected relationships in the universe.

This may be an inspiring vision of cosmic good news, but for the people to whom Jesus was speaking and to us, there is still this problem of evil, of war, of people rejecting God and the needs of their neighbors and thinking only about getting more power and money and control for themselves. How will Christ change self-centered human beings to become active participants in God's global and

cosmic kingdom of loving relationships? Through his words and example, Jesus says: “Repent and believe or trust the Good News.”

To repent means to turn around, to change our thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions, to move in a different direction. The call to repent is not so much word of judgement, as it is a word of loving invitation and urgent call from God that we need to keep learning about how to live better, to stop trying to be in control and trust God to be in charge, to let God keep changing and maturing us and all our relationships and perspectives throughout our lives as part of God’s kingdom network of love.

Jesus was saying to first century folks and to us: wake up, look at life, respond to life in a different way. Believe and trust the good news that I’m at still at work in this world, in and through you, at work among all people, all living things on this planet, in the cosmos, bringing hope, opening up a better way of more just, loving, respectful, joyful relationships in and through all interactions.

Jesus did not change the self-focused, power and control traits of human beings and the Roman Empire by force, or laws, or military power. Jesus began to transform the world by patiently and persistently engaging in non-violent relationships of love and healing, by asking questions, by inviting people to follow him, to watch and learn and practice his way of love.

After Jesus spoke to the crowds, he immediately began to practice his strategy of transforming the lives of people through relationships. He found a few fishermen cleaning their nets and he asked them to follow him. Surprisingly, they immediately left their nets and families and followed him. Jesus initiated this new season of God’s network of Spirit empowered relationships on this planet, by inviting a small group to follow him, to receive the transforming power of his Spirit to help them learn and embody this loving relational way of life which would change the world.

And this same Jesus comes to each of us this morning and every morning to give us a fresh invitation: will you begin again today to follow me, to let me guide you to live as part of my creative network of loving relationships, so you can be part of bringing my good news to a hurting world?

If Jesus was here speaking to us this morning, I think he would begin by thanking this congregation for all the many ways we are already participating in his network of loving relationships. We can give thanks together for the joy we find in making the lives of many people locally and around the world a little better through our words, actions and contributions.

And Jesus might note that he sees many of us getting weary, feeling helpless, feeling overwhelmed and despairing at the enormous problems in our nation and world. This morning Jesus might remind us of his struggles as he sought to live God’s way of loving relationships in a violent society. To follow the Jesus way of love is costly. It involves sacrifices and daily practice.

We have been blessed to have Christopher sharing his world class gifts on the organ to inspire our worship and encourage us in living the Jesus way of love. As we admire Christopher’s musical gift, he would be the first to tell us that that his God given gift as an organist requires daily practice and continual learning, even when he is exhausted, when he feels too busy, when he would like to do other things. Being the best organist he can be for the glory of God and the encouragement of those who hear him play requires relentless practice.

Through Christopher, and this morning’s Gospel, Christ reminds us that we also need to refocus every day on practicing our calling to be part of Christ’s network of loving relationships, daily

helping to overcome evil with good, bringing light into the darkness in little ways, with relentless, patient perseverance. We all get busy, we get weary, we are tempted to veg out, sink into despair about the world around us and our personal concerns, and ignore the needs of people around us. This week how might Christ be inviting you to repent, relying on the help of the Holy Spirit and each other, begin to change some of the ways you think, speak and act, so that you and all of us can re-focus on practicing, to the Jesus way of love, for God, for our all our neighbors on the planet, for ourselves, in partnership with millions of other people around the world who are also seeking to live as part of God's cosmic network of love.

Let us close our eyes and be still for a few moments: ...As you have listened to these reflections on today's gospel, what has caught your attention? What do you think Jesus might be saying to you?...

What little changes do you think Jesus is inviting you to make in your life this week so you can be a more vibrant, vibrant participant in God's vast network of loving relationships?...

As our closing prayer, let us pray out-loud together three times what Jesus taught us to pray and live: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." ...Amen.