

**God Never Gives Up: Kingdom Come**

Mark 1:14-15, Mark 4:26-32

Good Morning! Alice and I loved to read books with our kids. One of our favorites was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by C.S. Lewis. It's the story of 4 children who stumble into another world—a world called Narnia. Narnia is full of magic and talking animals and battling armies. But Narnia is ruled by an evil witch. Because of that, it cold. It is always winter but never Christmas. Does that feel like this week? The people in Narnia knew that there was another king—a true king—who they hoped would rescue them, but they had been waiting a very long time and nothing seemed to change. Winter dragged on and on.

That long wait for a dramatic rescue is also the situation at the end of the Old Testament. The people of Israel had constantly rebelled against God, constantly did what seemed right to them rather than what God had said, and ended up carried away into exile, which we saw last week. But even as Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was demolished, we heard a note of hope from the prophet Jeremiah. Rescue was coming! Someday people would be reconciled to God. God would save them from the mess they had gotten themselves into. The people of Israel were looking forward to a messiah who would save them. But centuries went by and they still were captives, still under the thumb of one foreign empire after another. God seemed absent. That is how the Old Testament ends.

Today we see how God's promises through the prophets were finally fulfilled. The main take aways are that 1) Jesus is the climax that the Old Testament points to, 2) the heart of Jesus' message was the arrival of God's Kingdom, and 3) that God's kingdom is already begun but not yet fully here. God's kingdom is still arriving in our world today, by God's actions in you and in me. The very name "New Testament" gives us a clue that Jesus is the fulfillment of the story. It is also called the New Covenant—those are two ways of translating the same word. This is the New Covenant that Jeremiah predicted centuries earlier. That is not a coincidence, but the fulfillment of the story. The Jews were waiting (and waiting) to be rescued. For a savior. God does send the messiah, but he wasn't what they were expecting. We get Jesus.

Not a mighty warrior, but a craftsman from the sticks. Not a wealthy king but a man with few possessions. Not a pharisee focused on perfection, but someone who is focused instead on the outsiders. God is saving his people through this surprising Jesus. More than that, he is saving the entire world.

Jesus starts his ministry with the words we read together this morning. This is how the Eugene Peterson translates them: “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.” Time’s up! The time is fulfilled. Jesus is not starting something new, he is announcing that he is what people have been waiting for. He is the fulfillment of God’s promises. Each of the 4 gospels starts with connecting Jesus back to the rest of the Bible story. Mark quotes Old Testament prophets to show how Jesus is fulfilling those prophecies. Matthew traces Jesus’ lineage back to King David and then all the way back to Abraham. Yes, Jesus is that promised descendant of Abraham who will bless the whole world! Luke follows Jesus family tree all the way back to Adam — to the very first people. Then John starts his Gospel even *before* creation—Jesus was the Word with God and was God before there was anything at all. *This* Jesus is the long-awaited savior.

If someone asked you to summarize Jesus’ teaching, what would you say? What do you think is the heart of Jesus’ message? Is it love? Is it hope? Is it salvation? Those things are all the *results* of Jesus’ message. But the good news that Jesus is announcing is that God’s Kingdom is arriving! What does that even mean? One way to think of it is that God kingdom is God putting everything right at last. The Kingdom isn’t a geographical place, it is where God is in charge, instead of everyone doing whatever seems good to them. The problems in the world all trace to people doing what seems right to them-- or worse, not caring what is right or wrong. We don’t need to look far to see the abuse, neglect and addictions that causes. When we live under God’s rule, then things can get put right again. This kingdom announcement of God putting things right is the core of Jesus’ life, his teaching, and even his death. ALL of it was pointing to one reality—God’s good kingdom is breaking into the world. When we feed the hungry, when we reach out in love to the unlovely, when we take good care of God’s creation, when we love God more than ourselves—then God’s kingdom is arriving. Evil’s days are numbered.

The church in America has often shrunk the gospel down. We want to make it all about us. We become obsessed with getting into heaven, instead of bringing heaven down to earth. When Jesus says that the kingdom is arriving, he is bringing up there down here. That is the end of the story too—ultimately heaven comes down to earth, up there comes down here. As Tom Wright says, God’s plan is not to snatch people away from earth to go to heaven, it is colonizing earth with the life of heaven. Colonizing earth with the life of heaven. As we join in Jesus’ kingdom mission we are bringing a little bit of heaven down here too. God isn’t just saving you or me, he is redeeming all of creation! God’s Kingdom is about God putting everything right at last. That was the Gospel that Jesus preached. The word Kingdom is used 123 times in the four gospels! It is always the focal point. Words meaning save or saved or salvation show up less than half as often. Jesus does save us, but he saves us *through* the arrival of God’s Kingdom. Jesus’ message—from birth to his death-- was always about bringing up there down here.

We get a picture of God’s kingdom through Jesus’ miracles. They are not just random acts of kindness—they are windows for us to see what God’s kingdom is like—it is where blindness and illness are healed. Where things like leprosy that make people into outcasts are wiped out. Where even death is conquered. God’s kingdom is not being a zombie under a harsh dictator; it is joyfilled life where everything is put right at last.

We worry about kings because all our human kings are fallible. All of them get seduced by power. But what if the *true* king was perfectly good, and totally able to fix things, and fair and loving? A kingdom ruled by that kind of king would be great! That is the kingdom Jesus announced.

Jesus’ message was Time’s up, the kingdom is here, so repent and believe the good news. The Greek word translated repent is *metanoia*—it means to change your mind. Change your mind. In the Message it was translated “Change your LIFE!” Stop assuming that our broken world is ok. Start believing that God’s kingdom is coming into the world! Stop contributing to the kingdom of evil and selfishness. Start believing that up there is coming down here. Change your mind and believe the good news that God’s kingdom is coming into the world, thanks to Jesus.

That *sounds* great-- but is it real? It is easy to imagine someone objecting: "So—you are saying that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world? Are you kidding? Have you taken a look at what is happening in the world? Just read the papers! Just look around at any family! Look at all the pain, all the brokenness. Is this what God's rule looks like? Really?? Why is God letting all of this happen?" What kind of kingdom is that??

That's a good question. Evil is all too real. Horrible things happen all the time. Tom Wright puts it like this: He says "Jesus doesn't give an explanation for the pain and sorrow of the world. He goes where the pain is the most acute and takes it upon himself. Jesus doesn't explain why there is suffering and illness and death in the world. He brings healing and hope. He doesn't allow evil to be the subject of a seminar. He allows evil to do its worst to him. He exhausts it, drains its power and emerges with new life." Jesus takes evil's worst and comes out the other side bringing life and health and hope. First Pres—Jesus is with us in our suffering. His resurrection shows that evil and death do not have the last word. No, love and life have the last word. That is what God's kingdom looks like—where love has the last word.

People in Jesus' day were hoping for a messiah who'd bring a political revolution. A mighty warrior who would change things overnight and throw out the Romans. But that isn't the kind of kingdom that Jesus was announcing. The kingdom that Jesus announces is not political. It doesn't line up with any part or any country. No, Jesus' kingdom is any place where God's will is being done, where we reach out to broken world with love and mercy. Where we love our enemies, even when it is hard. That is why Jesus taught us to pray that God's will be done, his kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus was announcing that God's kingdom is available to us. We can be part of it. The question for us is will we join in it. Will we let the kingdom bloom in our lives?

Jesus loved to teach in parables. He told a lot of parables trying to explain what God's kingdom is like. None of them use military images. Our second reading today comes from Mark chapter 4, where Jesus tells some kingdom parables. All of them are about growing things. Things that start out small and get bigger. Things that only happen slowly, over time, not all at once. The Kingdom Jesus is announcing doesn't come all at once. The first story we read compares God's kingdom to a crop growing in a field. The emphasis is on the surprising

*power* of a seed. The farmer sows the seed and then he is out of the picture—the life is in the seed, the power is in the seed, and that leads to the crop growing up, if the conditions are right. The crop is planted and growing but the harvest is not yet here. Church, this idea is key to understanding how God’s kingdom works—slowly, over time, by the power of even one single seed. Our job isn’t to force growth, it is to sow the seed of God’s love.

Jesus launched the kingdom. But it is not yet here in its fullness. God’s kingdom is both already and not yet. We can start living into it, but it won’t be completely here until Jesus’ return. Jesus is asking—are you going to join in God’s kingdom or not? The seed is planted in you—will you let it bear fruit? It is scary to let it develop—God’s kingdom growing in you changes things. Turn over your own little kingdom, your own sphere of influence—and let God rule there. That is how the kingdom comes. Every day, every hour, every decision we make-- we have that choice to turn over our kingdom to God’s kingdom. That is why we pray over and over again for God’s kingdom to come on earth as in heaven—we need to remind ourselves to let his will be done in our lives. Remind ourselves of our part in bringing up there down here.

The other story Jesus tells us to describe the kingdom is about the mustard seed. The idea is that the kingdom doesn’t appear with irresistible power. No, it can come in the smallest of ways, but over time it grows and grows until you can’t miss it. God’s smallest becomes the world’s greatest! Even the least bit of God’s kingdom makes a huge difference in our world. What a hopeful response to the problem of evil! We are those seeds, that leaven that transforms the whole loaf—we are agents of God’s kingdom. We are here to transform our communities—often through invisible, unnoticed activity. Just a tiny seed can make a huge difference. Look at how Pamela’s Closet changes lives each week! Look at the families in crisis you feed at Ronald McDonald House, or the homeless people you give food and dignity to.

Our former church in Washington started a community outreach program called Jubilee Reach. It began as a ministry to help kids with homework after school. It quickly became obvious that most of the kids needed a good breakfast, so they started offering that. Then came English as a second language classes, often for the parents. They were even able to provide nurses who gave vaccinations and did basic health checks. A few years ago Jubilee Reach was asked to provide coaches for one middle school’s sports teams. The school was

desperate for help. The church and Jubilee Reach found some volunteers. These coaches focused on respecting the kids and helping everyone to have fun and feel valued. The school discovered something shocking—their gang activity had dropped dramatically. The reading test scores of the students soared. Not just for the kids on teams, but the whole school's scores! Somehow the culture of the school was changing because of these volunteer coaches. Because of kids being loved in the name of Jesus. A little bit of up there was coming down here. The next year ALL of the middle schools wanted in. Can you imagine the discussion at the public school board meeting about inviting a Christian group to come into the schools? But the principals insisted on it so they did it and the miracle kept spreading—gang activity dropped and reading pass rates skyrocketed. These coaches ended up being offered offices in the schools so they could be available to the kids more of the time. It all started as a seed. First Pres, just a little bit of the Kingdom of God can transform the whole community! I wonder how we might be called to be a mustard seed to transform the Wasatch Front?

We are living in this time of already and not yet—the kingdom has already begun but has not yet fully arrived. God has called us into his loving kingdom; and he sends us out as his ambassadors. We don't have to be afraid. We have a good King, the *true* King and he has won the ultimate victory. Let's live in faith for King Jesus! And as we do that-- what seeds will you plant?

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you for coming to earth; for bringing God's reign back to our broken and hurting world. Thank you for planting your kingdom seeds in the most surprising places and for using even the littlest things to make big impacts. Lord use us—help us to trust you, help us to turn over our little kingdoms to be part of your coming Kingdom. We love you Jesus—help us to show your love out in our neighborhoods and schools and workplaces this week. In your name we ask it, Amen.