

**Immerse: The Gift of the Kingdom    The Kirkin'**  
Scripture: Mark 1: 14-15; 9:20-27    Psalm 23

It is so good to get to worship with you today! I have to say that this is the most different Kirkin I've ever been involved in! Traditionally for First Presbyterian Church, the Kirkin of the Tartan worship service concludes a weekend filled with music, shared meals, dancing, baking, crafts and shortbread. Did I mention shortbread! Normally our beautiful sandstone church is packed with people from all over the city who come to celebrate the Reformation and our Scottish heritage. On Kirkin Sunday everybody finds a Scotsman somewhere in their family tree! But this year, in 2020, our celebration must be different. While we can't sing and dance and eat beside one another in a crowd, we are so grateful for the technology that brings us together. We thank God for the fellowship of our shared faith and the ability to be together spiritually even while separate physically. Welcome!

Some of you come to the Kirkin every year, it is a beloved tradition. For others of you watching at home this service is a step into the unknown—an act of courage to check out something outside your comfort zone. Thank you for joining us! Many people have mistaken ideas about Christianity—sometimes they heard those mistaken ideas in church! Others have been hurt by people in the name of religion. I think God weeps for all of that. Norman Vincent Peale said that there are two primary forces in the world—fear and faith. Fear moves us to destructiveness or sickness or failure. Only rarely will fear lead to any accomplishment. But faith is different. Peale says faith is the greater force and it can drive itself into your consciousness and set you free from fear forever. Today I want to talk about the difference that faith in Jesus can make for you, right now.

People often think that religion—if it is real at all—is just about what might happen to you someday. It's about the future, and not really relevant to our lives now. That is a huge mistake. True faith is important *because* it changes our lives RIGHT NOW. That was Jesus' message -- he called people to experience a different kind of life—starting right now and lasting forever. He called this new life the Kingdom of God. Friends, today I want you to hear that

following Jesus is not just like buying a “fire insurance” policy in case there’s an afterlife. No! It is about entering into real life with Jesus today. The whole point is to experience God in this very moment. To live a “with God” life. That changes your today and all of your tomorrows.

There are 2 things I want you remember today: first, eternal life with Jesus, living in the Kingdom of God, can start right now, in this life. Second, you can’t earn that new life—it is a free gift from Jesus. The invitation is already waiting for you to accept it. Jesus doesn’t want to put any barriers in the way of our life together with him! You can live with Jesus starting now. This isn’t something you have to try to earn, it’s an invitation you accept. In fact, even the faith to believe that is a gift that Jesus longs to give you. It is all grace to you. It is a gift because God WANTS to be with you. That is why Jesus came. He knows you and loves you deeply. He loves you even though he knows all your secrets! He is crazy about you! That is the truth that the Reformation helped us remember. My hope for each of us today is that we will believe this good news!

Many in our congregation have been reading the New Testament book of Mark this week. Friends, Mark is a great place to get to know Jesus. One thing we see is that Jesus is constantly helping people. He never seems to care if they are religious, or well behaved, or “deserving” --- he just heals them. He can’t wait to help make them whole. In fact, the only people Jesus ever seems impatient with are the churchy types—the religious people who think they are so much better than those “sinners.” They think they have God on a leash and have tricked themselves into believing they don’t need any help. Those folks frustrated Jesus, but the reality is everyone who asks, gets help. That is still true today.

Roderick McNeely grew up with an aunt who would often bribe him with drugs and alcohol to get him to keep quiet about her own addiction. Soon enough Roderick was hooked too. As a young man he had a heart attack while using crack cocaine. He was found three days later, just barely hanging on to life. Not surprisingly, Roderick soon found himself in prison on drug charges. A few weeks after his release he was arrested again. Soon he was doing hard time in Texas. His life was a mess. But in prison he met Jesus. Not a fake jail house conversion to try to get parole, but Roderick really encountered Jesus and he connected with some other believers. Through those new friends he learned about recovery from substance abuse, about

how to be father, about how to live the life God actually wanted him to have. In 2010 Roderick walked out of prison and fell to his knees, thanking God. Soon he was back in prison---but not as a prisoner anymore. Instead he was a volunteer with Prison Fellowship, sharing the Good News about Jesus and teaching classes on anger management, reentry to society, and more. Roderick met Jesus and his life today is changed. He doesn't believe because of a hope for heaven, he believes because Jesus has changed his life and is healing him right now, in this very minute. God's kingdom came into Roderick's life and the same can be true for each of us!

At the very beginning of the book of Mark we get a one sentence summary of the Gospel from Jesus. It says that Jesus preached God's good news—the time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the good news!" In the Message translation it says "Time's up! God's kingdom is here, change your life and believe the Message."

Let's focus on three words there—Kingdom, repent and believe. First is Kingdom. That is a cringy word for us-- we are used to kingdoms led by humans—kingdoms that end up in oppression or conflict or corruption. Even our best efforts at government always fall short, because we are all fallen, selfish, power hungry people. Jesus is not talking about another kind of *human* government. This is NOT about people claiming to rule as God's representatives! That has *always* been a disaster! No, Jesus is talking about God himself being in charge-- about God bringing wholeness, healing, peace, fulfillment, joy. When you hear God's Kingdom, think wholeness. Kingdom is wholeness. Think about things at last being put the way they were meant to be. Jesus came to announce that God was launching this great rescue mission of putting everything right. It won't be complete until the end of the story, but it began during Jesus' life and is happening now. Even in a dark time like this, God is putting things right.

The Kingdom Jesus was announcing didn't stop 2000 years ago. It is happening all around us today. My wife Alice calls them "small m miracles." We see it in hungry people being fed, thanks to food banks and St Vincent's. We see it in teachers faithfully going to school, despite the uncertainties of COVID. We see it in our niece leaving her 2-year-old toddler every day to go care for sick people in a COVID Intensive Care Unit. We see it in the deacons buying pallets of water bottles for homeless people in the heat of the summer and masks so

kids can be safer back at school. We see it in the helpless being cared for, and in the powerful laying down their privilege to help others. That is God's wholeness breaking out. The kingdom comes through people choosing the subversive way of love instead of hate and anger and force. We pray for the flood of God's love and justice to pour down, but in the meantime small miracles of God's love are slowly wearing away the evil of this world.

God's kingdom has drawn near—it is available to each of us. Jesus invites each of us to join him. We can start living in God's kingdom right here and now, if we stop trying to be king ourselves. Dallas Willard said that if you want to go to heaven, go now, because it is already here! Go now! Heaven is already here. Despite the darkness, despite the anger and fear around us—Jesus' invitation stands. The question is whether we join in God's rescue mission or not. Jesus' good news is not just about hope for the future. It is about a new kind of life now.

How do we join this kingdom? That brings us to the other two words, repent and believe. Repent is another word that has a bad reputation. Many of you are shrinking back a little right now—thinking about someone yelling at you with a megaphone or wrapping your knuckles with a ruler. Repenting is not about getting a spanking. No, it literally means change your mind! Think differently! Turn around! Quit going the wrong way and start going the right direction. This is all about us getting lined up with reality. In the movie Planes, Trains and Automobiles there is a scene where Steve Martin and John Candy end up unwittingly driving the wrong way on a deserted freeway in the middle of the night. Some people on the right side of the road see them and desperately try to warn them—honking and yelling: “you're going the wrong way! You're going to kill someone!” Our heroes agree that the other people must be drunk, how could they know where they were going! Then the headlights of two semis appear over the rise in the road, bearing down on them. Disaster is imminent. The people on the other side of the road were not trying to impose harsh rules on them, they were warning them of danger! The reality is that our lives are naturally off track. We are going the wrong way. Disaster is waiting for us, if it hasn't already arrived. Jesus' call to repent is not a buzz kill, it is a life saver. Turn around. Change your mind. Behold-- the kingdom of God is at hand! Jesus invites you into a better life.

Pastor John Ortberg said that repentance does not increase God's desire to be with us, it increases our capacity to be with Him! It increases our capacity to be with God! Jesus is really saying—here I am, come be with me, quit running away! Repentance it is turning around; away from the disaster we are heading towards and instead moving in step with Jesus. Author Frederick Buechner says that to repent is to come to your senses. To come to your senses. He says true repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying I'm sorry, and more looking to the future and saying Wow!

Maybe the hardest thing to believe about Jesus' good news of God's Kingdom is that it is freely available to us. We don't have to prove ourselves worthy. We don't have to come up with the price of admission. It is accepting the invitation, not earning a reward. That is where the last word comes in. Believe. Believe the good news. Believe means trust—trust that Jesus is telling the truth. Have faith in him. Be willing to ask for help. All through Mark and the other gospels we see God's kingdom springing up around Jesus—as he heals people—mind, body and soul. He frees them from whatever has them trapped. He restores them to their communities. He makes them whole. Jesus never demands anything before he heals them. There is no fee for his services. Jesus makes people whole as a gift to them. He'll do the same for you and for me. We just need to ask.

In the second part of our gospel reading we see an example of Jesus healing someone. Here is God's kingdom showing up in this boy's life who had been plagued by seizures his whole life. The boy's father asks for help, but he hedges his bets a little—he says, "help us, if you can." "If I can?" Jesus responds. You can almost see the smile playing on his face. Then Jesus says, "anything is possible if a person believes." What comes next is maybe my favorite verse in the whole Bible—the dad cries out: "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!" I believe, help my unbelief. That is our truth. We believe but there is always that whisper of a doubt. How does Jesus respond? He immediately heals the boy! He doesn't wait to insist on more faith from the boy's father. Jesus' rescue is a free gift, just as it is today. It is grace. Jesus calls us to believe, to have faith. Eugene Peterson, the author of the Message translation, says that all people of faith he knows are sinners, doubters, uneven performers. We are secure not

because we are sure of ourselves, but because we trust that God is sure of us. We trust that God is sure of us.

Do you see friends? God's wholeness, healing, and hope are available to you today. This is not about a promise waiting in heaven, it is something we can live into right now. The time is at hand, today is the day of salvation. To get there we need to be honest—we need to change our minds and turn around. Turn away from the disasters we are headed towards. Instead, accept the invitation Jesus offers. This new life in his Kingdom is not something we earn, it is an invitation we accept. If you are having trouble even believing that is possible, just start there! Be like the man who cried out to Jesus-- help my unbelief! Jesus will always meet you where you are. No matter what you've done, no matter what that accusing voice in your head says, his arms are open. He is waiting for you. Jesus came and gave everything so you can live the fulfilling life you were made for and be with him always. Don't turn away. We don't have to keep living in our pain and piling up our regrets. Accept the gift of the kingdom that Jesus offers— and let's live lives of wholeness, looking forward and saying wow.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you for coming to save us. Thank you for launching your kingdom project and for inviting us to join with you in your rescue mission. Help each us of to turn towards you and trust you for the free gift of new life with you today. Give us all the faith to ask you to help us in our doubts and give us the humility to turn over our little kingdoms to instead live in yours, now and always. Lord be our shepherd and hold us safe, forever. In your strong name we ask it, Amen!