

The Kingdom of God has Come Near

Reverend Heather Miner

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15
Deuteronomy 3:23-28

The kingdom of God has come near. These are the first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel. Jesus didn't speak sentences like ... here's the way to cope in today's economy. Jesus didn't publish a guide to good parenting ...or great marriages. Yet Jesus' words remind me that even in today's market, even when I've blown it once again as a mother... even if I don't live into all my dreams...the kingdom of God has come near...near enough for our hands to be moved by God's hand and to carve into the world that which images his kingdom.

After Jesus' baptism, after the temptations of the desert, after the angels have waited upon him, Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God has come near. We might understand his proclamation given what seems like a spa weekend in the desert—indeed, angels waiting on him. But our text makes clear that Jesus speaks only after the one who baptizes him is dead. John's death breaks us away from any vision that Jesus spoke a naive hope born out of living the good life. We are reminded that John the Baptist is dead because John worried the authorities. Even so, Jesus proclaims: "The Kingdom of God is near."

Right from the outset we understand that this was no proclamation of acclimation to the present authorities or political rule. On the contrary, these are fighting words. Jesus' use of Kingdom suggests that what stands as the political rule of the land is less important than the Kingdom that will eventually transcend it.

Kingdom of God is one of those phrases that we who attend church a lot banter about like children hitting a balloon. We forget that Kingdom building is less a utopian dream than a battle. For Jesus to talk about the Kingdom of God suggests that the Empire of Rome has seen its day. It is a phrase with political ramifications. Given John the Baptist has just been killed because of the implications of his words, we might expect Jesus to be stockpiling weapons and leading his followers in battle exercises.

But the gospel is clear that this Kingdom is not brought about by traditional soldiering. Jesus did not

set out to create an army but disciples. Jesus didn't set out to gain power but to reclaim people from the illness that takes hold of them. Not power to fly, but sight to the blind. Not the ability to live a life free of sin, but forgiveness of sin. Not a world free of demons, but power to send them away. Not lots of money but the recognition of one whose gift of one denarius, all she had, is blessed by God. Not a massive bulldozer but prayer to move a mountain. Not a life free from death but a promise of resurrection. Not Kingdom come, where the mighty warrior God explodes upon the scene and all is made right, but 'the Kingdom of God is near' and its beginnings can be likened to simple, daily things like mustard seeds, yeast, a lost and found coin, and the like.

Not Jerusalem, the center of religious power, or Rome, the center of political power; instead, Jesus goes to be baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan.

The river Jordan is a "thin" place. Paul Gundry, a liturgy professor at Eden Seminary, spoke of "thin" places at the church vitality event recently. The "thin" places in our lives are those places where , in our walk, heaven and earth meet. The first place that came to my mind was Pilgrim Pines, the church camp above Yucaipa, because every time I've gone up the mountain I've gone with the expectation that God was going to speak to me there. I have never been disappointed. I remember quite vividly the time when I hiked early in the morning and stood above the clouds, the time I sat with an older woman and listened to her story of faith, and now the time I led our youth on retreat and learned so very much from them. I listen better there.

The river Jordan is a "thin" place in the Bible, a place where God can be seen tearing apart what has been, leading the faithful into a new future. I know some of you renewed your baptism in those waters. Would that we all be able to enter into its waters as did Jesus long ago.

We all may not be able to cross the real life river Jordan in our life time...but here, here in this church begun by a group of women who wanted children to

know about Jesus...this sanctuary filled by prayers of the saints for over 50 years...this church we pray into and out of...this building filled by those seeking God, sobriety, healing...here is a thin place, one of the thinnest, when we come expecting to be with God.

The danger is we often don't enter into the thinness of places. Instead we are busy replaying the trouble of the week or judging what is happening at the moment. Or we look to the future that it may become the new paradise, the place where all is aligned and we can finally live.

Even the most faithful fall into this trap. In our scripture today we hear Moses doing what he does best, negotiating with God. He is trying to negotiate a deal which will allow him to gain entry into the promised land. "O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness..." Oh please. Only begun to show you...? This is the Moses who was given the words and power of the plague to defeat Pharaoh, this was the Moses who led Israel out of slavery through the God parted Red Sea, this is the Moses who has received manna from heaven and all he and his people have needed for 40 years...this is the Moses who speaks to God like none other, face to face. And he suggests God has only just begun...

"Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon."

As if entering into the promised land holds more of God for Moses than what has come before.

It is probably true that the days that follow Joshua, the days of David and Solomon's reign, brought to Israel an easier life, a higher standard of living, a freedom to believe God was on their side and no one could mess with them and live. The promised land was a good place to live. Yet, I'm hearing today from scripture that the wilderness held no less of God than did the promised land.

I think that's why Moses tells of God's anger: "But the LORD was angry with me on your account and would not heed me. The LORD said to me, "Enough from you! Never speak to me of this matter again!"

I love how we hear the voice of Moses in Deuteronomy. He gives a report of his own misdeed. Preachers often do that...because we learned something and it is that learning we want to share.

"Go up to the top of Pisgah and look around you to the west, to the north, to the south, and to the east. Look well, for you shall not cross over this Jordan."

And I hear...but you've crossed over others, you have crossed into the world of my promise, a world that is not tied to the land of milk and honey. You have lived within that world throughout your days.

Even before Jesus, Moses, the voice of Israel, comes to terms with the idea that he has known God as fully as one can know God, outside of the Promised Land.

So Jesus returns us to the Jordan and leaves the old promise behind. Jesus vividly illustrates to us that ultimately God's promise is not tied to land, a destination, or a future. God's kingdom is not tied to a land, or a destination, or a future, but with our willing hands is carved into our present.

Far from Jerusalem in the rocky hills of Ethiopia, are cathedrals, not built upward in the way of Europe, but dug by hand out of the limestone ground. When Islam came into power those in Ethiopia could no longer move so freely to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. So they decided to make Jerusalem there.

A passage from the book Ethiopia, the Unknown Land: "...Perched on the slopes of Mount Abuna Yosef, in a remote and mountainous region not easy to traverse," lies Lalibela. "At Lalibela, there are eleven churches, cut in most cases completely out of the solid rock, designed according to legend after a vision by the Zagwe emperor of the Heavenly Jerusalem. ...

Along the valley of a river – itself canalized in places into a rock-cut channel—called Yordanos after the Jordan, ...the workmen excavated vast trenches. They isolated immense blocks of the living rock, which the masons then in turn transformed into colonnaded, arched and domed churches.

It is not inconceivable that the cutting of these churches could have been a deliberate response to provide an alternative for pilgrims for the city that had such a profound grip on the Ethiopian imagination, but was so difficult for them to reach." (Stuart Munro-Hay, Ethiopia, the Unknown Land, 189/190)

Okay this isn't a solicitation for a new building program for our church, well not one that requires a chisel. But the Ethiopian churches carved out of the mountains upon which they live is a great image of the transformation people of faith make in their world. We are called to carve out cathedrals in our lives...yes, here in this church, and in our neighborhood, and in our family, and with our friends, and with those we barely know and those we know a long time.

At the women's retreat I quoted Henri Nouwen

who asks in his book “The Way of the Heart” , “Does everything we say need to be said?” We chuckled because we women are good at saying lots of things that probably would be best left unsaid. God said “Let there be Light and there was Light.” God didn’t wave a magic wand but used the power of word to create. We too create with words. What words we choose to speak carve something into another’s imagination. A “honey-do” carves one thing... a “thank you for doing” carves another, an expression of love without an agenda carves another still. Let me rephrase the question for today...what can we speak to carve out of our ordinary lives cathedrals, thin places, where those with whom we speak see heaven?

Those of us who seek the Kingdom of God, those who feel how near it is, see it breaking in all around us and seek to carve its image into our lives. Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to yeast in bread and a mustard seed, because the Kingdom of God isn’t a world of fantasy, but is created in day to day life, in the things of this world, in the here and now.

I began this message by lifting up Jesus’ first words, suggesting that in the contemplation of them, we will gain more than if he gave seminars on specific topics for today. He leaves the seminars for you. Instead Jesus opens our imaginations to the possibility, the reality, of the nearness of God.

Simply imagine the difference it makes when you enter into your home after a long day’s work believing the Kingdom of God may be found there. Imagine what difference it makes, if at work, amidst the changes you cannot control, you thought of, you looked for, you sought to carve into the sometimes desperate situations the image of the Kingdom of God. Imagine a day with your children who are tiring you out taking a deep breath and looking into their eyes, seeking there the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is near...it is up to us to carve the cathedrals that testify to his power and love.