

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Jonah 3: 1 – 5, 10
1 Corinthians 7: 29 – 31

Ps. 62: 6 – 14
Mark 1: 14 – 20

Twenty-one years ago, about this time of year, I was the only person in my graduating seminary class lucky enough to take GOEs (General Ordination Exams - national exams within the Episcopal Church) and both written and oral canonical exams for my particular diocese. The canonical exams were down at Honey Creek. The oral exams were in front of about a dozen or more folks, both lay and clergy, who formed the Commission on Ministry, and who were seated around four of those long tables formed into a square. The Rev. George Maxwell, who had been (or maybe still was) the rector of Christ Church, Savannah, was the examining chaplain for Scripture. I don't remember any of the other oral exams, but I remember this one.

One of the questions that the Rev. Maxwell asked me was, 'In a nutshell, what is *the* message of the Gospel?' It was pretty obvious that he was looking for a particular answer. Now, perhaps I had somehow forgotten a discussion on this in seminary, but I had no answer. "God is love?" I proposed. "No!" he replied. Rather emphatically. "It is that the Kingdom of God has come near!" Well, this started a lively discussion around the table, because apparently others had missed that key point as well. The longer they discussed it, the less time they had to ask me other questions, so I just sat there quietly and let them duke it out. The Rev. Maxwell won, needless to say.

The Kingdom of God has come near. These are Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark. They mark the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and they name the essence of his message. The Kingdom of God has come near. Jesus had been baptized by John and then had gone into the wilderness with the Holy Spirit where he was tempted. In Mark's Gospel, everything moves so quickly, so it is not clear whether Jesus had joined John's ministry at the Jordan before John was arrested or whether the arrest happened while Jesus was in the wilderness. Either way, this seems to be the sign for Jesus that the fullness of God's time has arrived. It is time to begin his own ministry, so he heads back to Galilee. We find Jesus walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, proclaiming to an unspecified audience that the Kingdom of God has come near, and that people should repent and believe the Gospel, the Good News (which is what 'Gospel' means).

Whereas I had said that the heart of the Gospel was that 'God is love,' if asked, many other Christians would say that the core of the Gospel is that Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven, provided we believe this. But, according to the Rev. Marcus Borg, this is not at all what Mark's understanding of the Good News, or Gospel is. For Mark (and Matthew and Luke for that matter), the Gospel is all about the Kingdom of God. Most Biblical scholars would agree with that, says Borg. So, what exactly *is* the Kingdom of God as Jesus, Mark and the early Christian community would think about it?

First of all, the *Kingdom of God* is not about the sweet-by-and-by. It is not about some thing or some place or some time separate from this world. The Kingdom of God is about life in this world. That is not to say that there is not resurrection and a life beyond that. Rather, it is a proclamation that God is redeeming *this* world. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we say each week. On earth. Heaven's fine already. It's earth that needs a lot of help.

Secondly, for Jesus, Mark and the early Christians, “Kingdom of God” has as much political connotation as religious. For the Jews of Jesus’ time, church and state, so to speak, are one and the same. The Jews and early Christians are quite familiar with earthly kingdoms and empires. To say ‘the Kingdom of God’ is to indicate that this kingdom will be different in some way from those established by the powers of this world. The Kingdom of God implies fidelity to God, not to a King Herod or a Roman emperor.

Thirdly, the Kingdom of God, as Jesus, Mark and his audience understand it, is about transforming the world as it is on both an individual and a corporate level. The transformation will make the world into God’s vision for the cosmos, or the dream of God, as theologian Verna Dozier wrote (and as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry referred to yesterday at the Revival). In God’s world, there will be peace and justice, as the Hebrew Scriptures attest. In God’s world, justice looks like everyone having enough and no one having too much. In God’s world, nation will not make war against nation any more.

Though the phrase ‘the Kingdom of God’ isn’t necessarily that familiar to Jesus’ unspecified audience, Borg says that it names what many Jews have long hoped for and but only dreamed about. A world where exploitation and oppression don’t exist. A world where poverty and hunger and barely getting by are no more. A world in which every family will live content, sustained and unafraid of having it all taken away.

The Jews who don’t share this dream are the 1%ers of their time: the wealthy and powerful aristocrats and nobility, senior officials in the court of Herod, and the leadership of the Temple. These people are doing well in Jesus’ world, and they are fine with the status quo. God? Redeem the world? Why? I’ll let you draw your own inferences for 2000 years hence.

Just how this transformed world might come about is a subject of debate among the Jews of Jesus’ time. Some Jews think that God alone will bring about the transformation. Others think that if everyone can just obey all the laws with great faithfulness, this will bring about the transformation. Still others feel that only the passion and action of violent rebellion will bring it about. Some Jews believe, and have been waiting for, God to bring it about through a human messiah. And there are just a few who believe that God will utilize two messiahs – one royal and one priestly. In reality, probably most every Jew (except the 1%ers) hopes for this transformation by God and doesn’t really care *how* God chooses to do it, just that God does it, and the sooner, the better. So, when Mark has Jesus announce that ‘the Kingdom of God has come near,’ he is naming God’s dream. And, he is putting into a phrase the hopes and dreams of the people of Israel, the people of God. Mark is naming a different kind of world where *God* reigns. And this is the very heart of the good news, the Gospel.

The Kingdom of God *has come near*. What does that really mean? Marcus Borg notes that the Greek is very difficult to translate because of so much ambiguity in the words. “Near” can be understood either chronologically or geographically. It might mean ‘near in time,’ as in it is coming soon, but it isn’t here yet. The Greek verb might also mean ‘has come.’ As in, it’s arrived! Besides time or place, ‘near’ might also be understood in the sense of the Kingdom of God being accessible and available. One can be in it now, in this life, in this world.

Then Jesus says, “*Repent* and believe in the good news!” For many Christians, repent or repentance is primarily associated with the idea of sin and forgiveness. It’s about acknowledging guilt for things done or not done, feeling sorry, confessing the sins, making up one’s mind not to do them again, and then receiving God’s forgiveness. But, Borg says, that is NOT the meaning of repent in the

Bible, specifically in Mark's Gospel or in the good news that Jesus brings. The meaning of 'repent' is twofold, he says. First, looking at the etymology, the linguistic origins, of the Hebrew word translated as repent, it is associated mainly with the Jewish experience of the exile. It has the sense of returning. As in the journey of returning to God from a place of exile.

In Greek, the word is μετανοια (literal meaning: to turn), and that word's roots mean to 'go beyond the mind that you have.' The mind we have, that is, the way we think, is shaped by our cultural and tradition. The mind we ARE to have is shaped by God and by God's dream for this world. So, to put those two ideas together, to repent is, in Borg's words, to embark on the way of return to God by going beyond the mind that we have.

"Believe the Good News." Up until the reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries, 'believe' in either Judaism or Christianity never meant to ascribe to a certain set of statements about the faith. To 'believe' meant to commit oneself, to give oneself, to a relationship defined by loyalty and commitment. To 'believe' meant to give one's heart to something. So to believe in the Good News that the Kingdom of God has come near is to commit one's self to God, the ways of God, the Kingdom of God and a vision for a very different kind of world.

This, Mark says, is the Gospel of God which Jesus brings to us. It is all about God's dream for this world, how near it is to us and Jesus calling us to return to God by going beyond the minds that we currently have.

Earlier this week, about two dozen members and friends of Trinity joined a number of other people in walking in the parade to honor Martin Luther King, Jr. and his efforts for justice and peace. I can't help but connect that with this Gospel. Did King have a glimpse of God's vision for this world? I don't know, but I think there's a good chance that he did. He went to the mountaintop and had a vision. He went beyond the mind that he had. He knew that something better was possible, and he was willing to give his life for it. This weekend at the Revival, Bishop Curry quoted George Bernard Shaw. Shaw said, "You see things and you ask 'Why?' I dream things that never were, and I say, "Why not?" As followers of Jesus Christ, Curry said, we are the "Why not?" people of God.

The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news. I invite us to journey towards God, and to go beyond the minds that we have. Your Kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done on earth as in heaven. How will you or I respond to God's call this week to help reveal a little more of the Kingdom of God that has come near? +

References taken from "*Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Mark*," Marcus J. Borg, Morehouse Publishing, 2009.