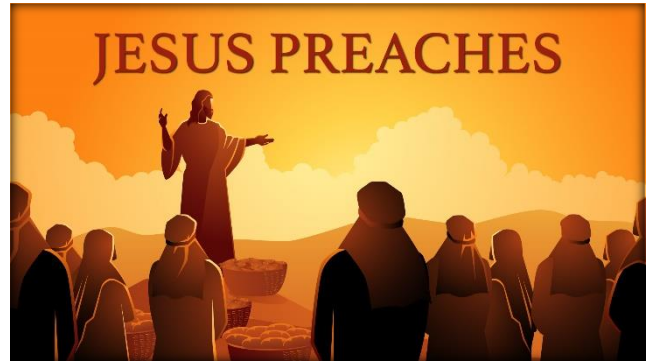


“The Kingdom of God is at Hand”

Mark 1:15; Matthew 3:1-3, Luke 4:38-44

The shortest sermon Jesus ever preached!



When I was a boy of six or seven, I waited with such anticipation for the arrival of Christmas. By the time of Christmas morning, I was wound tighter than a drum. The Jews of Jesus day were similarly wound up by the time he emerged on the scene. They had waited so long for the Day of the Lord to arrive, the day when God would usher in his kingdom, sweeping aside the hated Romans and the corrupt priests.

And so, Jesus arrives and proclaims simply:

The time has come, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news! (Mark 1:15)

It is the shortest of Jesus’ sermons but also his most important. For it means that in and through Jesus, *everything* has been changed and *nothing* will stay the same.

Certainly, the Gospel of Mark is brief and to the point. The first of the gospels to be written (mid-60’s AD), it is also the shortest. There are only 661 verses in the NIV translation of the gospel, compared to more than 31,000 for the whole of the Bible. 661 verses for Mark. They begin simply enough:

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God . . .

70 characters. . . . In this writing, as with all writing, beginnings matter. They set the stage for what is to come. We have four Gospels that have been sacred Scripture from the earliest decades of Christianity. Each of the four paints for us a different portrait of Jesus. And all four Gospels begin differently. Two tell the story of Jesus’ birth. Two introduce Jesus as he begins his public ministry. As Morna Hooker puts it, each beginning is the key that opens the Gospel to us.¹

A dramatic key

Imagine, if you can, that you’ve never heard of Jesus. A friend invites you over for a small dinner party to hear an amazing story. You arrive in the evening, a little tired and hungry. But, as everyone takes a seat, someone rises and begins reading a dramatic story.

This is a bit how it was in the first century. Mark’s Gospel, his story of Jesus, was not read, it was heard, usually among small groups of Christians gathered in homes for worship. We aren’t very practiced at listening to someone read to us. I doubt that most of us have the attention span even for a writing as brief as Mark’s Gospel. But we do attend the theater, where we might enjoy a play that lasts even two or three hours.

Mark’s Gospel must function a bit like a play when it is heard. The listener has no paragraphs or chapter headings. The listener can’t go back and reread a passage to clarify something. Thus, knowing that his Gospel would be heard, not read, Mark helps the listener along, helping us to see what is coming. Hooker points out that the first thirteen verses of Mark do just that. They are a prologue, preparing us for the dramatic events we will soon hear about in Mark’s story.

Grasping the truth

One of the most respected New Testament scholars of the last half-century is a man named Gordon Fee. Dr. Fee, now deceased, wrote some massive works on Paul’s writings, including in-depth treatments on the Holy

¹ *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*, by Morna D. Hooker of Cambridge University. Dr. Hooker helps us to see how each Gospel prologue offers us guidance on how the rest of the book should be read.

Spirit in Paul's letters and on Paul's Christology. In a book for laypeople, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, (highly recommended), Dr. Fee tells this story:

"At a recent coffee hour with students in the Regent College atrium, one student asked, 'If you were to return to the pastoral ministry, what would you do [meaning, how would you go about it? What would you emphasize?]?' My answer was immediate: 'No matter how long it might take, I would set about with a single passion to help a local body of believers recapture the New Testament church's understanding of itself as an eschatological community.' I then set about to explain why, and what that might look like in the present day. I have no illusions that it would be easy, I further explained."²

In his book, Dr. Fee went on to explain that:

"The one feature that probably more than any other distances the New Testament church from us is the thoroughgoing eschatological perspective from which believers viewed everything that God had wrought through Christ and the Spirit. Eschatology has to do with the time of the End and refers first of all to Jewish expectations that God through his Messiah would bring a dramatic end to the "present age." This in turn would be followed by the "coming age," signaled by the resurrection of the dead and the gift of the promised Holy Spirit.

"The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Here you have it. If you are looking for a one-sentence description of Jesus' ministry, this is it. These are the first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel. So, let's take a closer look at them.

The time is fulfilled For centuries, the Jews had labored under foreign rule that was often brutal. They waited with great hope and anticipation for the day when God would again rule, when God's kingdom would come, when all the world would see that YHWH is God. Jesus announces that their waiting is over – the time has come!

The kingdom of God has come near Jesus announces that, yes, God's rule is about to burst upon them; the story is coming to a climax. God will again be king. There will be no room for Caesar or any other pretenders to lordship. There will be only one Lord (and it will turn out to be Jesus!).

Repent Jesus is not inviting his fellow Jews to join some sort of social club. Rather, he invites them to recognize and to regret that they have been wrong-headed in their approach to being God's people. Jesus invites them to abandon their own agendas and follow his. This is not about simply being sorry for what they did; Jesus calls them to turn 180° and take a new path.

Believe in the good news The word "believe" can throw us off here; it makes it all seem too intellectual. Instead, Jesus speaks here of trust, of embracing Jesus and his proclamation with our whole being. The good news is that Jesus is Lord, not anyone or anything else. Our loyalty and devotion must lie with Jesus.

My experience over the last thirty-four years in ministry certainly bears out the truth of Dr. Fee's claims. My study and preaching testify that the eschatological "already/not yet" perspective is inescapable throughout the New Testament. So, this week our goal is simply understanding. Not application, not devotion . . . just understanding.

First: "A new thing"

Isaiah writes of God doing "a new thing" that "springs forth" (v. 19 above). Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth, Greece, that if "anyone is in Christ – new creation! – everything old has passed away, everything has become new" (v. 17). Such phrases are exciting and comforting, but many Christians don't quite know what to make of them – what is all this talk about the *old* going and the *new* coming?

These aren't sentimental words. Paul is not speaking metaphorically or figuratively. Instead, Paul writes about the way the world really is, the way it really works. This is concrete language grounded in things as they are. Understanding Paul and the rest of the NT writers on this will take a little effort, but I promise that the effort is worth it.

² Fee, Gordon D. *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (pp. 49-50). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

“The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15)

These are Jesus’ first words in Mark’s Gospel. What is he talking about? What time? What is to be fulfilled? What does it have to do with the kingdom of God?

Jesus and his fellow Jews shared a common perspective on the world. They believed in a God who had created everything there is and pronounced it good. But they also knew that God’s world was not as he had intended it to be. Creation was broken. Humans, despite being made in God’s image, were estranged from God. The Jews knew that God had chosen them to be the ones through whom creation would be healed. Indeed, as depicted in Figure 1, they awaited the arrival of the Messiah, the anointed of God, who would bring about God’s kingdom, healing creation and restoring everyone to a right relationship with God. The coming of the Messiah would be the climax of history. It would be the time to which God’s people had been pointing for nearly 2000 years. This would be Isaiah’s “new thing.” Exile would be ended. Sins would be forgiven. Evil would be banished. It would be God’s time. It would be God’s kingdom. God would give his people “a new Spirit.” Everyone would know God in their own hearts (see Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah

Jesus came talking about the fulfillment of this Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God’s kingdom. In God’s kingdom there are no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. In the kingdom of God there would be plenty of food for everyone, so Jesus fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes. It is vital to see the full meaning of Jesus’ miracles. They are not merely acts of compassion from a generous and loving God, they are occasions when the kingdom of God comes bursting forth for all to see.

Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, some did. In the months and years immediately after Jesus’ resurrection, these followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy



Figure 1. Jewish expectations in Jesus’ day (figures from Fee’s *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

and suffering were still present in the world. Using Figure 1 as a guide, it’s as if the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! To the average Jew, the answer was simple – Jesus wasn’t really the Messiah, hence the world still awaited the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Already/Not yet

But Jesus’ disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God’s anointed had indeed come. Thus, the problem was not with Jesus but with the Jewish perspective depicted in

the writings of the New Testament, we see a new perspective emerging, as depicted in Figure 2.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God’s kingdom had come -- but not yet in all its fullness! The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah’s coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived “between the times” when God’s kingdom had come already, but not yet. I really can’t overemphasize how important to our reading of the NT is our understanding of this “already/not yet” perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the “ends of the ages have come” (1 Corinthians 10:11), he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they

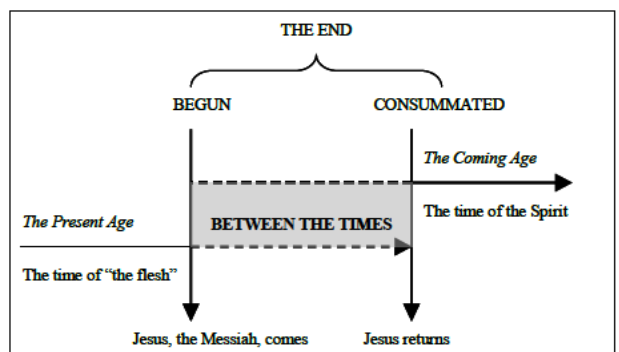


Figure 2. The Christians’ new perspective: already/not yet

wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . . and, truly, so are we!

As Gordon Fee writes, we are empowered by God's Spirit to live the life of the future, of God's kingdom, in the present age. We are to be, in Paul's phrase, "ambassadors for Christ," carrying God's message of reconciliation and hope to the world, in what we do and say every day. We are new creations not just for our own sakes but for the sake of all the world. Paul understood that in his journeys he was crisscrossing the Mediterranean founding colonies of a new human race, a people born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3). We are just such a colony. It can be hard for us to think of ourselves this way . . . but that is the nature of transformation. It may take the butterfly awhile to comprehend its own rebirth. We may not always feel like new creations. We certainly don't always act like new creations. But we are. *This is the real world.* Glory be to God!

Building for the kingdom of God

God has ushered in his kingdom . . . already (but not yet). Thus, you and I will never build this kingdom. That is God's work. Jesus will return and the kingdom will be seen in all its fullness upon God's initiative and in God's good time. The mission is God's! What we do, as part of God's work, is to build for his kingdom.

Jesus asked his disciples how they could possibly be the light to the world if they kept the light hidden from others. He told them to go out and make disciples across the entire planet. As selfish, prideful, and weak as we humans tend to be, God, in his wisdom, sends us out to do build for his kingdom. He has sent his Holy Spirit to guide us and strengthen us, so that we will not insist upon turning inward to our own needs, but will turn outward, serving the needs of others. When we help someone to find the "pearl of great price" (Matt 13:46), we are building for the kingdom. When we do "for the least of these" (Matt 25:40), we are building for the kingdom. It is in such things that we are the light to the world.

Finally

The kingdom of God is not just about the future, but it is also about the present. It is still coming, but it is present now. In his book, *Rumors of Another World*, Philip Yancey urges us to see this as much like two "parallel universes" that, even now, overlap from time to time and place to place. So . . . when you look at First UMC right now, what do you see? Do you at all see God's kingdom present here? In what ways? When? What are some concrete examples? See if you can come up with a list of ten. For example, when reach out in mission, are we not stepping into God's kingdom, even if just for a while? What are some other examples? When have you felt like you've stepped into God's kingdom? When have you felt like you built for God's kingdom?