# SERMON SERIES: THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME TO YOU

**“What Is The ‘Good News’?”**

*Mark 1:14-15*

If you remember during Advent we used a sermon series focused on the arrival of God’s kingdom in the birth of Jesus. And we said that we’re going to follow the theme of the kingdom of God as it relates to the church’s calendar of sacred time. We now find ourselves in the season which follows Advent and Christmas, and leads us into Lent. Our focus during these days will be on the presence of the kingdom of God in the life, person and work of Jesus. The sermon series we begin today is entitled “The Kingdom Of God Has Come To You.” Let’s turn to today’s Scripture reading, Mark 1:14-15.

***In seminary preaching classes--or in any public speaking class--students are taught different ways to engage their listeners. Speakers want to get peoples’ attention so they’ll want to follow along with what’s about to be said. There are different ways a speaker can establish attentiveness and interest, and one such way is to begin with a statement or statistic that reaches out and grabs the audience.*** As we kick off this sermon series I want to make such a statement: The ‘good news’ of Jesus Christ is not about going to heaven when we die. It’s not about accepting-Jesus-into-your-heart-so-you-can live-forever. Now before anyone starts hyperventilating let’s unpack that a little bit.

Mark 1:14-15 tells us, *Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God’s Good News. “The time promised by God has come at last!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”* Matthew records this announcement in 4:17 as *From then on Jesus began to preach, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”* The message of the ‘good news’—what we call ‘the gospel,’ was this: the kingdom of heaven (or God) is near.

Nowhere in the gospels do we find Jesus saying anything about people “accepting him into their hearts.” ***History records a massive revival which*** ***swept North America in what was known as the First Great*** ***Awakening in the early eighteenth century. The Second Great*** ***Awakening took place in the late eighteenth century. And in the early*** ***twentieth century another revival took place. Revivalism,*** ***as those movements came to be called, was centered*** ***around a strong appeal to the emotional nature of individuals.*** ***The old-timey camp meetings were birthed during those times,*** ***as was the concept and terminology of ‘accepting Jesus into your*** ***heart.’*** The idea of ‘accepting Jesus into your heart” would’ve been simply bizarre for a first century Jew! For them, all of life was under the reign of God--not just certain aspects of it, as we are prone to think today. In addition, the people of the first century AD had no frame of reference to understand a god living within a person. They simply didn’t think like that or see the world that way.

So when we say that the gospel is about accepting-Jesus-into-our-hearts-so-we-can-go-to-heaven-and-live-forever, we’re actually talking about a concept birthed in the last three hundred years. The message Jesus came to bring—that he presented in his life and ministry—was that the kingdom of heaven had arrived; and that by believing in the One whom God had sent, people could enter this kingdom and partake of it.

Belief in Jesus Christ—who he is and what he did—is vital to being in the kingdom. Throughout the gospel of John we see the evangelist repeatedly pointing out the necessity of believing in the person and work of Jesus: John 1:12--*But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.* John 3:14—“*And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.”* John 6:29--*Jesus told them, “This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent.”* There are others, but I think you get the idea: In order to be part of the reality of the kingdom of heaven here on earth, there must be belief in--and obedience to--Jesus Christ. We cannot be part of the kingdom without it.

Through belief and faith in Jesus we can be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God--but it doesn’t end there! ***Too often*** ***people stop at that point: “I’m*** ***saved. My sins are forgiven. I’m*** ***going to heaven when I die and*** ***be with Jesus.” That’s simply*** ***the first step of a much fuller,*** ***richer, deeper adventure!***  We’re not redeemed so we can sit around and wait to die. We’re redeemed so we can partner with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, to make the kingdom visible all around us! Just as Jesus did in his earthly life, the church is to be a tangible presence—bringing a piece of heaven to life here on earth!

Let’s go back to our Scripture reading. We’re told *Jesus went into Galilee*…

and…*preached*: Jesus is the herald of thekingdom. His teachings, as well as his authoritative deeds,signified that the kingdom of God had arrived. Again, notice that Jesus’ message wasn’t “Let me be your personal Lord and Savior.” It wasn’t “Just say this prayer and you’re ‘in.’” It was *“The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”* John the Baptist had announced the arrival of Jesus, and Jesus announced the arrival of God’s kingdom: that people can be involved in God’s redemptive work in creation! They can make a difference. God desires to use them to further his plans.

Being part of the kingdom expresses the kind of relationships God wants us to have—because of the relationship God has entered into with us. It express the kind of attitudes God wants us to display—because of the attitude God has shown toward us. It expresses the kind of sacrifice God wants us to exhibit before a broken and needy world—because that’s the kind of sacrifice that God exhibited to us.

 ***One of the most tragic things about Christianity today is how many people claim to be Christian, yet their lives are so contrary to what Jesus exemplified. One all-too-obvious example was the heinous Westboro Baptist Church, which picketed at funerals and proclaimed a message of disgusting hate. But it’s not just fringe fundamentalists like Westboro Baptist Church: It’s something all of us must struggle against.***

 ***I once knew a man—I’ll call him Troy—who had something of a rough background and overheard some people in the church saying negative things about him. Troy said, “Why would I want to join a church? If they’re going to talk about people who aren’t like them, I’d rather stay at home.” Now Troy wasn’t an atheist. He wasn’t anti-God or anti-Jesus. But he witnessed a glaring discrepancy between what some Christians say with their mouths and what they do with their actions.***

Whenever we make the good news of Jesus Christ to be just aboutME—*my* personal Savior, *my* way to avoid hell, *my* place inthe afterlife--then it becomes easy to fall into the trap of thinkingourselves better than others. ***That’s exactly what Westboro Baptist Church did.*** We wrongfully assume that because we’re “saved” we can do whatever we want. That’s not how lifein the kingdom works.

But if we understand the good news to be about the presence ofthe kingdom—of our full participation in helping to make God’srule a practical way of life that all areinvited to participate in—then our actions line up moreeffectively and faithfully with what we proclaim.

 The gospel is that God, through Jesus Christ, has opened the kingdom of heaven to everyone. Remember what the angel said to the shepherds in the Christmas story: *“I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.”* This gospel is for everyone! It’s indeed good news that a better way of life can be had *now*, not just after we die.

 I believe this needs to be the message we rediscover and share today. Not just getting Jesus into our hearts so we can reap certain personal comforts or benefits—but getting into the reality of God’s kingdom so he can use us to reach others.

 I’d ask you to consider what your understanding of the gospel or the good news has been? Has it just been “fire insurance” to avoid hell? Has it been about securing your place in heaven? If so, then I ask you to consider this ‘good news’ to be about your invitation to becoming an agent of kingdom life. It’s your opportunity to confess your faith in Christ, receive his forgiveness, and willingly accept an active place in the kingdom here on earth. Each of us is presented with the opportunity to make this world a better place. And we receive an eternity of blessedness in heaven one glorious day! But until then, we’re called to display and express what true kingdom grace is all about.

 Please bow your heads and close your eyes.

 The Holy Spirit may have revealed something new and different to you this morning. Maybe your understanding of following Jesus has just been about staying out of hell or showing up for church each week. Maybe you just said a prayer at one time but nothing has really ever changed. If so—and if you’d like to fully and completely step into God’s kingdom in a bold new way--then I ask you to just lift your hand.

 This is simply a way for you to submit one hundred percent of all you are to the reign and lordship of Jesus Christ—not just in one or two places, but in every aspect. Remember: the good news is that the kingdom is open to every single person. Christ himself will cleanse and restore you, and give you a place and purpose that makes a difference in the world around us.

Let us pray: *Sovereign King of Creation, Son of Righteousness, Spirit of Holiness, please forgive us for those times when we have cheapened your gospel by making it all about our own personal desires. Forgive us when we have treated it as a commodity to be bought or sold. Forgive us if we have thought ourselves better than others because we have it and they don’t.*

 *Please, Father, help us to see, understand and embrace your kingdom; for if we do, it will change how we see the world around us. It will change how we understand the church. And it will change the way we embrace the scared, the hurting, the confused.*

 *I shout my joy and praise to you, O glorious King, for those today who have chosen to step willingly and purposefully into your kingdom. Bestow upon them the forgiveness of all their sins and the removal of all their guilt. They have reunited themselves with their Father and Creator and King. The image of God within them is restored and your original goodness shines from them. Bless them with the gifts and presence of the Holy Spirit, and begin now to reveal the destiny of their lives for your glory.*

 *Look upon us with favor and blessed grace, O Lord, our Christ. May the hope of the world flow from us like a never-ending stream, and may the places we have in your kingdom allow us to impact others with beauty and goodness; in Christ Jesus, the center and reason for the gospel. Amen.*