

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, January 26, 2020

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“THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HERE, NOW”

Matthew 4:17; Colossians 1:13,14

We are told that timing in life is very important. For example, timing is important in the real estate market or in the stock market. Buy low, sell high, if you can, but it's not always clear when the time is right. The timing of so many events is out of our control. They just seem to happen. Often we say, “Oh, I should have done that earlier, or I wish we had waited a while longer.” But in retrospect we may see that God's hand was involved and that certain events really did happen at the right time. I sometimes wish that I had started my studies for the ministry right after I had finished my B.A. degree rather than having 6 years in the business world. But now I realize that God was shaping me and teaching me and giving me life lessons in those years which helped prepare me for ministry. And those lessons and that shaping were essential.

One person who always did things at the right time was our Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe this was because God was directing the events of his Son's life, and also because Jesus was so open to God's guidance in all things. And I think of those hidden years in Nazareth before Jesus began his public ministry. God was at work in his Son's life preparing him for his life's mission

Today we read about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It happened in response to a particular event. “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee...” Jesus had been baptized by John, then spent 40 days in the wilderness gaining victory over Satan's temptations through the truth of God's word. And now with John's arrest, Jesus heard the Father's voice. “It's time to begin. Go forth.” And he did. He left Nazareth, a town which was not always friendly to him and set up shop in Capernaum on the shores of Galilee. Capernaum now lies in ruins but is a very popular stop in Israel for tourists. Now we don't know which house Jesus lived in there, but Peter's house has been identified. In that house Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. A fairly new and large open air church now stands above Peter's house. The ruins of the old synagogue still stand in Capernaum. It is quite moving to walk down the cobbled streets of the town and to enter into that old place of worship, knowing that's where our Lord walked and where he worshipped. How blessed were the people of Capernaum to have Jesus among them. “Truly the people who sat in darkness saw a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light dawned.”

From his base in Capernaum, Jesus went forth and began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17) How true that was. The Kingdom of Heaven had indeed drawn near, in Jesus. The people of Capernaum and everywhere could have reached out and touched the Kingdom of Heaven, for it was right there, in Jesus and in all that Jesus did during his ministry, from the beginning, through to cross, resurrection and ascension. In Christ

the Kingdom of Heaven invaded this occupied earth. And the Kingdom of Heaven is here to stay. So we say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here among us, now." And that word "repent" means "to turn around. The church proclaims the good news to the world, "Turn from the darkness towards the light of Christ. For the kingdom of heaven is here, now."

The first point we want to make is that the Kingdom of Heaven is one of two Kingdoms here on earth.

The Bible makes it clear that there are two Kingdoms in this world – the Kingdom of darkness and the Kingdom of Heaven. But for a few minutes let's think about the Kingdom of darkness.

The beautiful world that God created has been occupied by hostile, enemy forces - sin, evil, death, Satan. These powers invade our social structures, our political arrangements (this week we've been remembering the horror of the Holocaust), our personal lives, and even the natural world, in the form of a dangerous and deadly virus, for example. We are all overshadowed and influenced by these enemy forces. And together they have created a dominion of darkness here in this world.

In December 1952 a deadly mix of fog and black smoke covered London, England for four days. Four thousand people died. Coffins ran out, as did funeral flowers. Here is what happened. As smoke poured out of London's factories it mixed with fog and the air turned colder. In response, people heaped more coal on their fires, making more smoke. It was soon so dark some said they couldn't see their own feet. Roads were full of abandoned cars. Sunlight was blocked by all the soot. Midday events were cancelled due to darkness. Smog got into buildings, including the British Museum, damaging books and artifacts. Cattle in the city's market were killed and thrown away before they could be slaughtered and sold; their lungs were black. Someone said the whole scene was like "someone had set a load of car tires on fire." Truly the people sat in darkness.

Now we don't see it as clearly as we should, because the dominion of darkness blinds us to its reality. But the truth is God's amazing, wonderful creation has been invaded by a kingdom of darkness, which affects and undermines all of life, bringing oppression, brokenness, corruption, pain and ultimately death.

Someone who was acutely aware of the kingdom of darkness was Jesus himself. He started his public ministry when John was arrested. Why was John arrested? It was because of the dominion of darkness. John had publically called out Herod's immoral marriage. And Herod, displeased, had John arrested and thrown into prison. Not long after, Herod beheaded John. Herod let the kingdom of darkness reign in him and direct his actions. And the result was the death of a righteous, godly man, John the Baptist.

Having successfully eliminated John, the power of darkness now turned upon Jesus. Throughout his ministry Jesus was hounded and harassed by the kingdom of darkness. Often he was able to avoid or resist those powers that would ruin him. But finally, the Kingdom of darkness got him. As the authorities came to arrest him in the Garden he said, "Every day I was with you

in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns.” The Kingdom of darkness did its worst to the Beloved Son, the King of Glory, the light of the world. The dominion of darkness crucified him, put him to death on an old rugged cross. It was their boldest and most outrageous statement. “Bring heaven into this world and we will wipe you out.” Yes, there is a strong dominion of darkness in this world.

But here’s the second point. *The Kingdom of Heaven is the victorious Kingdom.*

Make no mistake. The Kingdom of darkness and the Kingdom of Heaven are in no way equal. In that Passover weekend clash in Jerusalem the occupying forces were decisively defeated. In the cross and resurrection of his Son, God overturned the Kingdom of darkness and established his Kingdom forever. The power of darkness is still active in the world and sometimes seems so strong, but it has dealt the fatal blow. Oh, the Kingdom of God may be the quieter of the two Kingdoms, but it is the victorious Kingdom. This Kingdom is here among us now! The people who sat in darkness now see a great light.

And wherever God’s will is being done on earth that’s where the Kingdom can be seen and experienced. Wherever the work Jesus inaugurated on earth is being done, we can say, “The Kingdom of Heaven is here now.” Where disease and illness are being cured, where the hungry are being fed and those without a warm coat receive one, where oppression and injustice are being replaced by justice and righteousness, where the good news of the kingdom is being proclaimed, wherever people turn and follow Jesus, whenever reconciliation occurs, whenever forgiveness is offered and received, that’s the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, here and now. Heaven’s Kingdom is victorious. It is a Kingdom which has dawned, is dawning and will break forth in all its fullness when Jesus returns. The dominion of darkness will be put away forever. The Kingdom of Heaven is the everlasting Kingdom, the victorious Kingdom. So lift up your heart with hope.

I told this story in the summer, but some of you may not have heard it. An email came to me last summer from a Christian man who attended here for a while, though he now worships at another church. But he enjoyed his time with us and thanked us for the worship and hospitality. He wrote: “I had an incredible experience during Easter. I have artificial limbs on both legs below my knees. I took communion on Palm Sunday and started to feel different, like the Holy Spirit was doing something. I normally walk 2 kilometres a day with the artificial limbs, but suddenly started walking further. During that week, I walked 15 kilometres per day. On Easter Sunday I walked 29 kilometres. I thought that no one might believe me, but the app on my phone tracked all my steps! So I’ve joined the ‘Walk So Kids Can Talk’ marathon on the weekend, and my whole team at work joined as well. We’ve raised a lot so far, and I’m thrilled, as kids are so precious. So it was quite the Passion Week, and amazing things happened, all because of Jesus.”

“Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.” Yes, the Kingdom of heaven is here, now. The Kingdom of Heaven is active in this world, and among us. It cannot be stopped or defeated. It is the victorious Kingdom.

Finally, this. *We who believe have already been transferred from the Kingdom of Darkness into God’s Kingdom.*

Paul writes this in Colossians 1:13,14 - "God has rescued us, (not will rescue us, but) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of His Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." In ancient times a victorious king would often transfer the people of a defeated kingdom to live in his land. And that is the picture Paul gives us here. Through the victory of Christ, God has transferred us who believe in Christ from the defeated Kingdom to the victorious Kingdom. Though we are not yet at the final destination, Paul tells us that our citizenship is in heaven, now. So we are living under a new regime. We serve the Heavenly Kingdom in our time on earth. Here and now we receive strength and love and hope from the Kingdom of God's beloved Son.

In 1990, baseball player Brett Butler changed teams. He had been one of the most popular players on the San Francisco Giants, but he was a free agent and signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers. A few months later Butler returned to San Francisco to play, but now he was wearing the uniform of the Giants' arch-enemy. When Butler stepped out on the field, the crowd gave him a loud ovation. They still loved him. But then Butler walked over to his new manager, Tommy Lasorda, and gave him a hug. The cheers turned to jeers. Later Butler explained, "It turned a page in my career. I'm not a Giant anymore. I wanted them to know I'm a Dodger now."

Friends, God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son. That's the side we are on. That's the Kingdom that has our allegiance. And when the last day comes we will be transferred once again to the place Jesus has prepared for us in the Father's house. So let us openly embrace Christ as he has embraced us. Let us speak of the Christ who has saved us and to whom we belong by faith. Let us proclaim to the world, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is here, now."