

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NEAR

Mark 1:9-20

Key Verse: 1:15

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Last week, we learned how John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord. He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This morning, we learn how Jesus began his messianic ministry. He did two things to prepare for the ministry. He was baptized by John the Baptist. Then he had to fight and overcome Satan’s temptations. Jesus also did two things as he began his ministry. He preached the kingdom of God and called his disciples. Jesus said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” Let us open our hearts and listen to Jesus!

I. THE BAPTISM AND TEMPTATION OF JESUS (9-13)

First, Jesus was baptized by John (9-11). Look at verse 9. *“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”* Jesus’ baptism by John was not a baptism of repentance, for Jesus was without sin (Heb 4:15). But Jesus received John’s baptism anyway. Why? His baptism by John signified the continuity in the redemptive history of God. Jesus could have ignored the work of John and established his own independent ministry. But he humbly received a baptism from John in order to succeed him in God’s salvation work and history. God’s ministry is never a one-man show. God’s work is done when God’s people work together. The work and history of God is that of Abraham, David and Jesus, and that of John the Baptist and Jesus, and that of us who participate in the work of God.

Most importantly, Jesus’ baptism was the inauguration ceremony of the Messiah. Look at verses 10-11. *As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”* The inauguration of a new president in the U.S. is an exciting event as it marks the beginning of a new chapter in the country’s history. Some inauguration speeches are remembered by many people around the world. For example, in his 1961 inauguration address, John F. Kennedy famously said, “... my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” But the inaugural speech for Jesus’ new ministry was delivered by none other than God the Father. The voice of God from heaven affirmed the person and the work of Jesus Christ. At the same time, heaven was torn open and the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus like a dove. Dove is a symbol of peace. So in some opening ceremonies of the Olympics, doves are released. But it was different for the inauguration of Jesus. The doves were not released into the air. Instead, the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus from heaven like a dove. As the Messiah of the world, he would conquer the world. But his conquest would be by his love, not by the sword. His conquest would be by the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Messiah who was

anointed by the Holy Spirit. God ordained Jesus personally as the Savior of the world. Likewise, God's servants are ordained by God. God calls and ordains us to be shepherds of his flock. Kings, queens and presidents are ordained by men, but God's servants are ordained by God. Therefore, those who are chosen by God as his servants must have the conviction that "I am ordained by God, not by men."

Second, Jesus overcame Satan's temptations. Look at verses 12-13. *"At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him."* Jesus' inauguration ceremony was not followed by a great party or inaugural ball. Jesus had to fight with Satan as he began his messianic ministry. The Holy Spirit sent Jesus out into the desert. He was tempted by Satan for forty days in the desert. There was no food and drink. Only scorpions were there in the desert. It was cold at night and blazing hot during day. In fighting against Satan, Jesus did not use his own power, even though he is the Son of God. Jesus depended totally on God throughout the 40 days of fasting prayer. It was a long spiritual battle in the desert, lasting for 960 hours.

Why did Jesus have to go through the temptations? It was because the first man, Adam, was defeated by Satan's temptation, and then the world was cursed. Therefore, the first thing Jesus had to do was to challenge Satan and defeated him where Adam had failed. Jesus' ministry began with Satan's temptations, just as the human history began in the Garden of Eden. The difference was that Jesus defeated Satan and opened a new era in human history. It also signaled that his ministry would not be political in nature, but spiritual.

Mark does not give us the details of his temptations. But from Matthew and Luke, we know that his battle with Satan was not a sword fight. There is no mention of a beast with ten horns at this point. Rather, he was tempted with the basic needs and desires of man, such as hunger, human glory, pride and easygoing way of life. Likewise, Satan often comes to us, not as a figure with horns and a pitchfork, but with a sweet voice of someone close to us. Using the disguise, Satan tempts us to lose the hope of God. He tempts us to give in to the pressure of this sinful world. He whispers to us that we don't have to follow Jesus, and we should just live for food and pleasure. He tempts us to live for ourselves. Satan's temptation is to make us live like Esau—just enjoying momentary pleasures and forgetting about any spiritual blessings.

Actually the temptation of Jesus was for our benefits. Hebrews 2:18 says: "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." Jesus defeated Satan and opened the way for us to overcome Satan's temptations. So what happened? God did not abandon Jesus during his struggles. God sent his angels to him. This teaches us that Satan is real and his temptations are real, but we are not alone in our battle against him. St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." Temptations are a problem for us only when we give in to them. We must believe that God is with us as we struggle to live by faith in this world where Satan is very active.

II. THE BEGINNING OF JESUS' MINISTRY (14-20)

Look at verse 14. *"After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God."* The evil king Herod imprisoned and beheaded the righteous man, John the Baptist (Mk 6:18-19, 26-29). It was a difficult time for anyone to start the work of God. But Jesus began his gospel work in that dark situation. Jesus teaches us here that we can do gospel ministry in any circumstance if we have faith in God. The fact that Jesus began his gospel ministry in the terrible times gives us hope for this country, that God can establish America as a kingdom of priests. What did Jesus do as he began his gospel ministry?

First, Jesus preached the kingdom of God. Look at verse 15. *"The time has come," he said, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"* What was the first message Jesus delivered as the Messiah? Jesus began his preaching with the words, "The kingdom of God is near." Jesus also ended his earthly ministry by speaking about the kingdom of God before he was ascended to heaven (Ac 1:3). In fact, the main focus of his preaching was on the kingdom of God. He said to Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (Jn 3:3). In his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20). He also said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Mt 13:44). By my counts, Jesus used the term "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven" more than 70 times, counting only the direct (red-letter) quotations. It is one of the most important topics, if not the most important topic, of his teachings. And yet, to many young people, the kingdom of God does not seem to be near. One young man told me that he wanted to think about it when he gets old. But Jesus says that the kingdom of God is near. Some people imagine that the kingdom of God is a location. It is somewhere up in the sky, beyond the clouds. Others imagine that the kingdom of God is in the future, something that will be established when Jesus comes again. But Jesus simply said, "The kingdom of God is near."

"The kingdom of God is near." What a beautiful message! The kingdom of God is Jesus. Where Jesus rules there is the kingdom of God. Without Jesus, there is only death and darkness. The kingdom of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ. There is no true hope in this world because everything is temporary. Everything will perish, spoil and fade away eventually. Jesus' message, "The kingdom of God is near," gives a living hope to all people who are in hopeless situations. So how can we enter this wonderful kingdom of God?

Let us read verse 15 again. *"The time has come," he said, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"* Jesus said, "Repent and believe the good news!" To enter the kingdom of God, we must repent and believe in Jesus. To repent means that we turn ourselves away from the sinful ways of this world and follow God instead. We must turn our hearts to the Lord. The kingdom of God is not something we can worry about later when we get old. The kingdom of God is near. The time has come.

We must not put it off. We must obtain the assurance of our life in the kingdom of God before it is too late.

Second, Jesus called his disciples (16-20). Look at verses 16-17. *As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."* At the beginning of his gospel work, he called his disciples from among ordinary fishermen. Jesus invited them to come and follow him. Jesus said, "I will make you fishers of men." In the past, their job was to catch as many fish as possible to support themselves financially. They worked hard against the strong winds and waves to catch fish. Many times, they felt empty as they chased the fish day in and day out. "There's got to be more to life than this," they probably said to themselves. Knowing their agony, Jesus called them to follow the Messiah instead. He called them to catch people for God. Jesus wanted to raise them as spiritual leaders.

From a businessman's point of view, it seems that Jesus started a losing business. What could these smelly fishermen do for God? But from God's point of view, it was a very important beginning. These fishermen would follow Jesus and later change the history of the world forever.

What was their response to Jesus' calling? Look at verse 20. *"Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him."* These men used to follow the fish at night. They worked hard to make money. But they had no true meaning in life. Money couldn't be their purpose in life. They knew better. They made a decision to become disciples of Jesus. Without delay, they followed Jesus.

There was a medical student in Seoul who was on his way to become a good medical doctor who could make a lot of money for himself. But God had a better plan for him. A servant of God led him to Christ through Bible studies. One day, this young man heard the voice of Jesus speaking to him personally as he studied Mark 1:17, "Come, follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men." When he responded to this calling, Jesus kept his promise by making him a fisher of men. This young man is Dr. John Jun who is among us. He is a medical doctor and a professor at Hershey Medical School.

God also changed the course of my life through Mark 1:17. I was born to a poor family. Growing up, I couldn't have nice things that other kids did. So even after I became a believer by God's grace, I was still focused on making money and living for myself. I was content to be a Sunday Christian, meaning that I would live for six days like any other people of the world, and go to church on Sunday. But God knew that this wasn't a blessed life. He wanted to give me a true purpose and meaning in life. So he called me with Mark 1:17, "Come, follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men." I responded to his calling, simply believing his promise that he would make me a fisher of men. And Jesus has kept his promise. He has blessed me to live a life of praying for young students and studying the Bible with them. I pray that each and every one of us here may hear the personal calling of our Lord Jesus and respond to it, so that our lives may be truly blessed.

In conclusion, the time has come for us to believe in Jesus and follow him. The kingdom of God is near. The good news is not far away. Jesus is near. We despair because of bad news surrounding us. But Jesus calls each of us to repent our sins and believe the good news of the kingdom of God. May God help us come to know how to serve others with the message, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Jesus began his gospel ministry by calling his disciples. God may help us to raise disciples of Jesus among us. Most of all, may God help us to accept the message, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"