

In the Flow

Mark 1:9-15

First Sunday in Lent / 18 February 2024

Pay attention to the order. Look at the flow of the text. We start at 1:9 with Jesus' baptism by John (verses 9-11), and then we have Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (verses 12-13), followed by Jesus's statement about the kingdom of God (verses 14-15). Jesus leaves Galilee for the wilderness to be baptized, then he's led deeper into the wilderness for forty days, and then Jesus returns to Galilee. Upon his return, right after word arrived that John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus begins his public ministry. *Everything Jesus came to do is summed up in these two verses, verses 14 and 15 of chapter 1. The life of a Jesus-follower is summed up in these two verses.*

Here they are again: "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"

And it's here, in these two verses, so simple and profound that we need to pay close attention to the order. Getting the order correct is crucial.

Let's break it down, and you'll see what I mean. Jesus arrives in Galilee. What is the first task of his ministry? He comes proclaiming or preaching. What is he proclaiming? The good news. Whose good news? God's. *God's* good news. The *euaggelion tou theou*. The gospel.

What is this good news that's coming from God? Here's what Jesus says: "The time is fulfilled" (Mk. 1:15)—*peplerotai ho kairos*. What time is it? *Kairos* time! And what is *kairos*? *Kairos* is an aspect or type of time. Unfortunately, in English, there is only one word for time: *time*. The Greeks had two words: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Kairos* is one moment among many moments pregnant with possibility and opportunity. It's not ordinary time, common time, second after second, sequential, tick then tock then tick then tock forever and ever. That is *chronos*. *Kairos* is not that kind of time. There are special moments within the ordinary flow of time, within *chronos*, that are full of meaning and significance, moments that emerge and erupt the ordinary flow of tick-tock time that are singular. When something different and new occurs *in* that particular moment, every other moment after it is forever changed. That's *kairos* time. And that moment has to be seized; otherwise, it's lost. In Greek mythology, the youngest son of Zeus was Kairos. He was depicted with a flock of hair over his face but bald in the back. As he approached you could seize his hair, you had something to hold on to. But if you missed him and did not seize the moment, there was nothing to grab hold of as he went past you. That's *kairos*.



Caerus or Kairos

“The time is fulfilled.” There is a new thing emerging, erupting, exploding in ordinary time in the life of Jesus and this new thing must be seized. That’s what Mark wants you and me to see here. The beginning of Jesus’ ministry is a *kairotic* moment, and what occurred in that moment continues unabated throughout time, for all time, right down to our time, to *this* time.

So what erupted into time then and continues to break into our time now? “The kingdom of God is at hand;” Jesus said, “repent, and believe in the kingdom.” This is the order we need to pay close attention to.

Kingdom. Repent. Believe. In *this* order. Not: repent, believe, and then enter the kingdom of God. Neither is it: believe, repent, and then the kingdom of God will come near. Getting the order correct is crucial. Where you begin will shape the contours of how you view the Christian life. Where you begin will determine where you end up and shape how you get there. By “there,” I don’t mean up in heaven. For Mark, the kingdom of God is not a synonym for “heaven.” The kingdom or, better, the realm of God (the Greek could also accurately be translated as the *empire of God*) is not “up there” or “out there” after we die.

The realm of God—God’s realm of fairness, justice and righteousness, God’s way of *mercy and peace and fierce love, God’s judgment upon evil and every injustice in the world*, God’s redemptive power to heal and to restore, to save and to make whole, this kingdom, this realm, this empire, this sphere of benevolent influence—has come near, has drawn close to us, it has erupted into the space-time continuum in the body and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. Reality cracks and splits open with his arrival in this *kairos*-time. All that the kingdom symbolizes and means is now embodied in Jesus, in what he says, but also in what he is. God has entered into time through the Son, and time will never be the same again. The power of God has now been unleashed upon the world in an entirely new way, in him. This new thing *is* the good news; it is what we mean by gospel.

And because all of this is now true—the kingdom is not on the way, it’s not about to draw near, it’s here and now, right now in Christ—we need to wake up. Wake up! Change your life! Change the way you think! *Metanoia*. Change your mind, change your awareness, which is what we mean by repent, and then believe and trust in the goodness of this good news. When we wake up to the presence of the kingdom, we will be changed.

Kingdom. Repent. Believe. Many Christians like to switch it around by starting with repentance. We've all heard countless televangelists calling for repentance as a kind of warning. If you repent, so the message goes, change your ways, and then believe certain things about Jesus or God or the Spirit, *then* you'll enter the kingdom, which often means heaven. Many Christians think this is the order of things: Repent. Believe. Kingdom. But that's not what the text says. That's why John Calvin (1509-1564) insisted, "Repentance is not placed first...as if it were the ground of forgiveness, or as if it induced God to begin to be gracious to us."¹ Forgiveness is not contingent upon repentance. We can't force God to forgive us by repenting. Jesus arrived in the Galilee proclaiming the kingdom *because* God *is* gracious, not because we are.

Kingdom. Repent. Believe. Some Christians like to reverse it altogether by starting with belief. Christians who take this approach tend to become anxious about what they believe or don't believe, they become anxious about what others believe or don't believe; they work themselves up into a nervous state and worry about doubt creeping into their lives. All the emphasis is on belief. They say if you first come to believe certain things about Jesus and change your thinking and behavior, the kingdom will come.

Whether you start with repentance or belief, the major problem with both distortions of this text is that both salvation formulas are so ego-centric and ego-driven. These readings of the text make it all about us, about what we can or cannot do or think or believe. We assume that if we just perfect repentance, get our moral and theological lives in order, return to the straight and now, follow certain rules of behavior, behave like good little boys and girls, and control our thoughts, then, surely, the blessing of the kingdom will fall upon us. But as we all know, this is the royal road to continued disappointment and failure. It doesn't work this way.

The good news is not about you. It includes you, to be sure, but it's not about you. It's not about what you can or cannot do to enter the kingdom. It's not about you and me trying to earn our salvation. It's not about us. We can't usher in the kingdom of God. We can't bring it about. We can work with God toward it, but we don't bring it about. We can't manipulate God with our "good" behavior, as if that would get God to open the doors and let us in. But you might be asking, isn't that what Jesus wants from us? Isn't this what God wants from us, perfection? Isn't that why Jesus came to die, to deal with our sin, to judge our waywardness, and to take our sin on a cross? Doesn't Jesus expect a particular ethic from his followers? Of course—which brings me back to the text.

The ethic God requires of us flows from understanding the kingdom. Kingdom. Repent. Believe. The kingdom comes first. It's a gift. It's an act of grace. It's given. And it has already arrived. It's already here, in Christ. Right now. What Jesus wants first from us is not our best intentions but for us to know in our hearts and minds that God is gracious, to know God's justice, mercy, peace, and wholeness, to know that something new and beautiful and wondrous and redemptive has been born and is being reborn in us because of him.

And when this awareness overwhelms us, when this grace overcomes us, when we come to this consciousness, that is, when we experience God in precisely this way and align our lives

with that vision, then change, *metanoia*, will follow, it will happen almost unselfconsciously, and we will come to believe in the good news and trust in the good news because we know that it's good. *This* awareness of the kingdom *yields* repentance; it changes our minds and informs what we believe, and ultimately, it compels us to follow him; it moves our bodies and our feet, and we move or march or act. In the next section of Mark's Gospel, we're told that people dropped their nets and followed him because they saw a different world opening up before their eyes, with new possibilities found in him. Because they caught a glimpse of that vision, they left everything and followed him (Mk. 1:16-20). Jesus offered them a vision of God's kingdom. And he came preaching to help us to see it, too.

It's the kingdom vision that calls us—and it's the vision that changes us and invites us to repent from former ways and believe in the possibilities of a different narrative, a different story. The vision calls us to act or walk or march or work or pray. It calls us to come alive. And when the vision emerges, when *kairos* breaks into *chronos*, and we attempt to move toward that vision, we should expect resistance against us, we should anticipate an enormous struggle against God's kingdom, as we saw in Jesus' life.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and writer, is helpful here. He says, "Jesus is much more concerned about shaking your foundations, giving you an utterly alternative self-image, world image, and God image, and thus reframing your entire reality."² The good news—this kingdom message embodied in Jesus—is all about "regrounding, reshaping and redirecting you from your core." And it's not really good news unless it's doing all of this for us and to us. Without transformation at the core level, religion or faith is essentially ego-driven and ego-centric. The faith becomes something we "use" for our own ends and purposes, something we "do" to get something out of God, the church, or our neighbor. Unfortunately, then, the Christian life becomes all about doing, "repenting," or believing or trying to believe certain things about God or Jesus or the Spirit. The faith experience becomes consumed with a desire to try harder, be a better Christian, a better person, a better mother or father or son or daughter or spouse or partner. No wonder people get disappointed and frustrated.

Jesus' ministry didn't start with repentance, and it didn't start with an emphasis on belief. It began with the kingdom message, the proclamation of God's good news erupting into the world. Think of the good news as a geyser welling up from the depths and showering down upon us with grace upon grace. We can't cause the geyser to well up. We're not called to measure or "understand" the whys and the wherefores of the geyser, try to maintain its pressure, or determine when and where it breaks through the surface and enters our lives. Instead, we are called to acknowledge its presence and force. We are called to allow it to happen—because it is happening—and then allow it to wash over us and rain down upon us. We need to surrender to it. Allow it to happen. Be grateful for it, rejoice in it, celebrate it. You can't cause the water to pour down upon you or make the geyser do its thing. It is, as Jesus said, done *unto* you. (see Luke 1:38). Richard Rohr describes this as a "deep allowing."

Allow the kingdom to wash over you.
Receive the good news.
Yes, allow kingdom to wash over you.
Allow God's love to overwhelm you.

Allow God's justice to convict you.
Allow God's grace to shake your foundations.
Yield to it again and again and again.
When this occurs, and every time it occurs, we change,
we are changed, *metanoia* happens almost naturally.
How could we not change after an encounter with the Living God?
Repentance flows from the transforming experience,
and then we believe
and trust
and align ourselves with that vision,
and rest in the goodness of God's kingdom.
We give our lives over to it.
Then, leaving our nets behind, we follow wherever he leads.

¹ John Calvin, Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke in *Christian Classic Ethereal Library*.

² Richard Rohr, "Lent Is About Transformation."