

Written Copy: Mark 1:14-15 “The Powerful Kingdom Message”

3rd Sunday @ Epiphany

Sunday, January 21st, 2024

Text: Mark 1:14-15

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

The text’s intent

To show Jesus, who was proclaimed to be the Son of God by the Father and anointed by the Spirit as the Christ, who took our place in baptism, and in resisting the temptation of the devil, to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who now is bringing His reign and rule into this sinful world. He brings it through the proclamation of the Gospel: that the fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation promised and progressively revealed since the Fall has finally come in Him. Sinners are called to repent: to turn away from the rule of their sinful hearts and turn to God who is gracious and merciful and forgives all who believe based on the work the Jesus Himself will do in His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus’ proclamation not only tells us to do this, He brings to bear the powerful command of the Word of God to make it happen, to open the door to conversion by the Spirit who creates faith to believe this message is “for me”. We see the power of His words as He calls four fishermen to leave their present career and take up the vocation of disciples, who will learn how to “fish” for people through their own Spirit empowered proclamation of the Gospel.

Focus Statement:

Jesus is the King of Kings who came at just the right time to fulfill the promise of a Savior given by God at the Fall and revealed throughout the Old Testament. He brings His gracious reign and rule into the hearts and minds of people through the call to repent and believe. And His life, death, and resurrection are the power for that to happen in the lives of those controlled by the sinful heart and the devil. His proclamation of His reign and rule that comes by the work of conversion is more than just the power to inform, it makes His reign and rule the reality and keeps it so by the power of Spirit created and sustained faith

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

We are born being ruled by our sinful hearts that are advised by the voice of the world and the prince of the fallen world, Satan. We can see our proclamation of faith in the Gospel as inadequate to turn others from unbelief to belief. We can see them as lacking the same power as our words to those who stand opposed to us.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Share the Gospel, the message of Christ’s reign and rule knowing that through the Spirit who dwells in that message it has the power to change lives because it’s the powerful words of God.

Subject Sentence: The Gospel is the power to change hearts and minds

Introduction: The Atheist and The Christian Discuss Jonah

There's the story of a Christian who was seated on the plane next to a college professor who was an atheist. The professor saw his seat mate reading the Bible and made the comment, "You don't really believe that stuff, do you?" The Christian replied, "Yes. I do." "All of it?" the professor asked. "Yes, all of it." the Christian replied. "How about that story about Jonah being swallowed by the whale. Do you really think that happened?" "Well, the Bible doesn't say "whale", it says big fish" the Christian answered. The Professor replied, "Okay, big fish. Still, do you believe a man could be swallowed by a fish and live to tell about it? How could that be." The Christian replied, "I don't know. But I'll find out when I see Jonah in heaven." The pompous professor replied, "What if Jonah's not there?" The Christian responded, "Then you can ask him."

The Witness of Jonah to Unbelieving Nineveh

As a kid attending Sunday School, I always liked the story of Jonah: the reluctant prophet who was thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish. Back in those days the Sunday School teacher at my Church would use filmstrips: a series of pictures shown on a screen that the teacher would advance in coordination with a record on a record player that would provide the teaching narration. I seem to remember that one of the pictures from the Jonah filmstrips had him sitting inside this fish, with a little campfire going, and a raft sitting beside him. A quaint picture for a kid, but nowhere near what the real-life situation must've been. And seeing how this event was discipline from the LORD aimed at changing Jonah's reluctance to be the LORD's prophet to Nineveh, I don't believe his situation was very pleasant.

Three days and three nights later, Jonah is vomited up on land. That in itself sounds like a most unpleasant experience. From there the LORD once again calls Jonah to go and preach His message to Nineveh. Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrian Empire, whose army is known for not only its power in battle, but its brutality against those nations and people's it conquered. And while they had not yet attacked the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they were certainly afraid that one day they might. This is part of Jonah's reluctance to go and preach any kind of message at Nineveh. They were non-Jews who Jonah didn't consider worthy of a prophet of God. On top of that he will be heading into enemy territory with a less than popular message. But three days and nights inside the belly of a big fish changed his mind.

Imagine how he looked and smelled laying there on the shore. Even if he cleaned himself up in the water, he still would've been a sight. Theologians have put forth that perhaps he was physically changed as a result of the effect of the fish's digestive juices upon him. His skin color may have been altered; his hair color perhaps changed. So it is that Jonah, changed inside and out, heads to Nineveh and preaches a pretty straightforward and law-filled message: "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown! The LORD's going to destroy you!" Doesn't seem to be a lot of hope in that message.

Yet that message does some powerful work in the lives of these pagan unbelievers. People who had no faith or fear in the LORD changed dramatically. They not only expressed sorrow and a heartfelt desire to change through their words and actions, but also in their hearts. They turned away from their sinful life and appealed to the LORD who they believed was gracious and merciful. As the king of Nineveh said to his people in calling them to repent, **Jonah 3:9 Who knows? God may turn and relent. He may turn from his burning anger so that we will not perish.** Perhaps Jonah witnessed to the LORD's grace and mercy without words. Perhaps his appearance helped communicate the story of the LORD's graciously working for him salvation from death in that fish. However it happened, they are able to appeal to the mercy and forgiving nature of God.

And how does the LORD respond? **Jonah 3:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.** Jonah's message consisted of more than just the warning he preached. He witnessed to them of the grace and mercy of the LORD who forgave him and saved him from certain death in the belly of a big fish when he repented. And the LORD does the same for them. That's because He is gracious and merciful to those who turn away from their sins and turn to Him in repentant faith. He desires all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth that is the Gospel Message.

Jesus Bringing His Reign and Rule Through the Gospel

Mark 1:14-15 ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."**

It is this same merciful God who brings this powerful message of salvation into Galilee in our Gospel Lesson. Mark begins by telling us that Jesus comes to Galilee after John the Baptist was arrested. He was arrested by King Herod Agrippa, who ruled the region of Galilee with the permission and oversight of the Romans. Jesus comes proclaiming the same message that John was proclaiming: "Repent and believe in the Gospel": the Good News from God.

Jesus is not afraid of Herod, or of Rome, or of any human ruler. He is not afraid of the one who is called the "prince" of this fallen sinful world, Satan. Jesus comes proclaiming the Gospel because in doing so He is bringing into enemy territory a new reign and rule, a new Kingdom, His kingdom. With Jesus on the scene, this kingdom is more than at hand, it is here now with the power to change hearts and minds through the Gospel, the powerful words of God, just as it did in Jonah's day in the city of Nineveh.

The time is fulfilled: now is the time. This is the salvation that was spoken of to Adam and Eve after they fell into sin and put all of creation under Satan's control. It is the promise that was kept alive and pointed to repeatedly by the Old Testament prophets, who revealed little by little what it would be and mean to mankind, This is what has been fulfilled.

It's the Kingdom: which is the reign and rule of God. God certainly reigns and rules over all things temporally in this world. In fact, all the nefarious plans of Satan must bow to and serve the plans of God whether he wants them to or not. But all mankind is born into the devil's kingdom. We are born with sinful selfish hearts that serve the purposes of Satan because when we obey the desires of our heart we are always standing opposed to what God wills and commands for us. The LORD tells us to love Him first and love others second, while our hearts say, "Serve yourself, and if it pleases your agenda, then serve God and others." When God is not first place in our hearts, there can be no pleasing Him. We are bound captives in the devil's rule and cannot save ourselves. Unless something happens, we will face the same end prophesied to Nineveh, eternal destruction.

Jesus comes to break into our hopeless despair, to break the control the devil has over our sinful hearts and lives. Jesus comes to save us through a simple yet powerful message, a command: "Repent and believe!" But the words of this command are not just any words. They are the very words of God, and have with them the very power of Creation, so that they not only declare the truth, but they make it happen in your life and mine.

He commands that we repent. And He causes that repentance: that turning away from following and serving our selfish sinful hearts by showing us not just the ways we disobey, the ways we use our time, talents, and treasures to serve ourselves, but how awful a thing that is to live turned away from the God who gave us life and all we have. And as He impresses this upon us, and our hearts are crushed under the weight of our sin and guilt, the Holy Spirit turns us to see Jesus.

He turns us to see the One anointed as the Christ, the Messiah, the long-promised Savior as the Spirit comes down on Him and into Him at His baptism. We hear the words of the Father declaring this man to be more than a man, but the very Son of God, who in what He said, did, and thought always obeyed the Father. We look to see the One who stood firm in obedience for 40 days in the wilderness, His body weakened by hunger, yet He refused every single temptation of Satan to serve Himself instead of God. It is this victorious Son of God who had no sin yet underwent our baptism so that all of our sins might be washed onto Him. It is this One who took all those sins and suffered and died for them. In doing so He broke the choke hold the devil and our sinful hearts had over us.

He freed us from the condemnation of our sin, from having to suffer that eternal destruction. Instead, we can inherit the future Jesus Christ won for us, eternal life in the New Heaven and New Earth. Jesus won all this for you and gives it to you through the second command: "Believe".

This too is not something you can do on your own. But in this very command of Jesus is the power of the Holy Spirit to grant faith in your hearts and minds. And by that power you can have and hold that all Jesus has done in His life, death, and resurrection was for you. That it frees you from serving your sinful heart and the devil and suffering His fate. That you have been given Jesus' gift of eternal life. That you have it and hold it now. And His Spirit through this kingdom message, through the Gospel, keeps you trusting and believing and desiring to serve your King, you Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

You as a Witness of the Powerful Kingdom Message

Jonah's proclamation, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, worked powerfully to change the hearts and minds of a sinful nation that did not believe in the LORD God. He was an unwilling witness who all the while was hoping the people would not repent and that the LORD would destroy them, as Chapter 4 of Jonah's book testifies to. The LORD nonetheless worked powerfully and supernaturally through this reluctant witness. Imagine what He could do through you?

When you share the Gospel, you are not just sharing any words. You are sharing what is the power of salvation for anyone, even those who are standing in hard hearted unbelief. Know that it's not you, not how well or how slick you share your faith in Jesus Christ; it's what the Spirit does through that sharing. We climb in the boat with them and share how sinful we all are; how that sinful selfish heart continues to demand we listen and obey. But how the Gospel speaks a better and stronger message. How Jesus Christ came to defeat the power of sin and the devil in our life through His own life, death, and resurrection. How He gives that victory to us and is giving it to them too. Share how faith in Christ has changed your life and can change them for the better too because He loves them and wants them to live with Him now and for eternity. It's not you or you're speaking that will do this. It's God Himself whose Spirit promises to be present and able to work as we share our faith in Christ.

Conclusion

I don't know how Jonah was able to survive in the belly of a great fish for three days and nights. I don't have to understand this supernatural event to believe it. I don't understand how an entire city can be turned from unbelief to faith in God by Jonah's message, but I don't have to understand it to believe it. I don't completely understand how God could become man in Jesus Christ, how He was able to suffer for the sins of the whole world. I wasn't there to see Him rise again from the grave. But I believe it all because I believe the witness of Holy Scripture which attests to it as the truth. And I hold it as truth by the power of faith. I may not always understand how the Spirit is working through my witness of Christ in the lives of others. In fact, I may wonder if He really is. But I hold to His promise that whenever I share the powerful Kingdom Message of the Gospel, the Spirit of Christ is there, who can and does work miraculous things in the life of those I share it with. He can do more than I can imagine. He is doing so in my life. He is doing so in your life. And He can do so in theirs. Amen.