

A Sermon
"GOD'S KINGDOM IS NEAR"
Dr. Russ Seger
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SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **And** when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to **him**. Now **after** John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of **God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.**"

CHILDREN'S SERMON

I have a story to tell you. And it is a story that is somewhat familiar. My guess is that we don't know the whole story very well. It concerns 97 verses of Genesis. That's four chapters. Now that's a pretty long story as far as Bible stories go and it is the story called "The Great Flood". The principal character of the great flood, human character, was a guy by the name of whom? Noah, that's right. And he was told by God to build a big boat. Now this boat was supposed to be as long as a football field. That's a pretty good sized boat, isn't it? And just about as wide as a football field and several stories high. It's probably not nearly as big as an aircraft carrier, but for that day and age it was really a **BIG BOAT**.

Now, I want to ask you a question. If God told you to do something like that, how would you react? Would you do it? You'd jump right to it, huh? You'd get dad's tools and start in the back yard. Do you know how long it took Noah? A hundred and twenty years to build this boat. That's longer than most of us live. He lived to be a really old **guy**.

Think how hard it is. And adults, think of it for yourselves. How hard is it when you get that inner voice to obey it? Hmmmm? Especially if it seems totally preposterous to you. Build a boat that's longer than this church and wider than this church and taller than this church. Huh?? That's pretty remarkable.

Now, when he finished it, can you imagine what his neighbors were saying? Why in the world are you making a boat in western Nebraska? They made fun of him. Sometimes when we do what's right or what our spirit says for us to do, other people do make fun of us. Sometimes when we do the right thing everybody else in class or our friends say, "You're silly!" Or worse. But you knew that it was the right thing to do.

So Noah gets it done and then God says to him, "**Now** I want you to collect all the animals and bring them into the ark. In that day there were clean animals and unclean animals, that is, animals that you could eat and animals that you couldn't eat. Do you know how many pair of clean animals God told Noah to put into the ark? Not very many? How many? Six hundred. How many pairs of clean animals. Seven pairs of clean animals. How many pairs of unclean animals? Two. And they were all called into the ark. I would imagine that's a terrible menagerie of animals. How would you like to live with all the animals of the world for a year in the same place?

It's an amazing story isn't it? And when it began to rain, it rained for forty days and forty nights. Not only did it rain but as the story is told, actually the fountains of the deep opened up too. And there was a tremendous amount of water in the world. The boat floated for almost a year before the waters receded enough so that Noah felt like they were on some kind of ground.

The Bible story says that the boat landed on a mountain somewhere in northern Turkey, almost on the border of Russia. Some people say they've seen it but the evidence isn't real strong yet. But the boat carried Noah and his wife and his three sons and their wives and kept them alive through a very disruptive time in world history.

We have that story in the Hebrew text, but the story is told in a number of other texts not in the same way and certainly not with the same particular facts. But we know that sometime back in that era there must have been some kind of cataclysmic event and Noah listened to God and was saved.

The lesson for me, the power for me is that I think that God speaks to all of us. In our hearts God often says to us what we need to be doing, even if it goes against what our **friends** and what our community often times says. So I invite you and encourage you to listen to the voice that speaks to you on the inside. My guess is that it will be a great teacher if you'll listen.

SERMON

I told you last Sunday that we would come back to the first chapter of the Book of Mark. We skipped a few chapters last week to stay in touch with and in line with the readings and the calendar of the church year. But we've come back to these first expressions, these first moments in the Book of Mark. Our Scripture is the Mark passage that talks about Jesus becoming aware of his relationship with deity, with God and where it took him and what happened for him immediately after the fact.

I entitled my sermon 'THE KINGDOM IS NEAR' but I told the church school class this **morning** that I really wanted to call it 'A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER' to kind of take off of that movie program a number of years ago that talked about the world and the state that it's in. There's lots going on. There's lots happening and certainly there was lots happening in Jesus' day and for the writer of Mark.

I spent most of my early life living in what I would call a spiritual fog. I had a sense of God in me, a sense of God's presence in the world, but I didn't really understand what that meant. I could sometimes feel the voice of conscience. Sometimes it had to be helped by my parents and peers, but most of the time, I could hear God speaking to me in fairly significant and clear language. I didn't always listen so well. I grew up in a tradition that often times, while we talked about the voice of God and the Spirit of God, we often lived out our belief that we were just dirty, rotten sinners and we weren't good and we were bad and we were filthy.

Those two connotations, that is, God loves me on the one hand, and God's going to send me to Hell on the other, are really hard to reconcile sometimes. Or maybe you don't have that problem, but I did as a child, I did as a young person. Sometimes I still struggle with **it. Somehow I was never quite able to grasp God's Kingdom in the present. I lived in a** kind of apocalyptic ideology that someday Jesus was going to come and take me to heaven. I could hardly wait for that day. I heard that kind of preaching all the time. I grew up with it. And I could hardly wait sometimes, thinking that surely today must be

the day, God, that you're going to come. As it was in the days of Noah, is it any better today? Well, he hasn't come yet.

It seems to me that what Mark was trying to teach us in the context of his writing was that Jesus discovered on that day of his baptism that he was indeed God's son. Now he always was. In fact, we all are God's creation. But sometimes we don't realize it. Sometimes we just simply don't see it. But in the moment of Jesus' baptism, something happened to him. He heard this voice. Now there is no proof in Mark. Mark doesn't give us any sense of clarity at all of anybody around him that heard it. It is highly likely that nobody heard this voice except for the person Jesus, And Jesus reacted to it and he believed in the good news.

What good news? How do we find it? How do we discover it? What does it mean, good news? I think it means that Jesus discovered that he was a child of God and as we discover in our lives that we too are God's children, it empowers us and helps us to become, and that God's kingdom is very present and it's very near and it's very real for all of us. We just live in a fog. We just live with this sort of blinder on that we simply don't recognize or see. Glenn and I often converse about parallel universes...like there's something going on right beside me, I just haven't gotten in touch with it yet. I think that's a great metaphor for what God is doing in our world.

Why is it so hard for me and maybe you to accept that we are God's people? That we are loved by God, we are affirmed by God, in fact, we are God's very being. My guess is that we have shunned and blinded ourselves to the power of the inner world. We have become distrustful of those things that we don't understand or see or we can't define. I think it's one of the reasons why we've taken the wonderful myth of Biblical story and tried to concretize it. That's why we have people flying in airplanes over Ararat looking for the ark, because surely, if we could find that ark, we could prove that God did what God said God did. Or the ark of the covenant if any of you are science fiction folks and you like to go chasing around in the tunnels of the lost ark.

If only we could find that. Then, our faith could somehow be affirmed and we could establish that God wasn't joking, that GOD REALLY IS. But in that moment on that day when Jesus heard the voice of God, his eyes were opened and he saw a new world.

The great need for our age is for an opening consciousness...an awareness of God, a recognition that we are indeed God's people. By understanding that within us is an inner authority that we are called to because we are God's people.

The sadness for me is that I think our souls are orphans today. We don't know where to hang our hats. We don't know where to put our sense of being or consciousness. Over and over and over again in Biblical story, the voice came, the person followed and their lives were transformed. I told the children the story this morning. An unbelievable request. Build an ark. Preposterous! Absolutely crazy, ludicrous!

But one followed his heart. One could say the same thing of the ancient prophet Moses. When he was herding sheep on the back side of a mountain and he saw a bush that was burning and was not consumed and he heard a voice that said, "Moses, take off your shoes. You are standing on Holy Ground." "No, this is a desert, Lord, there's nothing holy about this at all". "Moses! I'd like you to go back to Egypt, you know that place where you murdered the guy. I want you to go back there and lead my people out."

Over and over and over and over again, the voice was heard. Often times coming to consciousness, coming to awareness leads us into things that might be considered by

some to be quite dangerous. And maybe that's the downside of becoming conscious, that we have to evaluate our own morality. We have to discover our own sense of right and wrong. It's always easier to live your morality than mine because then I can blame you for my wrong doing.

Coming into consciousness, owning God's voice in me, means that I have to become aware and willing to follow the voice that speaks within. I think it takes tremendous spiritual courage to recognize the inner life and open myself up to the power of God. But not only the power of God.

When Jesus left Jordan, he went into the wilderness. In fact, he was driven into the wilderness. Jerry told us this morning that it was kind of like a chair and a whip. That's the language of the New Testament. It wasn't necessarily a willing kind of thing. He was pressured, he was pushed into the wilderness and there he was confronted, I think, with his human-ness, with the desires of flesh...comfort, ease, wealth, acceptance, pleasure...all the things that we know that sometimes get in the way of us making the most ethical, the most moral of choices.

The enemy within me often contradicts. Paul said it well. "The things that I know I should be doing I don't, and those things that I know I really shouldn't do, I do. It's really hard for me to do the things that I ought.

It appears to me that what Mark was suggesting is that Jesus too wrestled in the moment of his awakening and he struggled with what it meant to listen to the voice within and confront his own demons, his own struggles to become what God called him to be.

It seems to me that the only way to resist evil in our lives is to become spiritually conscious of what is involved...that we are so attuned that we listen carefully to our own sense of ethic and morality, so instead of becoming part of the crisis, part of the situation, we stand up for what we believe.

I don't very often get political. But it seems to me that in the world that we live in, we are at a crossroads that is dramatic. And if we don't begin to listen to the earth and its agony, its aching, its crying out, and we don't begin to take more responsibility for the environment in which we live, that **future** ages may not live at all. It seems to me that if we don't learn the lesson of living together, we may well push ourselves to the point that we exterminate the whole human race. We have 30,000 nuclear weapons in the world today, more than enough to annihilate every living being and thing.

It's time for us to listen to our conscience and become conscious of the ways that we can change. When Jesus speaks of faith, he is speaking of a capacity of us as people to affirm life in spite of all of the struggles we have. That giving God's presence in our world a place, is the most humane and **wonderful** thing we can do. I believe that it engages both our intellect and our soul...both our brains and **our** hearts have to be working together because God's kingdom is right here in this place, right now and it will continue to be if we give voice to it and we allow each other to become all that God calls us to be.

Think of it. God's **kingdom** is in the now. Not something out there, not something we're waiting for, not some kind of post millennial process or apocalyptic process, but right now, right here in this place. You're living in the kingdom of God. Amen.