

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | JANUARY 21, 2024

JONAH 3:1-5, 10 | PSALM 62:5-12 | 1 CORINTHIANS 7:29-31 | MARK 1:14-20

When we were in school, many of us were taught how to write a basic essay. It has the same parts that you can apply to just about any topic. It has 1) an introduction, 2) three supporting paragraphs, 3) a paragraph explaining why people who disagree with you are wrong (my personal favorite), and 4) a conclusion paragraph. But the key to the essay, the most important part, they used to make us highlight it in big bold letters, is the thesis statement. Right at the very beginning, you need to tell your reader exactly what this is all about. Everything that comes after should support that main idea.

That is, in a way, what St. Mark does in today's gospel reading. After John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus emerges and proclaims, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This is the thesis statement for Jesus's ministry. It's what the whole thing is about. Everything that happens in St. Mark's gospel is explaining or illustrating or clarifying that single claim.

And like any good writer, Mark's Jesus packs a lot into this one sentence. With "repent and believe in the good news," he ties his ministry to the recently arrested John the Baptist. With "the time is fulfilled," he speaks of his ministry as the culmination of the promises from the Hebrew Bible. And most important, he proclaims that the kingdom of God has come near.

The kingdom of God is really what the public ministry of Jesus is about. It's also a phrase that many of us find a little bit odd. After all, we don't really have kingdoms anymore. And the ideas we do have about kingdoms tend to be pretty negative. So it might be a bit of a problem that the main theme in Mark's gospel is something that we, at best, don't really think about.

But in the medieval period—when kingdoms actually were a thing—some people started playing around with that image. And they said that the kingdom that Jesus is talking about isn't a physical kingdom with walls and a mote and a round table. The kingdom was really about a sphere of influence. It's about jurisdiction. Who's really in charge here? Whose reign are we under?

In the context of today's gospel reading, the answer is obvious. Who is in charge? Whose reign are we under? The Romans. For people like Simon and Andrew, life would have been full of little reminders about who was actually calling the shots. It could be something small like the faces on your coins or something large like the crosses by the side of the road.

So when Jesus shows up and announces that the kingdom of God has come near, he is inviting them to reconsider who is actually in charge, whose reign they are under, and who has ultimate authority.

This is another translation from a book we read during Lent a couple of years ago. And this gets at that idea a little better. "Jesus went into Galilee announcing the official proclamation about God. The time had arrived, he said, the rule of God had come close, so change your minds. Trust this proclamation."¹

Jesus begins his ministry by inviting people like Simon and Andrew to reconsider what and who they trust. This might seem like a strange invitation at first. After all, people like Simon and Andrew didn't trust in the Romans' violence and coercion. They didn't trust in their exploitation and cynicism. So why is Jesus asking them about what they trust?

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark: Reflections for the Season of Lent* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 14.

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It's because even if they don't trust that these things are good—and they're certainly not—they trusted that they were final. That they were just the way the world worked. They're just sort of built in. Even Jews around this time who wanted to end the violence of the Romans wanted to end it with what? Violence of their own. No matter who's on top, it's violence all the way down.

So we could ask the same question of ourselves for our own context, too. What are our deeply held beliefs, our assumptions about the way the world works? What are our beliefs about the possibility of peace between Israelis and Palestinians? What do we take for granted when we talk about hunger and poverty? Who are the people that we've written off as irredeemable or not worth bothering with? What do we put our trust in?

In this one sentence, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near, Jesus calls his first disciples'—and our—unspoken assumptions and beliefs into question. Jesus promises that a different way of ordering the world is possible. The violence and self-righteousness and fear of difference, the parts of our world that we take for granted, Jesus says, that's all on the way out. As St. Paul puts it, "The present form of this world is passing away." It's almost as if, at beginning his ministry, Jesus hangs up a sign on the front door of the world that reads, "Under new management."

Jesus manifests the kingdom of God, the reign of God, in his ministry. By healing the sick, liberating the possessed, practicing mercy, and teaching the good news without regard for himself, Jesus inaugurates a new pattern of life. Jesus embodies—literally—a way of life grounded completely in the love of God. A way of life in which violence, self-conceit, and greed are replaced with mercy, reconciliation, and generosity of spirit.²

By calling Andrew and Simon, Jesus invites them to join him in this new kingdom. No longer merely subjects of Roman reign, they are now citizens of God's kingdom. Active participants who join Jesus in embodying this pattern of life and witnessing to others.

And Jesus extends this invitation to us as well. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus empowers each of us to trust that what is most fundamentally true about ourselves and the world around us is that we are loved and cared for by God. And we can extend that same love and care to others.

In the same way that Andrew and Simon's world was filled with reminders that they lived under the reign of Rome, we can live as visible signs to others that God's kingdom is near. When we forgive those who have wronged us, we proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near. When we seek to understand those who are different from us, we proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near. When we serve the hungry and those who live with too little, we proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near. Our relationships, our institutions, our systems, and our identities have come under new management.

Desmond Tutu famously summed it up this way. "Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death. Victory is ours through Him who loved us."

Do evil and hate and darkness and death still exist? You bet. The kingdom of God hasn't arrived in its fullness yet. But, Jesus tells us, it's always near. And when the Spirit sends us to serve together as the body of Christ, we can bring it close to the lives of our neighbors.

So believe in the good news. The victory of goodness. The victory of love. The victory of life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² See ch. 2 of Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *The Love That Is God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).