

NO LOOKING BACK !

Epiphany 3,
January 21, 2018
Mark 1:14-20

Jesus really messes around with your life! We often speak as though he gives it sense and meaning – and, of course, he does that, too! But first of all he has a way of turning things upside down! The four disciples mentioned in today’s text could attest to that.

After his baptism and John the Baptist’s arrest, Jesus starts roaming the towns and villages, the hills and valleys of Galilee with a very simple message: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” At first glance that may not seem too terribly unsettling, but, trust me, it really is!

After all, what is a kingdom without a king? We usually think of kingdoms geographically, but there are more invisible kingdoms than there are visible ones. In fact, there are as many kingdoms as there are people, because each of us is trying to be king of our own kingdom. Sometimes that does involve space, but more often it involves the control of our lives in other ways. All of us live in our own kingdom, as it were, and we either are trying to carve out a larger kingdom or else we are busy trying to protect the kingdom we have.

It may be the power we sense at our disposal. It may be the respect we want from others. It may be the wealth we think so necessary if we are to feel secure. It may be the control we exercise in this or that arena of our lives. But everywhere we are exerting our efforts to seize or maintain or enlarge the arena of the kingdom we perceive to be our own.

Now, of course, some of that isn’t all bad in itself. After all, one should have self-respect and there is nothing wrong with an appropriate stewardship of life in any or all of those areas we have mentioned. The problem comes when we make our kingdoms so “final,” so “ultimate,” so “absolute” that they become held as though by “divine right.” They are made, sustained and expanded at the expense of others. Other kingdoms come into conflict with ours, try to move in on our kingdom. They infer that our kingdom’s boundaries should be moved in the interests of their own kingdom. We go to great lengths, often extreme lengths, to defend the kingdom we have so diligently made for ourselves. That usually occurs in subtle ways, of course. Someone pushes around on you. Rarely is it physical, but you experience it as very real. You sense that someone is trying to move in too close to your kingdom and threatening its borders. Sometimes you feel that your kingdom is hemmed in by rules and regulations established by others at work, in your home, in your neighborhood, or even in your circle of friends.

It is no wonder that wars take place among nations when we realize in how many ways our own personal kingdoms come under assault and the lengths we will go to protect them . . . and even to enlarge them so that our “inner boundaries” are secure. We all strive to be kings, because kingdoms require kings! Simon and Andrew, James and John, also had their kingdoms. They were simple enough kingdoms: A few boats, perhaps, a decent business, a good place in their community. But it was enough. Kingdoms don’t have to be large to be satisfactory. They were at peace with their place in the world.

But then all at once – out of nowhere, it seems – Jesus came telling everyone who would listen that all those kingdoms were shams. “Turn away from them,” he said. “They will all cave in. One kingdom eats another kingdom alive. They collide with one another. They are all empty shells that will crumble and vanish with time. Don’t put your time and energy into kingdoms like that!” “Repent!” was the simple word he used, but the word meant to turn away from such foolishness. “For the Kingdom of God is at hand.”

Jesus is not telling them that God is about to re-arrange national boundaries or carve out a particular piece of land for His divine rule. Jesus IS telling them that the King is coming into their midst with a kingdom of quite another sort, and all who would “believe in the gospel” – the good news of this King coming among them – would find through him a citizenship in the kingdom that supersedes all those little kingdoms we create for ourselves.

Many around Jesus, of course, could not think past geographical boundaries. He had to constantly alert them to the fact that his Kingship was of a different kind than restoring Israel’s national pride or enlarging their boundaries. “Repent!” he cried. “Think differently. Turn away from the dimensions of your human considerations and consider, instead, the kingdom that comes from above. Human boundaries mean nothing to the heavenly kingdom.” “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

So Jesus came messing around with human kingdoms, insisting that another kingdom would engulf and overwhelm and overpower all those little kingdoms that people had so carefully constructed and guarded and in which they felt secure. “Turn away from all that,” he said. But he said more, “Turn toward the kingdom where security is of a different nature, where God’s presence is the light and there is no more darkness, where sickness and death must give way to health and wholeness and a life that is more full, more intense, more deeply rooted than anything you can ever assemble on your own. Let the King of this kingdom rule your life and you will be amazed at how much more grand this kingdom is than your shabby little huts that you treasure so much. ‘Believe in the gospel,’” he said.

The visible manifestation of this kingdom, of course, was the King, himself . . . Jesus. He immediately started building a citizenry within this kingdom. “Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.”

So now there were four. And more were soon to follow. Twelve of them in all he would especially instruct as they followed him in close company. Although they recognized immediately that someone special was at hand, little did they dream of how completely he would invert their lives, overturning everything of their past and establishing an entirely different future than they ever could have envisioned.

Three things stand out in this account. First, he hardly chose people that one would expect for the building of a new kingdom . . . or, as our text has it, to be his “fishermen.” One would expect more sophistication, more people of unusual character, of unique talent and experience. The kind of people, perhaps, that a new Prime Minister would choose for his inner cabinet. These men were so

ordinary, so unlike anything one would expect as a king's closest advisors and representatives. They were people just like you and me! The significance of this is simple: The kingdom does not depend on its citizenry. It depends on its King! It is the King who makes the kingdom and it is life in the kingdom that transforms the citizenry into the kind of people out of which the kingdom is built.

The second thing is this: When Jesus said, "Follow me," it was not an invitation. It was a command! He did not make a suggestion that they should tag along with him for a while, and if they discovered that they were of the same mind he was, they would together build a different kind of life. It was just the other way around. He said, "In following me, you will find a new kind of life. It is imperative that you leave your own little kingdom behind and follow me. With me you will find a different kind of life." It is that "repent" thing again . . . "turn away from the empty futility of the life that you have known and turn toward the one in whom the kingdom of heaven is found." "Follow me!" he said. "Don't look back. Turn from the past and toward the future. And the future is in me."

The third thing is the urgency that is apparent in our text. "And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him." Eight times this word "immediately" is found in this first chapter of Mark alone! It indicates the urgency that permeates this Gospel. The old kingdoms are falling away and one dare no longer trust in them, for "the kingdom of God is at hand." Why hold on to the failing and falling kingdoms? Turn away from them and don't look back! Little did these four men in our text dream of how totally their world would be changed once they followed him. Nor do we!

The waters of our baptism are his call to "Come, follow me." He still changes lives for all who heed his call and walk in his footsteps like those first disciples. For those who entrust their future to him, who are willing to let him crush all the little kingdoms constructed out of the stuff of this earth so that the kingdom of God can become the overarching rule of life, there is no looking back. There is only the One in whom all futures are contained and whose kingdom is more significant than any kingdom this earth can conjure up.

In C. S. Lewis' story of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* Mr. Beaver tells the four children who sit at his feet hearing about the Lion who will come to save Narnia from its unending winter, "'Course he isn't safe! But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." Mr. Beaver is so right! The Lion of Judah, the one known as Jesus, isn't safe. He messes around with us until we "repent" and recognize the glorious truth that "the kingdom of God is at hand for us." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.