



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092  
(262)241-3121 [www.stjohnsmequon.org](http://www.stjohnsmequon.org)  
Email: [office@stjohnsmequon.org](mailto:office@stjohnsmequon.org)  
**Pastor James Tiefel**  
**(262) 853-9723 (cell#)**  
Email: [pastortiefel@gmail.com](mailto:pastortiefel@gmail.com)

---

## The Third Sunday after Epiphany January 21, 2024

### Jesus Appears through the Ambassadors He Calls

Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the good news that he had come to take away the sins of the world. He quickly called men to follow him and learn the details of his good news and how to share it with others. Still today he guides people to study the depths of his love and then to accept his call as his ambassadors with the message of salvation. Jesus appears to us and others through the public ministry of the gospel. We hear the message and support their ministry.

#### Sermon Mark 1:14-20

**After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”**

**As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.**

**When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.**

If you were to be hanging out in the Galilean countryside and heard Jesus wander into your field preaching on any given day, what is it you’d hear him talking about?

Maybe the importance of loving your neighbor, loving your enemies, or justice for the oppressed. That’s what many people assume Jesus’ main point of emphasis is, and they’re not wrong that these are important and profound things that Jesus talked about, but they’re also not the central point—they’re outcomes that result from it. Mark summarizes the central point of Jesus’ good news: **The kingdom of God is near.** Right now. That is the good news; “Repent and believe it!” All that other stuff, the way we live and everything, that’s a result of the kingdom, but the news itself is that the kingdom is here in Jesus. Jesus talked about the kingdom *constantly*, so we should probably know what it means. Why is this how Jesus words his message of good news?

The central thought of Jesus’ sermon was fittingly a central thought in the Bible: Who is king? Who’s running the show? Who’s in control? And we as good Christians say, well, God is in control, right? That’s easy to say, but we’ve skipped over the part where we wrestle with the reality of life experience that maybe says otherwise. We’ve skipped over something the Biblical authors do *not* skip over. Because Psalm 93 may say, **The Lord reigns! He is robed in majesty!** But then Psalm 94 says, **Lord, how long—how long will the wicked celebrate? They kill the widow and the resident alien and murder the fatherless. They say, “The Lord doesn’t see it. The God of Jacob doesn’t pay attention.”**

It’s easy to be an ambassador of God, preaching that God reigns when it’s sunny, you hear beautiful music, and babies are being born and giggling but for every wedding song there’s a funeral song; for every baby born there’s a miscarriage. While there’s a lot of life, there’s also a lot of death. So where’s God’s reign then? And how can anyone be an ambassador proclaiming his reign in these conditions?

It wasn't always this complicated. For Adam and Eve, there was no question that the kingdom was near or who their king was—the only reasonable way to live would be to trust him and live according to his commands. There was nothing to repent from or an opposing trust to dislodge from their hearts. But as soon as their trust turned to other influences an anti-kingdom was created—a kingdom with a different king to trust and a different reasonable way to live life accordingly. This anti-kingdom would manifest itself in entire people groups oppressing and sinning against one another. The world now had a clash of kingdoms. Who would win?

God didn't abandon his kingdom in defeat but because of his character of love and justice he carries out a long, intricate process of securing his kingdom as his own. He calls Abram out of the kingdom of the world and establishes him as the father of a new kind of nation who will be a kingdom of priests acting as ambassadors revealing to the world that God is, in fact, King. Even when outward circumstances seem contrary, when you're imprisoned as slaves in Egypt, when you're in exile in Babylon, God is a King who uses evil for good, and rescues. And prophets like Isaiah talked about someone who would be a messenger of good news about the kingdom, good news not just of a localized battle won but victory in the cosmic war against sin, death, and Satan through his chosen Messiah.

Enter the New Testament. Imagine you're a Jew who somehow didn't hear about any of the events of Jesus' life and never read any words of the New Testament yet, and you somehow got your hands on this scroll apparently written by someone named Mark and you read the first words, **The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.** Jesus is anointed and commissioned as the Messiah as he's baptized by John and then immediately goes and conquers the same snake in the wilderness that sent humans outside of God's kingdom into the wilderness in the first place, and then Jesus first recorded words are: **The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!** All those prophecies pointed to this and the center of all time is fulfilled in this Messiah king. The king is crushing the anti-kingdom and kingdom of God is reestablished in Jesus' arrival. Repent and turn from your trust in the anti-kingdom of self & Satan and the old ways of the anti-kingdom. Believe and trust that God is in fact king, and that he conquers sin and Satan for you and that the kingdom is yours through faith. Wow! Imagine that "news" actually being *new* to you!

Okay, but if the kingdom is so near, where is it? Why can't I see it? What kind of an imminent kingdom is this that can't even relieve one penny of my debt? That can't even reduce one pill of my prescriptions? That can't even give me a spouse? That can't even save my spouse? How is any of this possible to believe, let alone go out preaching for others to believe it?

Jesus was no stranger to these apparent contradictions. His friend, cousin, and forerunner, John, was imprisoned by the ruler of Galilee and yet he takes this message of the good news of the kingdom where? Not somewhere easy—he goes to Galilee, right to where people would question, "What kind of a kingdom is this that can't even save its messengers from arrest, humiliation, and murder?"

The kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom that's not dictated by outward circumstances. God *is* in control, but he does a surprising thing with that control: He doesn't kill everyone unholy; he allows the unholy to kill him. He becomes sin for us, the righteous for the unrighteous, reconciling the world to himself. Without armies or swords, without the works of citizens, without outward borders, the kingdom stands forever unshaken by the will of men. This is a kingdom where the king reigns in the hearts of repentant, ever-forgiven sinners by faith. It's an untouchable, internal, and eternal kingdom!

So what does it matter that the king seems so lowly on the outside or that his messengers languish in prison? In Christ, the only death that matters already happened when our old Adam was drowned with him on the cross. Now the deeper realities of forgiveness and holiness trump everything else. Now the only thing in front of us, no matter what happens to us, is *life, life, and more life*. What can man do to me? The kingdom is *here* in my heart. In answer to how God's kingdom comes, Luther explains in the Catechism, "*God's kingdom comes when our heavenly father gives his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe in his holy Word and lead a godly life now on earth and forever in heaven.*" Luther is combatting one of my personal pet peeves: The kingdom is not the future of heaven, although heaven is truly the kingdom. The kingdom is *near*. It's *here*. It's *now*. Stop waiting for the

kingdom and live in the kingdom! Jesus is king. Live under him in his kingdom now and let your trust in his rule guide your decision-making and conduct in the world. It's also true that the kingdom is not churches, although the kingdom is found within churches. God's kingdom comes everywhere the Word is proclaimed—it comes through the means of grace. So, if God has already won the war in Jesus' death and resurrection, winning the whole world for himself, and his territory is being reconquered by proclamation of his word and the administering of the means of grace, then it's vital to commission proclaimers of that Word. Jesus exemplifies this by, after having announced that the kingdom is here, immediately calling ambassadors to reveal this news to others, joining the conquest.

Notice the power of Jesus' Word as he calls. Although Peter, Andrew, James, and John are the fishermen, Jesus is the one truly fishing here. And he's not using any sort of enticing bait—they're not following him for the paycheck. Jesus' Word is a net that he casts out and captures these men for himself. Once Jesus catches people and makes them citizens of his kingdom through faith, like Paul said in our Second Reading, they're a pocket of new creation among the old creation. It's so evident how trust, how repentance and trust in their King changes these men.

They don't rely on their **reason**. They don't say, "You can't be serious! Look what happened to John. If he gets treated so wretchedly and you apparently won't or can't deliver him, why in all the world should we risk following you?" No, they cast aside their reason, their fears, their livelihood, and follow him.

They don't worry about being **inadequate**. There's such a stark contrast between caller and called ones here. Jesus is holiness wrapped in flesh; the disciples are so obviously flawed, weak, and sinful. And yet he doesn't choose men wiser by the world's standards. The King proclaims his message through the weak to highlight his strength.

They aren't concerned about **identity**. We know almost nothing about many of the disciples. Their whole lives and work were dedicated to Jesus' life and work.

We're not just called to have faith, but to share the faith! The kingdom call to us is a kingdom, of conquest! No fish Jesus catches for himself is to remain merely a fish. And what I mean by that is this: Think about fish for a moment. What good are fish? They're utterly useless. There could be a humongous, record-setting fish dwelling in the depths of the ocean somewhere; and yet if no one ever catches it, we would have no idea it ever existed. Despite its impressive achievements, it will have died and passed on its nutrients to other meaningless fish. Fish don't really mean anything—*until they're caught!* Then, they can be used for something.

If you think I'm being unfair and uncharitable to fish (or fish-like people), don't take it up with me, take it up with the author of Ecclesiastes, because that's exactly what he says. He says, "*Hey—I've gone searching all over for something to fill this hole in my heart, all of it is so meaningless! I could make a million bucks just to give it to someone else when I die! What good is it to live life without God?*" That's the life of the uncaught-fish, moving aimlessly through life on the way to the cemetery.

But once Jesus catches you in his gospel net, enacts repentance and Spirit-wrought trust in your heart—as he catches you and makes you a citizen in his kingdom and a pocket of new creation—caught fish are able to be used for something. All fish, once caught, are to be fishermen in some capacity. We're *all* called to respond to evil with love, forgiving our enemies, seeking peace, and sharing the Word when given the opportunity in whatever our vocation is. Some are called to be fishers of men by continuing to be fishermen, or whatever vocation they have in life. In Peter, Andrew, James, and John, however, we also see that for some, this calling is to leave behind whatever other vocation they otherwise would have and follow him as a full-time public ministers of the gospel, full-time fishers of men, proclaimers of the kingdom.

Although our WELS system lends itself to the young, this calling is not restricted to children thinking about ministry. The disciples all were adults with established careers. Older or younger, do you hear the Savior calling you in this way?

For some of you, that's less realistic. James and John left their parents to follow Jesus as full-time public ministers of the Gospel. And yet we know that their parents, Zebedee and Salome, were dedicated followers of Jesus, supported their sons, and Salome was even present at the crucifixion and Easter Sunday. You may not be called into the public ministry, but can you be a Zebedee? A Salome? Can you support the public ministry in some way? (I'm sure Pastor Tiefel has many ideas for how you could do that!)

The kingdom is near. God has reconciled to world to himself in Christ. Believe it and be reconciled! It's that simple! But don't stop there—be an ambassador and support ambassadors to reveal Jesus' kingdom to others. The Lord reigns and is coming soon! Amen.

*The sermon was preached by Vicar Micah Otto.*