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“God’s Kingdom...At Hand!”

Evening darkness has begun to fall over us as we gather for worship tonight. Against this darkening backdrop to our worship space, it is with delight that I share this “good news” with you...

Dear brothers and sisters, the Word has become flesh and is dwelling among us... drawing near to us in Jesus. What is this that has come into being in Jesus? **It is life.** The Light of Jesus is the light of all people. The Light of his life is alive among us! It is shining in the darkness! It is shining in our darkness! If we sense that darkness has covered over us, and the light around us has become night, even deep darkness is not dark to him. In the Kingdom of God, the night is as bright as the day. In the Kingdom of God, even though darkness doesn’t stop being dark it is as light to God (with liberty from Mark 1, John 1 and Psalm 139).

These are words of the Epiphany which illuminate the whole of our experience – the solitary paths we walk and our communal pilgrimage. As the body of Christ, we are bearers of the Light of World, the Light which has come into the world for all people! I invite you to enter this time of spoken word with expectation and anticipation, with keen senses and a posture of readiness and flexibility...for we are sojourners in the Kingdom of God!

Our sojourns in the Kingdom take us in many directions and lead us into uncharted territory. In this past week, even just our little flock, has no doubt has experienced the gamut of human emotion – from the most mundane to profound. Some of us may have traveled thousands of miles; others of us may have hardly been farther than the mailbox! Yet, thankfully this evening we gather together...and we bring with us, in spirit, others dear to us.

For our household, it has been a week which involved shoulder surgery for Martin. Even though he isn’t here this evening to offer his vantage point, I’ll share some reflections from my experience of last Thursday.

It had been many years since I had been at St. Joe Hospital where Martin’s surgery was to take place. We entered the hospital through the corridor leading from the parking garage. This corridor brought us into the hospital on the 2nd floor right to the top of a beautiful staircase. Straight across from this staircase, high above the lobby area, two stained glass murals serve as the south wall of the chapel. On this bright, snow covered morning, each of the “windows” was illuminated by the late January sunshine. Each window “spoke” a word of healing over the persons gathering below them. The most easterly window carried an especially poignant “word.” In this window, one could see two figures facing one another. One was a young woman with bandaged eyes. In one of her hands was

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what appeared to be a light colored staff; the other hand was outstretched seemingly toward the other figure. It appeared that she was blind – and had been that way for along time, evident by the worn white cane in her hand.

The “other figure” was that of an older man. He, too, had an outstretched hand, while the other hand clung to the crutch which supported his body. As the blind woman and lame man reached out toward one another they were also reaching toward a pair of large hands which seem to emerge out of the “back” of the stained glass work. My first thought... Yes, the hands of Jesus...but then also the awareness, the hands, no doubt, of the Body of Christ; in this place, in this artwork, a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. These images, this reminder of the ever-present Kingdom of God comforted me on this rather tense morning as I entrusted Martin into the hands of strangers.

Tonight, in our fellowship, we open the Gospel of Mark. The use of the lectionary texts is a new practice for many of us – so again a brief word of explanation. This year we are following the readings for “Year B.” Year B’s Gospel readings will come mainly from the gospel of Mark. (Year A, Matthew, B- Mark, C- Luke; John is interspersed throughout each year.)

The introductory words of Mark go like this: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” I’ve had to read this to myself several times in preparation for tonight’s message! This is “the beginning of the good news of Jesus! There is SO MUCH to say about the good news that it’s difficult not to try to say TOO MUCH. In worship planning, we note that we have this same “problem!” We find wonderful litanies, spirit-swelling hymns, moving prayers...and then Melissa reminds us... “We don’t have to squeeze it all into one gathering; we **will be** meeting for worship again!” So it’s been for me this week as I’ve considered the words of Mark chosen for us tonight. There’s so much that could be said! Listen again to a bit of the reading...and you’ll see why!

Beginning with Mark 1:14: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news!” **This is one incredible sentence!**

- John - he’s arrested
- Jesus – he’s on the road proclaiming something called “the good news”
- Jesus – his words continue - even more arcane and esoterically- “the time at hand and the kingdom of God come near”
- Next, there’s an invitation to “repent;” an invitation to turn around...take a look... come and see!
- And then, the call to “Believe!”

Right from the start – we have a hint that the Kingdom of God and the way things have “always been” are going to clash. (Review Mark 6 to learn more about John’s

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imprisonment.) With news of John's captivity ringing in our ears, Jesus offers promise of new possibilities and of new ways of being. When and where is this to transpire...?(?) right then, right there; right here, right now!

No details yet...simply the announcement of great change and possibility – a wide sweeping promise, a vision of hope...But then, an abrupt change to a story from the lakeshore. Suddenly, these poetic words of proclamation take shape in Galilee, between Jesus and a particular group of men, folks who happen to be fishermen.

(Reflections on John's account of the day which Andrew and Simon spent with Jesus. John 1:35)

- Invitation to "come and see"
- A return home at the end of the day
- A return to fishing on the next day

I read it this way: In each of the synoptic gospels we have stories of the Kingdom...often beginning with these words, "The Kingdom of God is like this..." So it seems to me in this reading from Mark's gospel. I would retell it like this, "The Kingdom sometimes unfolds for us like this, like Jesus passing along the Sea of Galilee, seeing Simon and his brother Andrew as they go about their work, their important ordinary work of casting nets into the sea – for as Mark tells us... they are fishermen!" In past days, Andrew and Simon have experienced in Jesus a new way of being. At their deepest places, they are beginning to make the turn from whatever old, empty ways happen to be **their** very own. Each one is turning to a life in which the old is going and the new is coming (this is repentance!) This time, Jesus doesn't simply invite Simon and Andrew to "come and see," rather he invites them – in images deeply familiar (making them fishers of men) - to turn more completely to a new place...and new way of being...Jesus invites them to follow him more fully into the Kingdom of God.

Metanoia-, this "repentance", this movement of heart into which Jesus invites Simon and Andrew – is our invitation, as well. We are welcomed, together with all peoples and all of creation, into this spacious place where our hearts may continually turn to the Light of Christ. Like these particular men, in this particular place, we, too, encounter the living Christ along our own particular "lake shores" ... or classrooms, or offices...or fields...or kitchens...or gardens...or grocery stores. In "our places" we discover the Kingdom of God among us, around us and within us. We find ourselves taken "by surprise" and then incredibly curious about our ever growing sense of longing and be-longing. We invite others to our discussions and into our wonderments. We go about our daily tasks and responsibilities, yet we live ever more aware and awakened to "God's Kingdom come."

The reality of this Kingdom:

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- is that, together with John, we see that right from the very beginning, there have been troubles. John came preaching about one who would “turn the world upside down” and not everybody liked it. But the message lived on...
- is that Jesus came ...preaching words that challenged Simon and Andrew... preaching words which beckon to everyone of us – Jesus came announcing the good news and not everybody likes it...but the message lives on.
- is that Jesus is with us...as the church, the Body of Christ, hands outstretched in care...not everybody will like it...but the message will live on!

No, as of yet, we don't have many details yet about this Kingdom. Just wait, however, for the weeks ahead as we read of broken spirits and broken hearts released from imprisoning bonds! Just wait for the upcoming weeks as we read of deadened persons restored to life and “worthless” people- like sick women- being tended to and healed!

Welcome today, to this place...the Kingdom of God!