

“The Call of The King”

Introduction: Last week, which was the first Sunday in the season of the church year called Epiphany—the marking of the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles/nations through the visit of the Magi—I offered that if the season of advent is a season of waiting, then Epiphany is a season of journeying. It’s a time to step out, like the Magi, and explore more fully who this Jesus is whose birth we’ve just celebrated. The season between Christmas and Easter is a time to reflect upon his life and ask: What is it that God is up to in and through his Son? It’s actually a significant question because we might be tempted to conclude that the life of Jesus isn’t all that important.

Consider, for example, the way the Apostles’ Creed describes him: “I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried...” Notice what’s missing? What happened to his life, to that time between being born of Mary and suffering under Pilate?! It’s almost as if, after we read the opening verses of Mark 1 we could skip ahead to 14:12 and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and not miss a thing! After all, we might think, Jesus did come to die for our sins so we could go to heaven when we die and be with him forever, so what’s the big deal about his life? Isn’t it just one long introduction to the more important event of his death?

Well, know that it was never the intent of the framers of the Creeds to dismiss the life of Jesus. It’s just that they were written at time when the supernatural birth and atoning death of Jesus were being called into question and Christians felt the need to highlight and codify these essential and unique matters of the Christian faith. But that doesn’t make the life of Jesus any less essential and unique. So we want to focus, as we typically do in these weeks between Christmas and Easter, on the life of Jesus. In particular, using the gospel of Mark as our guide, we want to pay attention to the kingdom-inaugurating work of Jesus. The gospel accounts reveal that with the arrival of the King—Jesus—God’s kingdom has arrived. So, how has God’s kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven (as Jesus taught us to pray)? What does the life and ministry of Jesus tell us about that? And perhaps more importantly, what does that mean for us? Are we just to get our sins forgiven and wait around until he comes again and makes all things new? Or is there a different, more intentional, path we’re to be on?

I. The Presence of the Kingdom

A. The first thing we want to note is that bringing the kingdom of God to bear on the realm of earth is how Jesus understood what he was about. “The time has come,” he declared. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” This, it’s important to observe, was said by Jesus as the opening statement of his public ministry, a full three years before his death and resurrection. This means, as we pointed out when we looked last month at what it means to be messengers of the good news (12/18/16), that the good news (“gospel”) is not just having our sins forgiven and the hope of heaven in the future. It’s about the arrival of a new kind of life, now, in the present, where the realm of heaven is breaking into the realm of earth. This “time” that has come is understood by Matthew, Luke, and John, in one way or another, as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s words that Israel’s God would return to restore his people and redeem his creation. In Jesus, this light had broken into the darkness.

B. As Paul writes to the church at Colossae, the kingdom of God is certainly future; it's our "inheritance." And yet it's also present; it's a realm we are brought into when we have our sins forgiven. We enter God's kingdom, as Jesus puts it, when start collecting on our inheritance as we repent, acknowledging our sin and seeking to change our minds about the way we see the world and live in light of who God is and what God wants done. The kingdom is present when a man like Zacchaeus recognizes the error of his cheating ways and pays back what he has wrongfully taken from others. It's present when the sick are healed, demons are driven out, and the storms of war and violence are stilled. It's present when barriers are broken down between races, and socio-economic groups, and genders, because all are one in the King, Jesus, who does not show favoritism (Gal. 3:28; Ac. 10:34). It's present when justice is done because establishing justice on the earth is an all-important objective of what Jesus is all about (cf., Isa. 42:1-4). *With my arrival*, declares Jesus, *the kingdom of God has come near. Although it will find its fullness in the future, it is available now.*

II. An Incredible Call

A. With this declared, in light of his arrival, Jesus then issues an incredible invitation or call. "Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people." With this calling, Jesus makes it clear from the start that the arrival of the kingdom is not a license for sitting around and waiting for heaven. Jesus wants us to follow him and be schooled as apprentices or disciples in kingdom living. And as we do so, he wants to equip us to school others in this life as well. So, let's think about the remarkable nature of this call.

B. This call is incredible because in the days when Jesus lived, it was never the rabbi who called the disciple. Rather, it was always the prospective student who took the initiative. What's more, to do so would have required a hopeful candidate to go through several "qualifying rounds," tests that they had to pass to prove to a rabbi that they were the best of the best, that they had what it took to study under him. Like making the starting team on a varsity sport, or receiving a lead role in a play, being accepted by a rabbi was quite an achievement.

C. Certainly we wonder: Why did these guys drop everything, leaving home, family, and job behind to follow Jesus? From the accounts in John (1:35-37) and Luke (5:1-11), it probably wasn't the first time they had seen him or heard about him. But when he called them, they ultimately went because they were wanted. They were loved just for who they were, not what they had achieved. The net of God's grace had begun to settle on them and when you know you are wanted and loved and someone wants to invest in you and make something of you, it changes everything. They couldn't not follow him!

D. Of course, as we follow Jesus it changes us. Jesus loves us just the way we are but he loves us too much for us to stay that way! As we ponder the reality of his reign in the world, as we immerse ourselves in his teaching and in his life and in his love, as we pursue justice and reconciliation in that part of the world we have some influence in, all under the guidance and power of his Spirit, he transforms us, and every area of our life as well. And so, as we observe the next three years these fellows spend with Jesus, we can begin to see emerge a direction or pathway of discipleship that Jesus lays out for us. What does that look like?

III. The Pathway of Discipleship

A. Overall, this pathway is a movement from skeptic, to seeker, to follower of Jesus, to fisher of men and women. It's not always a sequential path, and it doesn't mean we won't make

U-turns and loops, or even sit down and go nowhere for a while. But it does give us an important, overall direction to head. Let's consider each one briefly because they're all important, whether we're being made a disciple or making disciples of others.

1. Skeptic: The basic word for a skeptic is trust. That's because a skeptic is one who flat out doesn't trust a Christian, or Christians as a whole. There are many reasons this could be so, but the basic growing edge here is that trust must be built, or rebuilt. This person will not be argued into the faith, as if somehow we can get them to trust us because of our good logic. Instead, trust must be built relationally and slowly, pointing out humbly and along the way how Christianity is actually good for the wider world.

2. Seeker: The word for a seeker is step. This is so because a seeker has had some positive interaction with a Christian or Christians and wants to know more because of what he or she has seen in another. They are not ready to give their life to Jesus, but they are enjoying being among the community of faith and participating at some level in it. The seeker will need thoughtful challenges to go deeper with Jesus, to take another step to investigate Jesus and what inviting him to be the rescuer and leader of their life means.

3. Follower of Jesus: The word here is listen. A follower has pledged allegiance to Jesus and his kingdom and wants to grow in his or her relationship with Jesus. To do this, a follower needs to learn how to listen, to learn how to recognize God's voice, and to obey it, to put it into practice. The spiritual disciplines are very important here, ranging from silence to study to service and everything in-between, as they are ways to make ourselves available to what God is doing, and wants to do, in our life as we live within and seek to advance his kingdom.

4. Fisher of men and women: The word for fishers is lead. It highlights the responsibility Jesus gives to his followers to make disciples of others. Jesus hints at this when he says to his first followers in the region of Galilee that his call to follow him would ultimately lead to their being equipped and, using an image that would've appealed to fishermen, being sent to fish for people. Being a disciple, in other words, involves making them. It's worth noting that Jesus comes back to this responsibility after his death and resurrection. After directing his followers to head back to Galilee, he meets them there. Here is how Matthew describes it (28:16-20):

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

The arrival of the King and his kingdom, leads to his call to follow him along the path of discipleship and to then lead others along that same way.

What's interesting to note is that Jesus bookends his public ministry with this call. It begins by hinting that he will equip those who follow him to become fishers of men and women, and then it ends with that very charge. Which means that the kingdom-revealing life of Jesus is a huge part of that equipping process. The life of Jesus is what grows us as we listen, and it is what guides us as we lead...and he stays with us all the way! A good prayer to aid us along the way comes out of Paul's letter to the Colossians (1:9-14). Paul prays for their growth as disciples so let's pray for ourselves now, and then keep praying for others.