Mark Lesson 2 (2022)

**“THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR!”**

Mark 1:14-20

Key Verse: 1:15

“‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

 In the previous passage, 1:1-13, we learned how John the Baptist prepared people’s hearts for the coming Messiah through the baptism of repentance. Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and he received baptism from John. Just as he was coming out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (10-11) Jesus was reassured of his identity and calling as the Messiah. He was ready to launch his messianic ministry.

The initial stage of Jesus’ Galilean ministry is recorded in 1:14-3:6. It includes Jesus’ healing ministry to many sick people with broken hearts and spirits. His ministry revealed God’s unlimited compassion for people, including socially unacceptable people in his time. His messianic ministry was somewhat radical, so it became popular and controversial and offended the Jewish religious system of hierarchy. According to Mark’s account, Jesus’ Galilean ministry was full of energy and dynamic.

Today’s passage describes how his ministry in Galilee began. It has two focuses: Jesus’s proclamation of God’s good news (14-15) and the calling of his first disciples (16-20).

 Look at verses 14-15. “After John was put into 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.’” It’s noteworthy that Jesus did not launch his ministry until after John had been put into prison. John’s imprisonment indicates the end of John’s ministry. It also shows that the time has come for Jesus to act.

Jesus started his ministry not in the heartland of Israel, like Jerusalem or Judea, but Galilee, the northern part of Israel, his homeland. Initially, Jesus came to Judea to be baptized by John. Then he returned to Galilee, where he began to preach. Probably, Jesus chose Galilee as the base of his messianic ministry, away from the confrontation with the political and religious power in Jerusalem and Judea.

As Jesus went into Galilee, he proclaimed the good news of God. So what is the good news of God that Jesus preached? Look at verse 15. “‘The time has come.’ He said, ‘the kingdom has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” This verse summarizes the content of the good news of God. We may understand better as we think about this verse phrase by phrase; ***1) “the time has come,” 2) “the kingdom of God is near,” 3) “repent and believe the good news.”***

What did Jesus mean when he said: “The time has come”? After being under pandemic restrictions for more than two years, many people say, “*It’s about time.”* Likewise, the people of Israel had waited for the coming of the Messiah through whom God promised to deliver them from their misery. Yet, the Messiah hadn’t arrived, and their salvation hadn’t been provided for many centuries. So when Jesus said, “The time has come,” he was announcing that the critical time of God’s deliverance had arrived.

It reminds us of what Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 states. “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.”

Jesus had a sense of God’s timing, referring to the end of the present age and the beginning of the messianic age. We also need to have a sense of God’s timing in our lives.

Even though Jesus proclaimed that the time had arrived, he didn’t decisively announce the arrival of the Messiah, saying, *“Look up everyone, I am the Messiah!”* Instead, he said, “The kingdom of God has come near.” “The kingdom of God” is repeated 14 times in Mark’s Gospel. The term “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven” is difficult to understand. It’s easy to misunderstand. We tend to think of the kingdom of God as the concept of a place or a system, like nations or visible churches, or religious systems. But I don’t think Jesus was announcing the establishment of a new kingdom on earth, bringing God’s judgment or the change of the world system. Instead, the term “the kingdom of God” is more of God’s decisive act of love, compassion for humankind, living presence, invisible order, or providence.

In other words, when Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God is near, it’s the arrival of the new era of God’s compassion, mercy, and love, which are available for anybody, anywhere, and anytime. This is exciting. In the new kingdom that Jesus had brought us, everybody has access to God’s kingdom. It’s not far from us. It's available at our fingertips. Revelation 3:20 confirms it by saying, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”

We see many people who feel troubled and trapped. Many of them are troubled not necessarily because of what happens outside in the world but because of what happens in their inner self. Living in a materialistic world, people tend to focus on material wealth and ignore their inner world. But the kingdom of God is about the internal world more than the external world. Jesus said in John 14:27 (NLT), “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid.”

So how can we have this new kingdom of God in our lives? ***“Repent and believe the good news!”*** This is a simple message. But it opens the gate of heaven for us. There are two steps: 1) repentance and 2) faith in the good news. We have been thinking about the word **“repent”** quite often. But it’s always good to think again. The word “repent” is *‘metanoeō*/μετανοέω’ in Greek, which means **to change one’s mind**. It’s not just to stop doing the wrong things. True repentance requires a change of one’s mind, and it’s a lifelong process.

But we don’t always know what we should change. So we need a moment of awakening or inspiration to change our minds. We need to be open-minded, not holding to our old ideas, preconception, or pride. To be open-minded, we need to let go of our old self and pride. For example, people get into a fight and severe arguments when they are rigid, thinking they are always right. But when they acknowledge a possibility that they are wrong, they can be open-minded, and the argument stops. Jesus is not saying that we should repent because we are always wrong. No. He is saying that we should always be open-minded before the truth of God. Be ready to change your old way of wrong thinking, prejudice, pride, unhealthy habits, etc. The good news is that we are already blessed when we have a mindset open to change and improvement.

 The second part of the solution is “to believe the good news.” The word “believe” in Greek *“pisteuo”* means to credit, have confidence. The world of faith is to have the confidence of invisible reality. We cannot always depend on our human reason because faith is beyond our understanding. Neil deGrasse Tyson, one of the leading astrophysicists, said, “The universe is under no obligation to make sense to you.” (Pic#1) When I first read his remark, I thought it was interesting. And it made me say to myself, *“God of the universe is so huge and mysterious that He is under no obligation to make sense to me.”* Can I understand the mystery of the universe? No. Can Isay that I can understand the mystery of God’s truth with my human logic? No.

Even Apostle Paul admitted that what he knew was partial, and then he shall know entirely someday, as he was fully known by God. God is all-knowing, but we are not. Then he also said that the resurrection of our body is a mystery. He said in 1 Corinthians 15:51, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.” Paul called the resurrection of our body a mystery because it’s beyond our human understanding. We struggle to understand everything about God’s truth through our human reason or science. But we need more than human reason. The point is that we need faith and confidence in God’s declaration. Yes! “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” (Heb. 11:1) We live in the 21st century with many potentialities and challenges. We may feel insecure and afraid. But the good news of God is that the kingdom of God is already here, and it’s time for us to repent and believe the good news. Amen!

In verses 16-20, we see how Jesus called his first disciples, Simon and his brother Andrew and James son of Zebedee and his brother John. When Jesus preached the good news of God in Galilee, I am sure many people heard it. From the outset of his messianic ministry in Galilee, Jesus called a few people to work with him as kingdom workers.

Look at verses 16-18. “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.” I heard that the Sea of Galilee is a beautiful lake, almost 700 feet below sea level, 14 miles long, and 6 miles wide. (Pic#2 and #3) I also heard that the water in the lake is fresh even today, so people catch fish in that lake and sell them to tourists at high prices, saying that those fish are “St. Peter’s Fish or Wonder Fish.” (Pic#4) There were many towns and fishing villages on the western and northern shores in those days. Simon and Andrew were fishermen by trade.

I am sure that even before this encounter, they heard Jesus’ preaching of the good news of God, saying, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” Probably, they were pretty impressed and moved by Jesus’ preaching. Yet, they didn’t volunteer to join Jesus. They went back to their profession as fishermen. However, there was a moment of God’s call for them through Jesus. Surprisingly enough, they responded to Jesus’ call immediately without hesitation. I wonder how they could make such a quick decision. We are not for sure, but they might have decided to give a try to follow him because they saw something extraordinary in Jesus. Maybe Jesus’ voice of calling captivated them, and something emerged through Jesus. Similar things happened to the two sons of Zebedee, James, and John.

Look at verses 19-20. “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 follow him.” James and John were also fishermen by trade. It seems that their fishing business was big enough to hire more people. When Jesus called them to work with him as kingdom workers, they didn’t hesitate to follow him either.

We cannot explain scientifically or logically how they could decide to follow Jesus, especially in such a short amount of time. Were they making a mistake? I don’t think so. I believe that they made the right decision or the best decision. All I can say is that they could do so because they heard the voice of God through Jesus. Apostle Paul decided to follow Jesus because he had a clear sense of God’s call. Without a sense of God’s call, we cannot make such an important decision. In other words, we need to hear God’s voice directly or through the Scripture. I don’t believe that everyone is called to be missionaries and pastors. But we all need to hear God’s call.

The word “vocation” derives from the Latin word “vocatio” which means **“a calling.”** Vocation is also our response to a call from beyond oneself to use one’s energy, gifts, and talents to make the world a better place through service, creativity, and leadership. We need to have a sense of call, either as a pastor, missionary, doctor, nurse, teacher, lawyer, musician, artist, athlete, politician, parent, grandparent, etc. The ultimate goal of God’s call in our life is that our inner person continually improves through renewing our minds, and we can make a difference in other people's lives. Life in this world is complex, yet it can be ever rewarding when we remain open-minded, ready to be changed through repentance and faith in God. And the kingdom of God is at our fingertips. We also need to hear God’s voice of calling. “Come, follow me. I will send you out to save people.” I know some of us received God’s call many years ago. It’s time for them to renew the sense of God’s calling to our lives and have a new beginning. “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”