



March 1, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Mark 1:9-15

“What was Jesus’ favorite topic?”

Have you ever wondered, “What was Jesus’ favorite topic?”

What comes to mind?

-He lambasted the self-righteous religious folk fairly frequently, calling them snakes and vipers. He said they were like whitewashed tombs- clean and white on the outside, but full of filthy decay on the inside. He told them the prostitutes and collaborators with the Romans (tax collectors) would enter heaven before them.

-He encouraged people to put following him FIRST, ahead of riches or fame or even family. He said, “Pick up your instrument of torture and death (the cross), and follow me.”

-He stuck up for the lowly- outcasts- lepers, the diseased in general, tax collectors, prostitutes and adulterous women, women in general, the despised Samaritans and so forth.

With all that Jesus said and did, how can we zero in on a central message? Well, there is ONE topic Jesus brought up again and again. He BEGAN his ministry with it, told story after story about it, brought it up in the midst of human interactions, and named it at the Last Supper as he anticipated his death on the cross.

WHAT WAS THAT TOPIC??? (drum roll) THE KINGDOM OF GOD. There are 65 mentions of the kingdom of God in the Bible. FIFTY of them are in the gospels. You can open the New Testament to almost any place in Matthew, Mark or Luke

and find parables of the kingdom and references to its coming. If it was so central to Jesus, it is worth studying.

I do want to address one thing as we begin. The “kingdom” thing. Here in the U.S. we are not so fond of images of royalty. We threw out the kings, queens, lords and ladies with the American Revolution. Some also dislike the fact that the image of a “king” is one of a male person. God is not male or female, and God’s “person” status is different from a purely “human person” status. So—for any who find the phrase difficult, know that it is fine to say it differently- “realm of God” has been used for “kingdom of God”, along with other variations. They are not fully equivalent, but it’s ok for you to use them if you find they help you.

Ok. What do we learn through Scripture about God’s kingdom, rule or realm?

First- Jesus was sent to announce it. At the beginning of his ministry, after the temptation in the wilderness that followed his baptism by John, Jesus began to travel and preach. According to Mark, Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is NEAR.” It’s not far off, not in the distant future, but close to this very time and place. The other important thing he said is that this announcement is GOOD NEWS. So, the kingdom of God is GOOD. It’s NEAR and GOOD.

Second- God’s kingdom is for everybody, even those we see as unimportant—even children, little kids.

Third- God’s kingdom is a gift which we experience only as we allow ourselves to recapture some qualities we had as children: qualities like: trust, joy in depending on someone wiser and stronger, openness and receptivity to THIS MOMENT.....the “right now” in which we live, humble awareness of limitations, and a keen sense of wonder.

Fourth- God’s kingdom is like yeast in dough, like a mustard seed in the earth—meaning? (these of course can be the focus of entire sermons!)—
-Tiny beginnings can lead to amazing and immense consequences
-Nothing said or done in our day is inconsequential. Every word, deed and thought has cosmic significance.

So, WHERE IS THIS KINGDOM? Up in the sky? In the mysterious heavenly realm after we die? In this world when it ends, and Christ returns to earth?

This brings us to #5: Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is WITHIN you.” Some translations from the Biblical Greek say, “The kingdom of God is AMONG you.” Maybe God meant for us to know BOTH are true:

WITHIN: God's kingdom enters my heart when I turn my life, my love, my heart and soul, my will over to God.

AMONG: God's kingdom appears when two or three of us gather in Christ's name to love and serve him, and to love one another as Christ loves us.

#6: Jesus also spoke of the kingdom of God as a heavenly place and time- when the heavenly banquet unites us around God's table.

So, WHICH IS IT? NOW OR LATER? Yes.

Now? Yes.

Later? Yes.

Here's the summation:

The FULLNESS of God's kingdom is not yet accomplished, but it is PROMISED to us one day, by Christ.

Yet the kingdom of God is PRESENT now—it breaks into this world WHENEVER AND WHEREVER God's will is done.

There is a day I experienced in my ministry that I will never forget. A family in my congregation in Crystal Lake was coming home from Great America amusement park. Their van was hit head-on by a drunk driver. The father in the family survived. His wife, three children, and the family dog were all killed.

The day of the funeral I crossed the street from the parsonage to the church, and saw four hearses parked in the parking lot. As I entered the sanctuary to lead the service, I saw four caskets at the front of the church. At the cemetery we parked and walked to the area where there were four openings for graves.

Each of these sights was like a blow to the heart. The youngest of the children who died was six years old. She was part of a little pompon dance group. During the funeral people were invited to share a few words, if they wanted to. One of the pompon dancers raised her hand. "I want to do a cheer for Dallas," she said. I invited her up and she did the cheer with precision and power. There was audible sobbing in the sanctuary.

After the graveside service we had a lunch at the church. Then, in the afternoon, I did a wedding, celebrating the beginning of the young couple's shared life. In the

evening, I preached at Saturday night worship, which was a contemporary service, where we sang accompanied by a band and wore jeans.

I felt like I lived a whole lifetime in that day. At the funeral lunch I sat with the little girls who were in Dallas' pompon group. We talked about life, death, God, heaven. I took great care in finding my words—thinking, “These girls will never forget this day.” It seemed so important to me, all day long, to try to speak God's words, to do God's deeds. It seemed that every tiny thing I did and said was immensely important.

Then, as I prepared this message, I realized something: Every day is like that day. EVERY DAY IS LIKE THAT DAY. One small word from my mouth has the potential to change someone's life forever. I may never know about it, but this happens every day. And we need to live striving to be God's agents in all we say and do.

In the words of a Christian world missionary conference:

The kingdom of God is both present and future; both a growth and a final consummation by God. It is our task and our hope- our task which we face with the power of Christ; our hope that the last word will be spoken by God and that the last word will be victory. The kingdom means both acceptance and action, a gift and a task. We work for it and we wait for it.

Did you know that you are a “kingdom bringer”? We are, as

- we follow Christ
- obey his laws of love
- and seek to let Christ's spirit direct our lives.

We need to remember, with humility, that the fullness of God's kingdom will only be accomplished in completeness by God's own hand. BUT God's hand is at work, friends, planting little seeds, tiny ones, small- no more than grains of dust, like little mustard seeds----- US. WE are “kingdom seeds”, called to send roots into the soil of God's Spirit and GROW.

Trust God, as a little child trusts a loving parent. Trust God, do his work, which is watered by God's grace, and watch the Kingdom grow! Amen.