

Sermon for January 25, 2015 (Epiphany 3, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Samuel 8:4-20; Psalm 62; Mark 1:14-20

Title: The Kingdom of God Is Right At Hand

My dear friends: WELCOME to our Annual Parish Meeting!
WELCOME to this celebration of community which is held here each January –
and welcome to the celebration of the gift of THIS specific community in this place
and time.

When the Lord's cousin, John, was arrested by King Herod, Jesus went into Galilee
and launched his life's work.

His words to the people were very specific and quite intentional:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in
the good news."

A more accessible translation might go like this:

"The time has come. The kingdom of God is right at hand. Change directions and
trust in this good news!"

Now we MUST remember that this proclamation is for the community as a whole,
not to individuals.

His purpose was to build a new community, an alternative community, who will turn
God's vision for human life into reality.

Why is this a problem? Why was that so difficult to achieve?

Well, just look at our story from the prophet Samuel! It seems that the people of
God have always struggled with accepting God as the only ruling authority over their
life.

In fact, it can be argued that THIS is the on-going tension that lies behind every
single part of the biblical story.

From the creation in Genesis, to the struggle with the King of Egypt – the Pharaoh, to this classic battle of the wills between the prophet of God (Samuel) and the people of Israel – who have decided that THIS aspect of holiness is not something that they like very much!

Moses established a new colony of freed slaves who agreed to never again having a human king like Pharaoh to rule over them!

After Sinai, their liberating GOD would be the only authority over them.

Except that some time passed, and they became jealous of the other nations around them, especially the Philistines right next door to the west.

Why couldn't they have a king just like everyone else?

And so they succumbed to yet another form of idolatry – and they submitted to the authority of a king.

Did you notice how the old man Samuel talked about the rule of a king?

He will take...he will take...he will take...he will take...SIX times he repeats these same words!

Can you see the extreme irony on display here?

GOD is the one who GIVES them freedom, who GIVES them a homeland, who GIVES them new life, who GIVES them a way to live together in peace without ever needing a king to rule over them.

And yet they forget about this generous and gracious God, and they submit themselves to a human king who takes.

In the days of Jesus, Herod was the King of the Jews – and he took everything that he could get his hands on!

And now when John the Baptizer was taken by that false King Herod, Jesus stepped out of the shadows and proclaimed to everyone:

“The time has come. The time of the human king is over. The full reign of God is here, right at hand! Change directions – forget about that kind of earthly power

which you see in Herod, which you see in Caesar – and place your trust in this good news of God!”

OK, so here’s the amazing thing! It actually worked!

In response to this preaching, in response to the life of this Galilean preacher, a brand new community was born – unlike anything that the world had ever seen!

My friends: I have said it before and I will say it yet again this morning: There is no such thing as Christianity!

It does not exist. It is a figment of modern people’s imaginations.

There is no group of ideas, no set of doctrines, to which one could point and say, “this is Christianity.”

No. But what there IS, is the Church!

What has been since that day when Jesus first called out to Simon and Andrew is a community of real human beings who have shared their lives together in a way that is real and meaningful – and life-changing!

And what continues even today are local communities of real human beings like us who have heard these words of Jesus and have responded to them and have said, “Yes! We WILL change our minds, our direction. We WILL live our lives under the sovereignty of God. We WILL trust in this good news.”

Not everyone will respond to the Gospel. Not all will hear these words of Jesus as “good news”.

And that’s OK. But WE do. WE are among those who have said, “Yes” to the call ...

Who are STILL saying “Yes” to the call every time that we walk forward to the Altar, and every time that we tell a story about Jesus to our children in Guiding RAY.

We are saying YES to the Lord’s call every time that we gather to share with those who are in need,
and every time that we serve a bowl of soup to one of our guests at Souper Supper.

We are saying YES to the call every time that we place a gift in the offering plate – no matter the amount, and every time that we pause at Noon (or anytime of day) to pray for one another and for those who are sick.

Let's be clear that to be in the community gathered around Jesus, to share life together under the sovereign goodness of God alone - this does not mean primarily that we have access to special privileges.

Of course, there ARE many privileges of being in community with the Messiah. But more than this, it means that we have a special responsibility for the world around us.

The Church is the community of those who have been called out and set apart as a distinct community so that we can serve humanity with intention, with clarity and unity of purpose.

As those who are baptized – who are washed, drowned, re-created in the waters of new life by the Word of God – we are set apart to be a new and different kind of community for the glory of God AND for the good of those who will never darken our doors.

What a responsibility! What a gift! And what a privilege it is to share with you in this blessed community gathered together under the gracious patronage of Mary the God-bearer, the Mother of our Lord. Thanks be to God!

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
even if you have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and sustenance without money – free! – and without price.

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."