**Prepare the Way**

**Text: Mark 1:1-15**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**January 14, 2018**

Helen and I have a system: if I have a meeting in the early evening, I’ll phone home as I’m leaving the church, and she’ll get dinner started. 30 minutes later, when I arrive, I’m met by this *wonderful* aroma. The meal that’s coming smells so good that I can almost *taste* it. I’m prepared to eat good food.

That’s the way it works *some* of the time. Other times I’ll come in the door and there’s no aroma and Helen is reading the newspaper and she’ll say, “You forgot to call!” Oops.

It pays to prepare. Which is what John the Baptist was all about. He didn’t forget to call. Nor did God forget to call him! God sent him into the Jordon Valley, urging people to repent and receive forgiveness and be baptized. He was preparing their hearts and minds for the powerful message of Jesus.

It pays to prepare. Which is what Jesus’ initial proclamation was all about: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!” Jesus wanted people to be prepared for all of the ways in which the Kingdom of God would draw even closer through his ministry of preaching and teaching, of casting out demons and healing the sick and confronting all the forces that try to destroy the authentic life that God intends for the whole world.

“The Kingdom of God has come near.” It’s like that meal that’s almost ready: the time to eat is so close that you can almost taste it.

“The Kingdom of God has come near.” It is a bold proclamation! Jesus does not say, "Keep doing what you're doing, the Kingdom of God is a ways off yet" or "the Kingdom of God is what you will experience after you die." No, the Kingdom of God has come near, in *this* world, and we need to do something about it, *now*! And that’s exactly what Mark’s Jesus does. For the remainder of this first chapter of Mark’s gospel, we find Jesus engaged in a whirlwind of activity: preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, from dawn until the setting of the sun.

In so doing, Jesus shows us what the Kingdom of God is all about. He brings it even closer through his very actions. The Kingdom is the essence of who Jesus is, and it’s the essence of what the Church is called to be.

This is the way things are especially for *Mark’s* Jesus. The Kingdom plays a prominent role in Matthew and Luke’s gospels too, of course, but it is especially *Mark’s* Jesus who confronts us with this hard-driving immediacy of God’s Realm.

Before we go any further, we need to say a word about the Jesus who appears in each of the 4 gospels: he’s not exactly the same guy. You see, in the gospels – in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – we’re not reading literal history. We’re reading 4 different *interpretations* of Jesus; 4 different attempts to apply the wisdom and the power of Jesus to situations that churches are facing forty years and more after his death and resurrection. Each gospel writer has his own traditions about Jesus and his own agenda. And what each one writes about Jesus falls into 3 categories:

* There are things that the historical Jesus *probably* said and did.
* There are things that each gospel writer or his sources probably created as part of telling a good story.
* And there are things that we can’t be sure about; things that *may* be the historical Jesus or may not be. These things fall into a gray area between historical events of the early 1st century and the creative writing of the later 1st century.

But that creative writing is nevertheless revelatory because it has been inspired by the Risen Christ. That creative writing serves as a conduit through which God’s Word can speak to us because – as John puts it – the “Spirit of Truth” (the Spirit of the Risen Christ) has come to the Church. The historical Jesus spoke to the disciples in Galilee, and the Risen Christ Jesus spoke to the early churches around the eastern Mediterranean, and through the wisdom of the four gospels the Christ speaks to the Church today.

Mark was written first. That’s what most scholars think. We’ll be working a lot with Mark throughout 2018. And Mark’s Jesus especially is all about the Kingdom of God: *preparing* for it, *confronting* those who oppose it, and doing so with *power*.

John the Baptist prepared the way. Preparation and planning are important. General Eisenhower said that before the battle is joined, planning is everything. Had John not prepared the way, confronting the religious establishment with his message of repentance and forgiveness, people might not have recognized Jesus as the Messiah: Jesus placed confrontation and forgiveness at the heart of his ministry. Folks had enough troubling recognizing him as it was!

Preparation is important. I’m reading the new biography of Civil War General Ulysses S. Grant. In 1862 he was charged with the task of taking Vicksburg: the citadel on the lower Mississippi that *had* to be taken if the Confederacy was to be defeated. So General Grant got to preparing. He isolated himself in his headquarters. For weeks he poured over maps, studied the terrain, calculated the risks of various strategies; and he thought, and he thought and he thought. Criticism in the press was mounting because it seemed like Grant and his Army of the Tennessee were doing nothing. But then, in the spring of 1863, Grant moved with lightening speed: confronting the enemy, defeating the forces arrayed against him, and forcing Vicksburg to surrender. It never would’ve happened without preparation.

The B.C. comic strip on New Year’s Eve featured the character Peter, who chisels messages on a stone tablet and sends them to a friend across the sea. Peter writes, “We usher in the New Year with good intentions and heartfelt desires.” and sends the message out with the tide. Next morning another tablet drifts ashore. It reads, “We drop a giant ball and hope for the best.”

Without preparation, the *confrontation* that *must* come is likely to be a disaster. And make no mistake about it: in Mark’s gospel there’s *plenty* of confrontation. Jesus knows that the demonic forces that are arrayed against the Kingdom will not give-up without a fight. Mark’s Jesus confronts demons, he confronts illness, he confronts fear, he confronts confusion. There’s no gentle Jesus, meek and mild in this gospel. This dude is in your face! The late Fred Craddock suggests that this is the reason why Mark’s gospel has never been popular. We crave the pastoral scene of the stable birth in Luke, or the gentleness of Matthew’s Jesus inviting all who carry heavy burdens to find rest in him. We get a little turned-off by this passionate Jesus who demands obedience from destructive demons and confused disciples alike.

We get turned off by Mark’s “in your face” Jesus because in the Church, we often think there’s an 11th commandment that says, “Thou shalt be nice.” We try to be so nice to each other that if someone comes along and confronts and disrupts and tries to tear away those things that are getting in the way of the coming Kingdom – those things that *need* to be confronted if the Church is to be the Church and carry on the work of Jesus – they get shunned and ignored; and if the one who is doing the confronting is the Pastor, maybe even fired.

But you can’t cast out demons without confronting them. You can’t save God’s people without confronting the so-called authorities who are misleading them. You can’t address sin and pain and confusion and despair without confronting these things that cause dis-ease to the soul and sometimes disease to the body. People might reject you if you do, because you’re not being nice. But beyond the cross of rejection there is always the empty tomb of new life.

This opening chapter of Mark’s gospel is about preparation, confrontation and *power*. Jesus confronts the demonic with *great* power. One who tries to confront the enemies of God without the power to back him up is almost laughable. Somewhere in the vagueness of my early memories there’s an image of a cartoon character – maybe a little mouse – who is swinging his fists at a big cat and getting nowhere. The cat is just non-chalantly holding him at arm’s length. That’s what happens when you try to confront the powerful without having any power yourself. But Jesus…Jesus is imbued with *great* power. It is bestowed upon him by the Spirit at his baptism. This is how he’s able to cast out demons, heal the sick, gather a community and tolerate the endless misunderstandings of who he really is.

Jesus power, however, is not the power of a bully. He’s not pushing the demons around just to serve his own interests and gratify his ego. It is, rather, the power of one with *authority*. It is the power of one who is authentic to who he is and authentic to what the Kingdom is all about. Jesus demonstrated that kind of authority, with great power, in order to confront all of those forces that seek to prevent authentic living; seek to prevent the world from being the kind of place that God made it to be: a place of love and justice and wholeness and community and peace; a place where even human beings and wild beasts can live together without fear, as depicted in Jesus’ 40 day sojourn in the wilderness; a place where *every* person, in *every* nation, is loved by God. When Jesus confronts these demonic forces, with authority and great power, he is living out the values of the Kingdom; living as if it is already here, and thus bringing it even closer.

Preparing, and confronting the demonic, in the power of the Spirit, that the world might become the place of authentic living that God intended it to be from the beginning of time: this is the work of Mark’s Jesus, this is the work of the Kingdom, and this is the work that the Church is called to do. It’s not the work that the Church freely *chooses* to do, it’s the work that Jesus *calls* the Church to do. Jesus takes the initiative. Jesus seeks out the disciples; they don’t seek out him. Jesus all but *compels* them to follow him through the power born of authenticity that the Spirit has placed upon him. The Kingdom is near and the Church must act as if it’s already *here*! The Church is not a voluntary association for promoting good; it is the company of those who have been drafted: drafted into the mission of bringing the Kingdom ever closer.

Over all of this looms the shadow of the Cross. Those who confront the demonic tend not to get out of it alive. But then, *none* of us are going to get out of this place alive. So you might as well go down fighting. Others may abandon you when you do so, but God never will. There will be great suffering that goes along with the great power that God in Christ has bestowed upon the Church, but at the end of the story there’s an Empty Tomb.

Mark’s Jesus is the powerful Son of God who delivers humanity from all that threatens authentic life. That’s what the Kingdom of God is all about. And it’s so close that you can almost taste it. Amen.