

¹² Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; ¹³ and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Caper’na-um by the sea, in the territory of Zeb’ulun and Naph’tali, ¹⁴ that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ “The land of Zeb’ulun and the land of Naph’tali,
toward the sea, across the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”**

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zeb’edee and John his brother, in the boat with Zeb’edee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³ And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and **preaching the gospel of the kingdom** and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.

It’s hard to break old habits. It’s hard to get past the notion that Christianity is primarily about “Fire Insurance” – to make sure that we don’t spend eternity in a fiery place. But today’s scripture is so vitally important for us to understand – this message that Jesus lifts up in this first sermon: **“The Kingdom of Heaven IS AT HAND.”**

Many of us have grown up being told that this means: some version of ***If you want to be saved and go to heaven when you die, then you must ... “get fixed” in some way; must somehow make yourself good enough in God’s eyes; must confess some kind of faith statement.***

They don’t get it: Jesus did not come to change how God sees us, but to change how we see God.

Even though some folks insist that “being saved” is the only thing that it’s all about, this really misses the mark of what Jesus spent His life teaching,

and His death and resurrection showing – it’s about the Kingdom of Heaven AT HAND.

At the risk of being accused of beating a horse to death, let me repeat some figures I quoted four years ago, on All Saints’ Sunday:

In all four Gospels, "kingdom" is spoken about 115 times, and the words "save" + "saved" + "salvation" are mentioned only 46 times. (And most times where the Greek word is translated “save” or “saved” or “salvation,” it could also be translated as “HEALED.”)

The Kingdom is at hand. Jesus taught: Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

And, if you **go line by line, verse by verse, through each of the first three Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke, you will find:**

- **THERE IS NOT A SINGLE EXAMPLE OF JESUS SAYING “BELIEVE IN ME AND YOU WILL GO TO HEAVEN WHEN YOU DIE.”**
- **THERE IS NOT A SINGLE EXAMPLE OF JESUS TALKING ABOUT ANYONE’S PERSONAL SALVATION.**

So, what was he talking about? What is this GOOD NEWS?

As we heard read today, Jesus’ ministry begins with the announcement of his purpose – of the good news to be proclaimed: **“TURN AROUND, THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.”**

What meaning does this have for us today – January 22, 2017?

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This has been a momentous week – from what I have seen on television and from what I have read in social media.

- Inauguration of a new governor for the State of West Virginia
- Inauguration of a new President for the United States of America

- Historic protests and marches in America and around the globe

As these events were presented in the media, and discussed in social media, one phrase kept being repeated over and over:

- **“Talk is cheap. Anyone can talk. What real action will take place?”**
- And then one pastor, in a group where we discussed these things, said: I wonder how many people think the same thing about what we do from the pulpit every Sunday: **“Talk is cheap. Anyone can talk. What real action will take place?”** “Wow!” I thought, as I tried to prepare what to say today.

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Let me try to avoid that reaction: We can no more experience the Kingdom of Heaven at hand, than we are able – on our own – to make that Kingdom come. ... The most we can do is TO PREPARE for GOD’S ENTRY into our lives, to GET OUT OF GOD’S WAY, to REMOVE THE BARRIERS.ⁱ

And that is a difficult task for us, because **“for hundreds of years Western [humans have] been convinced that [they] could ultimately solve every one of [their] problems by doing something about it.”**ⁱⁱ
[repeat that quote]

Not to burst your bubble, but: **While there is much we can do, there is also much that is simply beyond our control.** Some people – some very frustrated people -- never get around to acceptance of that fact: **There is much in life over which we simply cannot have control**

So here is what a preacher can offer; here is what is more than cheap words – that anybody can speak:

BE READY, THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.

- **Not more than “cheap words” just because** Jesus said them (although I think it gives them great value.)
- **More than “cheap words” because** they will help us realize that eternity is right here, right now: at hand. **Eternity is not merely unending time; it is an indestructible present.**ⁱⁱⁱ
- **More than “cheap words” because** in a world that seems
 - ++ so terribly out of whack,
 - ++ so terribly angry and divided,
 - ++ so uncertain –
 the **reality of God’s Kingdom at hand** is the **only thing** that
 - ++ can provide healing,
 - ++ can provide certainty of spirit in the midst of uncertain circumstances, and
 - ++ can provide a power that can put everything aright.

And **we cannot make it happen at all!** All we can do is to **be ready!**

God’s Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

- ++ You can’t make it happen.
- ++ Your preacher can’t make it happen.
- ++ And no amount of good deeds by you will cause it to open up to you.

It’s ALREADY AT HAND.

- Only God can reveal it.
- Only God can hold out His hand to take your hand and usher you into it.

And you and I will miss it,

- if we are not ready for it
- if we are not looking for it
- if we are not open to its breaking into our consciousness

And that’s not just **cheap words**,

- because it will turn your world upside down.
- because it will change how you actually see life.

- because you cannot make it happen; it can only happen TO you, and then THROUGH you.
- Because you will have the power to do more than you can ask or even imagine, on behalf of the Kingdom ... and you WILL NOT BE ABLE TO TAKE CREDIT FOR IT.

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- Any time you hear someone taking credit for some good thing they have done, know this: **that is NOT the word of the Kingdom of Heaven**. That's the **word of someone wanting worldly praise**.
- Any time you hear someone saying that they have it all figured out, know this: that is **not the truth**, because **nobody can second guess what God is going to do**. And God keeps on keeping on surprising people.

Ach! We are living in a very interesting time. Perhaps, unlike any we have ever seen. But know this:

- Lots of people have lived in interesting times and gone through things unlike they have ever seen before.
- Lots of people have claimed that “we are at the crossroads.” Almost every politician I have ever heard and have read in my study of history, (and many of the church leaders, too) have proclaimed that “we stand at a crossroads in history.”
- **Lots of people think they have the answers**. And **lots of OTHER people think** -- at the same time -- **that the first people's answers are problems, not answers**.

But through all of it, and in all times and places, the **KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND**.

Words **ARE** cheaply spent.

God's Kingdom, however, is not cheap at all.

++ It cannot be bought.

++ BUT, if we are ready for God's Kingdom to break forth into our living, it can be more powerful than anything we can ask or imagine. Verse 23 in today's Gospel tells us about such power and about how it brings **HEALING**.

- This I know.
- This I have experienced it.
- This, I've seen in many lives of people here today.

Are you ready?

BE READY ... and wait.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

i Alan Watts, *Behold the Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion*.

ii Ibid. See also Pauline Boss, *The Myth of Closure*, from *On Being* (June 23, 2016)

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/pauline-boss-the-myth-of-closure/8757>

iii Ibid.