

Sunday Sermon
February 18, 2018
Mark 1:9-15
“The Kingdom of God Has Come Near”

Introduction

The Gospel of Mark is my kind of gospel—high energy, fast moving, task-oriented. In seven verses, Mark takes Jesus from his hometown of Nazareth to the Jordan to be baptized and blessed by God, then led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan and cared for by angels, and then to Galilee to preach his first sermon, where he says the time is being fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Wow, that is a faster and busier pace than our twelve months together here.

It has been a good year here. You are transitioning through change. But you have the DNA of God’s people, and that DNA does not change.

I do not have much time today, so in fast-moving Markan style, I am going to share how I see the kingdom of God is coming in this place. Here are twelve tasks or goals you identified in this past year’s Mission Study as important and how we have begun to address them.

Tasks

- (1) **Energize and strengthen Christian Education.** This year the CE Committee reorganized classes around a small groups model. They cleaned out, painted, and rearranged children’s rooms. They opened a Sunday morning Holy Grounds café.
- (2) **Reach out to parents with young children.** The display in the Welcome Center reflects a new Welcome the Child initiative. Our nursery workers now prepare and teach lessons. And families with newborns now receive mailings of resource materials to give them spiritual support.
- (3) **Offer more Bible study opportunities.** We are exploring the best time to offer a lectionary-based Bible study. There is also a group forming at the lake. They too are considering a Bible study.
- (4) **Involve children and youth more in worship.** Thanks to Robert Smith and Adam Bowling, Children’s Choir is meeting weekly and singing regularly. We are seeing more children and youth as liturgists and ushers and more liturgical dancers. We have added youth terms for deacons to go with the youth term for elder, and these individuals help serve communion in worship.
- (5) **Broaden worship experiences with a variety of music.** The new *Glory to God* hymnals dedicated in November incorporate many musical styles. Most of the selections are proving to be quite sing-able. Of course, occasionally I pick one that trips us up.
- (6) **Stream the worship service online.** This has been started, and donations are helping get equipment for better video and audio.

- (7) **Have more fellowship opportunities to get to know each other outside worship and service.** Some activities from the past twelve months: Summer Sunday Socials, ice cream social at the Aycock farm, Christmas Progressive Party, youth mission fundraiser nights at Di'lishi Yogurt and Chick-fil-A, and Pints with Presbyterians every other Thursday night.
- (8) **Grow and strengthen the Shepherd Program with groups organized geographically to make getting together and caring for each other easier.** With next month's election, we will have two deacons designated to work specifically with the Shepherd Program.
- (9) **Have more mission and outreach involvement here in our own community and shared with other faith groups.** Examples from the past twelve months: Presbyterians of Burke County booth at the Morganton Festival, Presbyterian Women partnering with Green Street Women for a regional gathering, Souper Bowl of Caring with six area youth groups. Habitat for Humanity, Sweet & Savory Delights Bakery, BUCM Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry, Meals on Wheels, Coalition for Immigrants are some of the shared ministries. On Palm Sunday, we will have opportunities morning and afternoon to process with our friends of St. Charles Catholic Church. In April, we will host a mission dinner with Green Street and Quaker Meadows Presbyterian Churches.
- (10) **Celebrate the great staff here.** Yes, you have staff with servant hearts, who in this year of transition have stepped up rather than let up.
- (11) **Be open to diversity, all kinds of diversity.** That is happening in ways we may not realize. Not so much in skin color or ethnicity. But people coming through our doors who are increasingly diverse in faith backgrounds or lack of any faith background. Therefore, we now give more information and instructions in the bulletin. We have new pew Bibles so individuals can open and read God's word, some for the first time.
- (12) **Help people of all ages, go and grow deeper in faith and service.** One way to move from being a consumer church who says "We go to church," to a missional church who says "We are the church" is through a language change. The Session is looking at changing the name for ministry organization here from Committees to Ministry Teams. The functions will remain the same as they have been, but with a name change the focus goes from meeting to serving.

Conclusion

Your Pastor Nominating Committee has been meeting weekly, working diligently, focused on the task of leading you to your next senior pastor. But this week, the team will slow down to spend some intentional time in prayer. Even fast-paced, task-oriented Mark shows that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness so that Jesus could spend time in prayer and preparation for what he was being called to do.

The first verse of Mark's gospel says that the story presented here is "the beginning of the good news." That is such a hopeful statement, as we long for good news to outshine the bad.

If Mark's story and Jesus' ministry are just the beginning of the gospel, then we have every reason to believe that the time is still being fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is still coming near. Believe it, First Presbyterian Church, there is good news still to come.