

Christian friends, the message we have to proclaim, to embody and to exemplify, is the same now as it has always been: *The kingdom of God has come near*. Today, as much as ever, people need to know that this kingdom is real and available. They need to see the joy and the possibilities of God’s kingdom in us, because people are too easily satisfied with that which is quick or easy. People settle for liquor or luxuries or technology or entertainment. They look to these things to save them, or at least to help them keep alive in this grim world. But, as C.S. Lewis once wrote, we are far too easily satisfied. We’re like a child who turns down an invitation for a day at the beach and chooses instead to stay sitting in an alley making mud pies just because the child really can’t imagine how much better a day at the shore would be. “What could be better than making these slimy mud pies?” the child might think. Ah, if only he knew!

If the Gospel of Mark were a Broadway play, the first 13 verses would be the overture. When we come to verse 14, the curtain is about to go up on the drama and when it does, we see...Galilee. We’re not in a large city like Jerusalem or Sepphoris or Rome. Nope, just little old Galilee.

Today it would be like expecting to see a drama unfold in New York City or Los Angeles only to have the story zero in on some place like Cannon Ball, North Dakota, population 934. It’s probably a nice place, but it’s not what we were expecting. It can remind me of a scene from the classic movie *The Philadelphia Story* in which Katherine Hepburn plays the haughty East Coast sophisticate, Tracy Lord. At one point she meets an earnest young woman who tells Tracy that she is from Minnesota. With a dismissive, if not vaguely bored, tone in her voice Tracy says to the woman, “Ah, yes, Minnesota. How nice. That’s west of here somewhere, isn’t it?” In other words, “You’re from nowhere, aren’t you, dear?” Or at least nowhere that matters.

That’s the reaction Galilee might have garnered from the sophisticates of Jesus’ day. It’s not the kind of place where one would expect a great drama to unfold.

But as the curtain goes up on the active phase of Jesus' ministry, that is exactly where we find ourselves even as Jesus—far from announcing some elaborate message—basically tears a page out of John the Baptist's book to declare, "*The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.*"

We've heard this before. It's basically what John said. But we thought John was only the warm-up act. He said so himself. So, what's the main character doing reprising all that? Jesus calls this announcement "good news" but at this precise moment as the story begins, the message itself is sufficiently thin on content as to make it difficult to discern what's so good about the news. The kingdom we are told is near enough alright. But it's not fulfilled. It's not crashing in to replace the grim realities of this world (nor doing anything to solve something as locally important as the occupying presence of the Roman empire in Israel). Something appears to be up. Something's in the wind. But just what that something is, we're not completely sure.

But Mark does not give us a chance to ponder that for long as the story moves right along to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. However, the drama quotient is hardly raised as Jesus calls to his side four simple fishermen. Smelling of fish and looking every bit like the working-class fellows that they were, Simon, Andrew, James, and John hitch their wagons to Jesus' still nondescript program and begin to follow him. Jesus does NOT tell them where they are going, beyond some cryptic promise to become "people fishers," he also does not tell these four the specifics of what they might expect to happen next. He certainly does not promise them riches or rewards or anything tangible whatsoever. Yet they follow.

It is striking and quite probably revealing that Mark's version of the gospel story gets off to such a humble, modest start. Matthew has his mysterious star in the east and the Magi who follow it. Luke gives us layer upon layer of drama surrounding the birth and later appearance of Jesus. John takes us to the rim of the universe and the beginning of all things in the all-creating Word become flesh who was and who was with God in the beginning.

But not Mark. Mark allows Jesus merely to appear from out of nowhere, emerging humbly from the heat vapors emanating from the desert floor to be baptized by John. And then at the very moment when we expect the curtain to rise on the drama to come, we end up in Galilee even as Jesus begins to pick the starters on his team that can best be described as rag-tag.

This is “*The beginning*” Mark already mentioned in verse 1. As many scholars have noted, it’s tough to know what Mark meant in his opening verse about “*the beginning.*” What constitutes this beginning? Is Mark so clever as to basically say the entire gospel from Mark 1:1 to the end of Mark 16 is but the merest *beginning* of a gospel that finally knows no bounds?

Tom Long, who used to teach preaching at Princeton Seminary, believes there’s a reason why we find Jesus in Galilee when he utters his very first words in Mark. This was no grand inauguration ceremony, because these are truly humble surroundings that match the gospel ministry Jesus launches and the gospel life that Jesus lives. *Galilee* is the place where most of us live. Most of us do not live in the citadels of power or in the glare of bright lights. No, we live in the *Galilees* of the world, on the margins, in places where the powers-that-be do not visit and that they do not know much about more often than not. We start in Galilee because the *Galilees* of this life—and the simple fisherfolk who live there—are exactly the places and the people Jesus came to save.

And so, when we come to the gospel’s climax and we listen to the angel’s words to the women at the now-empty tomb of Jesus in Mark 16:7, “*He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you,*” as readers of the gospel we are actually being directed back to Mark 1:14. We need to go back to Galilee, back to the humble beginning of the gospel and the mundane characters who inhabit it to see all of this through different eyes. Once we have been to the cross—toward which Mark is driving us through his gospel—and once we’ve seen the victory of God at the empty tomb, we go back to Galilee, and all it stands for, to realize anew that just such a place is what Jesus died and rose for. The victory of Easter that the angel proclaims in Mark 16 directs us back to Galilee to realize the cosmic victory is always

finally a local reality. It comes to Galilee and all who live there. It is a gospel and a victory for them, for the fisherfolk, for the outback, for every out of the way place and for every last one of us. Because *Galilee* is Kennedy, Robinson, Stowe, Moon and so on, it's good to know that's the place where we again and again find Jesus proclaiming the good news of the KINGDOM.

When we look at the world, we see so many things that are not right: Inequality, injustice, poverty, bribery, and lack of concern for the poor and oppressed. Economic and political powers are too often corrupt, and the powerful abuse the weak. We dream of a world of justice, where all is made right. In the Old Testament, that vision of a world made right was focused in the coming Messiah. Isaiah 11:2-5 describes the Messiah: *“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD... with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth... righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.”*

The Messiah will rule over a KINGDOM of righteousness and faithfulness. In addition, Isaiah 9 presents a glorious vision of a king like David, but with a surprising twist, because the King would arise from Galilee, not Judea.

Dallas Willard once wrote that when he was a boy, rural electrification, and the power lines to transmit it, was coming throughout the countryside. But suppose even after the lines were up and running, some families still only used candles and kerosene lanterns for light. A better way of life was waiting for them outside their door. You could shout to the rooftops, “Neighbors, electricity has arrived!” But suppose they just didn't trust in it. Maybe the kingdom of God is like that. We can believe it or not, but the kingdom is real and available to all.

*The kingdom of God has come near!* Don't be easily satisfied with temporary pleasures. Because a better, exciting, hopeful, and joyful kingdom of life is real and is available to us all. *The kingdom of God has come near.* We know this is true! And it's possible to help others know it, too. Amen.