### “The Kingdom Is Near” Steve Finlan for The First Church, February 18, 2024

**1 Peter 3:18–22**

18He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

**Mark 1:9–15**

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Good morning to everyone on this wintry day. This is our special time set aside to be together to receive God’s blessing through the stories and messages brought to us from Jesus. It’s said that the story of Jesus is the greatest story ever told. And I’m pretty sure we can agree on that.

Now, in the Bible you get some pretty down-to-earth stories, and some that are out of this world. We have some of the latter today. The First Peter text shows Jesus preaching to the dead in the afterlife, apparently to sinners from the time of Noah. Now, Jesus only preaches when there is a chance that he will be heard, and can save some. As Peter says in the next chapter, “this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that . . . they might live in the spirit” (4:6). So he went to this afterlife realm in order to save those who were ready to hear the message of God’s love and mercy.

This passage has greatly distressed some Christians who want a cut-and-dried distinction between heaven and hell, with those in hell having no chance of being redeemed. They believe those in hell are there forever, that their story has ended. But this passage clearly shows Jesus speaking to sinners from the past in order that they might live anew in the spirit. This shows the generosity of God, the eagerness to extend the hand of help to everyone, although no one will be forced to *take* that hand. It is the generosity and forgiveness of God that I see highlighted in this chapter in Jesus’ life. He is always doing what he can to help people “live in the spirit.” And we know God’s love and grace extends to us today, available to all who are seekers of the Spirit.

The mention of Noah and the flood enables Peter to make a transition to speaking of baptism, for the flood was seen as a prototype or a prefiguration of baptism by some early believers. He says baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience” (3:21). In other words, it means you are seeking and finding a new spiritual motivation for living. This has to go along with abandoning anything that would offend our conscience. So it means a reformed character. It means you have reached a turning point; you have closed a chapter in your life and are ready to start a new one. Finally Peter points out that Jesus has ascended and is at the right hand of God, with heavenly powers, angels, and authorities subject to him (3:22).

The Mark passage shows us a turning point in Jesus’ life, his baptism, which he underwent not to repent from sin, but so that he might participate in John the Baptist’s movement and “in this way to fulfill all righteousness,” as he says in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 3:15). It was part of Jesus’ way of participating in human living, sharing the experience of his fellows.

And when he did, “he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him” (Mark 1:10). Then comes the heavenly voice, saying “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (1:10–11). In Mark’s retelling, Jesus then goes into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, which is spelled out at greater length in the Gospel of Matthew. That is where Jesus makes it clear that he will not use miracles in order to exercise power, nor will he bow down and worship power. Angels ministered to him during this thoughtful but lonely time.

We can see that lots of things are happening in this passage. Mark gives us a summary of Jesus’ early preaching, following the arrest of John the Baptizer, beginning with “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near” (1:15). “The time is fulfilled” is a loaded statement.

We can notice clues to deeper meaning from the words chosen in the original language of Scripture. The word for time there is not the usual, sequential word *chronos*, but a more meaningful word, *kairos*, which means a special time, a critical time, or the right time. What he means by this is probably filled out by the next remark, that the kingdom of God has come near. So it is a turning point for the whole world, not just for Jesus.

Now, the kingdom of God can mean several things. It is the way God does things, and the way the heavenly realm is run. It is also the reign of God in any individual heart (“The kingdom of God is within you,” as he says in Luke 17:21 KJV), which is a more personal meaning that we can experience for ourselves. It can also mean the reign of God in a community of believers (as Paul said to the Thessalonians, “you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,” 1 Thess 4:9), to take care of one another.

Finally, in this passage Jesus says “repent, and believe in the good news.” “Repent” means turn away from, that is, turn *away* from sinful or selfish ways, and turn *toward* God. The good news is this message about God drawing close, about our deciding to do God’s will, turning to a new way, and becoming partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). So the beginning of Jesus’ message, in Mark, concerns turning toward God and believing that the kingdom of God is near. It means that lives are to be transformed, aligned with God’s will.

Peter reminds us that baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience” (3:21), for a new way of living, a renunciation of what leads to a bad conscience. He also tells us that Jesus is placed over all heavenly authorities and angels, and that Jesus made a proclamation to the spirits in prison (1 Pet 3:19), in order “that . . . they might live in the spirit” (4:6).

There was a Quaker minister and writer named Rufus Jones who wrote a book about his youth in a village in Maine entitled *A Small-Town Boy*. One of his stories was about a woman he called an “unsainted saint” named Hattie. She was a little woman, a bit over four feet tall, uneducated, and she was a spunky and fiery redhead (p. 132). When she was about 40, she had an experience and was “powerfully affected by the grace of God. . . New traits of character bloomed out like fresh spring flowers.” Now, instead of being fun-loving and self-centered she paid attention to others. She opened a little grocery store which soon became a gathering place in the community. Anyone who had “troubles soon discovered that the little woman in the store knew how to comfort them” (133). They would tell their story, she would listen, her face would light up whenever she responded, and they would leave feeling better. People didn’t realize that she had rheumatism and was in pain; she never talked about herself. “She could laugh as well as mourn, and she could rejoice with those who rejoiced” (134). “She enjoyed life as the happy birds do,” and she always had a glow ing face. “When she spoke of her heavenly Father her voice trembled and broke with a quaver, for the joy of the divine relationship filled her heart and eyes. . . She gave cups of cold water; she loved those who suffered; she strengthened the tempted and had faith even in those who had little faith in themselves.” Jones said we need more saints like her, and less doctrinal controversy and disagreement (135).

So what is required of us, today? Jesus wants us to live in the spirit. To do this, decision and action are required: the decision to accept the way of God and turn away from ungodly ways of living, and the action of repenting and demonstrating faith. This can happen gradually, but once the decision to follow Jesus, to live in Spirit, and to follow God’s will has been fully made, a new way of life begins.

The kingdom of God has drawn near. Let us enter into it. Go out and live your life with gratitude and striving, gratitude that enables you to appreciate the people and events in your life, and striving that keeps you reaching for higher spiritual achievement and meaning. If you do practice these, others will notice that you have a light within you. Even the simple things of life can gain new meaning, can be enriched by adding spiritual values to daily moments. You may not see the heavens torn open and the Spirit coming down, but you will see a new way forward and feel a burst of joy and gratitude.