

“The New Testament in Fifteen Minutes”

Date: Sept. 18, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: Bible, New Testament

Texts: Revelation 1:1-8; Mark 1:14-15

Occasion: Making Sense of the Bible, series

This is week two in our series “Making Sense of the Bible.” Today we want to take a look at the New Testament. As we learned last week, for the earliest Christians, their Bible was the Old Testament, and they saw these scriptures bearing witness to Jesus.

The New Testament begins with the story of Jesus Christ, who was sent from God “to seek and to save those who are lost.” (Lk19:10) The central theme of Jesus’ preaching and teaching, at least in Matthew, Mark and Luke’s gospels, is the kingdom of God.

This phrase and its counterpart, the kingdom of heaven, appear 82 times in the first three gospels. The kingdom of God implies that God is the rightful ruler over the entire cosmos. From the beginning, with Adam and Eve, humanity has struggled to submit to God’s rule.

Living in rebellion, humanity has brought suffering and pain to the earth. Violence, warfare, injustice, hate – these are all expressions of the kingdoms of earth, not of heaven.

Jesus announced the good news that God is still king and invited his listeners to repent. To repent was to turn away from rebellion and once more confess their allegiance to God and his kingdom. After calling his hearers to repent, Jesus lays out for them what the kingdom of God looks like, and how one lives after claiming God as one’s king.

Jesus came, not only to announce and remind his hearers that God is king, but he also came as the physical embodiment of the king. He walks on this earth, unleashing the power of the kingdom

against the forces of darkness, the liberating power of the kingdom for the oppressed, and the healing power of the gospel for the sick.

Jesus says in the first three gospels that the kingdom of God is “upon you.” And, at least once, he notes the kingdom of God is “within you.” Each time someone repents and becomes a follower of Christ, the rebellion experiences defeat and the king’s rightful rule expands.

The impact of each person choosing to follow Christ, living a life in service to God the king, is incalculable. Every relationship, every interaction, every decision across the course of that person’s life is different because of this one decision to follow Christ.

The world is restored by this preaching of the kingdom and the faith-filled response of those who repent. The message of the kingdom is summarized by two commandments: love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Over in John’s gospel, the focus is not so much on the kingdom of God, in fact the phrase only appears twice, although the concept is still present. The emphasis in John’s gospel is on the life Jesus gives us, and that by believing in Jesus and staying close to Jesus, we find life in his name. This relationship with Jesus leads us to a life of love, which is the same ultimate message we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In each of the gospels, Jesus reveals the heart and character of God. Jesus demonstrates God’s frustration with religious hypocrisy, God’s compassion for those who are poor and oppressed, God’s

mercy towards those who sin, God's healing power for those who are broken.

Jesus calls people into a right relationship with God, commands them, above all else, to love God and neighbor, and he insists that this love includes compassion for the hungry and forgiveness for those who sin against us. He even demands that we apply this love to our enemies.

From a Christian perspective, his trial is an indictment of the human race, his death a judgment upon humanity's sin and a means of revealing God's will, God's grace and God's love. His resurrection demonstrates God's triumph over sin, evil, hopelessness, despair, and ultimately death.

After his resurrection, Jesus sends his disciples into the world to announce his kingdom and to lead a revolution that would put the world aright. That is the Gospel story. It is contained in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Following the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the early Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit and, through the Spirit's influence and power, they continued the ministry of Jesus: healing the sick, casting out demons, and teaching and preaching about Christ and the kingdom he had announced.

The disciples took the gospel first to Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and finally to the "uttermost parts of the earth." A Jewish Pharisee by the name of Paul, who initially sought to suppress the Christian movement, was himself converted to Christianity.

Paul became the Church's greatest evangelist. He took the gospel across the Roman Empire, establishing churches everywhere he went. This is the story found in the Acts of the Apostles.

Paul started new faith communities, set aside leaders in those early churches, and then would leave to go preach in another town. When those leaders had questions or concerns, they sent messages to Paul, who wrote letters back to the churches in response.

His letters taught, encouraged, and sought to offer practical advice and help to those new Christians. Others also wrote to various communities doing much the same thing – challenging, encouraging, correcting, and teaching. Twenty-one of the 27 New Testament “books” are letters from the apostles.

The letters of the apostles are organized into three collections. The first two collections are letters of Paul. The first collection contains Paul's letters to churches, arranged from longest to shortest. Next come Paul's letters to individuals, again arranged from longest to shortest.

Thirteen of the 21 letters of the New Testament are said to be written by Paul. The remaining eight letters appear after Paul's collection, which reflects the priority given to Paul's letters in the early church.

Finally, the New Testament ends with a book written 30 years after the death of Peter and Paul, a book filled with visions of the conflict between good and evil, and of evil's final defeat. Various interpretations of this book have been given.

The opening chapters are key to making sense of the Book of Revelation. They tell of seven churches in Asia Minor, which is

modern-day Turkey, and the message of the Lord for each of them. Among them we find one group has “lost your first love.” Another is “lukewarm.”

Some have allowed false teachers and seem to have compromised their values, adopting the values of the Roman Empire rather than the kingdom of God. Some practice sexual immorality, eat food sacrificed to idols, or are becoming materialistic. The Book of Revelation is a message to these believers, who had either compromised or were in danger of compromising.

Revelation insists that the kingdom or empire of God will ultimately triumph over the Roman Empire and every other empire that follows in its steps. Those who persevere and remain steadfast in serving Christ, regardless of the cost, will be accepted into paradise.

Revelation ends where Genesis began, in a garden. The paradise that was lost by Adam and Eve in Genesis is restored by Christ in Revelation.

Well, that's the New Testament in 15 minutes. Its message of Christ and his kingdom still has the power to change lives. My life has been changed because of it. I have chosen to be a follower of Jesus, who came proclaiming the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Daily I read the pages of this book, especially the words of the New Testament, and I am reminded of Jesus' mission for my life, and for his world. He continues to call people to leave the kingdoms of this world, and choose to follow Him.

I have committed my life to following Jesus. It is my hope and prayer that you will read the pages of the New Testament and come

to the same conclusion I have. This is God's will for the world.
Amen.

This sermon is taken from the book *Making Sense of the Bible*, by Adam Hamilton, HarperCollins Publisher, NY, NY, 2014. Chapter 8 "The Bible in Fifteen Minutes," pp. 65-71.