

WORDS of FAITH: KINGDOM

“A Good Place to Be”

Psalm 99:1-5 and Mark 1:14-20

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

On this day when we have given Bibles to our 1st and 4th graders, and as we begin our new worship series, “WORDS of FAITH” I found myself wondering how many words are in the Bible. What do you think?

According to reference.com, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has over 780,000 words. The longest books in the Bible are Jeremiah, Psalms, and Genesis—each with about 30,000 words, depending on your translation. The longest in the New Testament are Luke, Matthew, and Acts. And the shortest, since I know someone will ask is 3 John, with just over 200 words.

There are a lot of words in the Bible. While there is a time and place to read and reflect on longer passages and entire books, in this series I want us to focus on just a few words at a time.

As I mentioned in my weekly CONNECTIONS email, I have been intrigued over the past few months with this devotional book, *Word by Word: A Daily Spiritual Practice*. Author Marilyn Chandler McEntyre has chosen fifteen words and written seven devotions on each word. Over the past week I’ve been pondering ALLOW, with topics like:

Allow time for the unfolding

Allow things to coalesce

Allow for surprises

Our “WORDS of FAITH” series begins today with a word that is not in her book: KINGDOM. Our first scripture reading from Psalm 99 celebrates God as King, and our gospel reading is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he announces the Kingdom of God, and then he calls ordinary people to change direction and follow him and be part of that Kingdom. Listen for God’s word.

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

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the

nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

In just a few weeks, we are having another Inquirers' Class, for those who are curious about this church and membership. (It starts on Sunday October 1.) In the first meeting of that class, we are going to read the verses you just heard—just as we have in other Inquirers' Classes over the past several years.



In these seven verses, we hear the essence of what it is to be Christian. There are actually several words like BELIEVE, GOOD NEWS, and REPENT that are worthy of our reflection. But KINGDOM I believe is the most important.

Like many words in the Bible, KINGDOM comes with some baggage. It sounds old-fashioned. It sounds male. And most people in history don't have a positive association with kings, who all too often have been seen as living in excessive opulence in a large castle, while the majority of people live in poverty.

For these reasons, some Christians don't use the word KINGDOM. Alternatives like REALM, REIGN, or COMMONWEALTH have been offered.

But I think we can reclaim KINGDOM, as it stands in contrast to the kingdoms of this world.

We realize right away that his kingdom is a challenge to the powers of the day. John the Baptist, the one who had announced the coming kingdom, was thrown in jail. Did you notice that, in the beginning of the reading?

Eventually Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted, and executed with the most serious charge against him being that he claimed to be a king, by implication a rival to King Herod.

The kingdom proclaimed by Jesus is very different from those of the world.

He proclaimed this new KINGDOM not in the economic and political center of the empire, but on the margins, in a remote place where the so-called “nobodies” would hear it first.

He said blessed are the poor, along with the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom.

He talked about the kingdom as a place of growth—like a little mustard seed that becomes something much bigger.

He told his followers that they had to become like children to enter the Kingdom, and he warned them that it would be very hard for rich people to enter the kingdom.

He told the religious leaders that prostitutes and tax collectors who be in the kingdom before them.

He painted a picture of the kingdom in the parable of the sheep and goats, talking about hungry people being fed, prisoners being visited, strangers being welcomed.

And he told them that the kingdom is among them, within them, and before them.

This language is evocative and even mysterious. Theologians talk about the “already and not yet kingdom.”

And we, as Christians, are invited into this new reality, to live with new focus in the present and with new hope for the future. This is God's Kingdom.

And if you're wondering how to be part of this kingdom, a good place to start is by reading Matthew 5-7, known as the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of Jesus' teachings. In a delightful book about God's Kingdom called *The Secret Message of Jesus*, author and pastor Brian McLaren says that these teachings, in Matthew 5-7 are the "Kingdom Manifesto."

I think the two most important things about the kingdom are both from these chapters.

In Matthew 6, after teaching the disciples to not worry about everything, Jesus said Seek first the kingdom.

And in Matthew 7, Jesus taught his disciples a prayer, and at the center of that prayer is the phrase, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven."

Too many people think the kingdom of God means heaven, somewhere in the future, somewhere faraway. It does mean that but not only that. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed begins here and now—on earth, as in heaven.

And so we look for the kingdom, we yearn for glimpses of the kingdom, and we try to make the kingdom more real.

We got a glimpse of the kingdom in the heroic stories from Houston, seeing how people reached out to help people in need. We'll get more from the Caribbean and Florida.

I got a glimpse of the kingdom this week, when I met with Oscar Mireles, the director of Omega School, where students with challenging situations and who

otherwise might be forgotten are given the opportunity to get a GED, a general equivalence diploma from high school.

I got a glimpse of the kingdom this week, talking with someone facing a cancer diagnosis. They don't know what the future holds, but they have new gratitude for family, friends, and the blessings of every day.

We get glimpses of the kingdom in people. And one of the most important concepts of the kingdom is what we heard in the call of the first disciples. Jesus told those fishermen that they would in the future be "fishing for people." Being in the kingdom is a gift and with that gift we have a new perspective, a new focus—the people around us. Fishing for people.

So I invite you this week to ponder this word kingdom, and to seek it and welcome it, in the people in your life.

The kingdom of God isn't about castles and crowns, or soldiers and armies, or wealth and power.

It's not even about sitting in a beautiful church on a Celebration Sunday.

The Kingdom is about deeds of love and mercy. It's about striving for justice in the world, especially on behalf of those who are too often forgotten. And it's about "fishing for people" in our daily interactions with our neighbors, co-workers, other kids in school, and especially with loved ones—with kindness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

Let us pray....