

The Third Sunday after Epiphany. The scripture text is taken from Mark 1:14-20

As Jesus began his public ministry, the scriptures tell us, (This is in Luke's Gospel, chapter 8, verse 1) that he, (that would be Jesus) "went on through cities and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God."

The concept of the Kingdom of God, was central to the teaching of Jesus, and therefore, it is critical to our understanding of what it is to believe in and follow after Christ.

E. Stanley Jones defines the Kingdom of God like this: "The kingdom of God is God's total order, expressed as realm and reign, in the individual and in society; and which is to replace the present unworkable world order with God's order in the individual and in society; and while the nature of the Kingdom is social, the entrance into it is by a personal new birth now; the character of that kingdom is seen in the character of Jesus, the Kingdom is Christ-likeness universalized; while it comes on earth in the time process, it is eternal and is the same rule which is in heaven and because it is Christ-likeness, this makes it heaven, there and here; and while it is a total order demanding a total obedience, it brings total freedom."

The purpose of God in creating the world was to establish His reign over all the earth. That reign was marred by sin and spoiled by our disobedience in the Garden of Eden.

Christ came to reclaim that, which was His own, and to proclaim God's rule and reign over all the earth through Christ's victory, as He overcame the cross, (by His death) and His victorious resurrection over the tomb.

Christ proclaimed that His complete victory would come at the time He returned to this world in power and in glory where, as the Apostle Paul writes in the Book of Philippians, chapter 2, verse 9: "Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

The kingdoms of this world go blindly on, believing that their power and glory is the only thing that counts in this world, and that they will last forever. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall.

The kingdoms of this world do not see, that there is an eternal hand working behind the scenes, which determines the destiny and the fate of every person and nation.

The Psalmist assures us that: "The Lord is King! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!" (Psalm 97, verse 1)

So the question comes to mind: "How does this affect us?" As we consider the kingdom of God, there are four truths that we need to understand.

To begin with, the reality of the kingdom of God, affects us in two ways: individually and globally.

*The First Truth that I wish to point is that: The Kingdom of God transforms us individually. The problem with the people of Jesus' day, was that they believed that the Messiah's Kingdom, would only be national in scope. It would be political in nature, and transform their nation into a world super power.

They were not much different from us were they? There are some who think that the Kingdom of God will come with the election of a president who will come closest to our political views of what is important for the nation.

We put our hope in a political leader as much as they did. We place our confidence in a person, rather than placing our confidence in God and the power of reaching out in his name to the poor and the disenfranchised.

I do not believe that the answer to our nation's problems lie within either political party, but in the repentance and transformed lives of the nation's people.

And when our loyalties to a particular political party come before our loyalty to the Kingdom of God and the people of that Kingdom, then we may know for sure that our confidence has been misplaced.

Can you imagine the Christians of the early church, placing their hope in the Roman Empire? Do you think they dreamed of having a Caesar, who was friendly to the Christians? That would have been laughable.

The early Christians, saw themselves as a "kingdom within a kingdom" and that the return of Christ, their Lord and Savior, was close at hand.

In the gospel stories, Jesus' disciples fled when He was arrested, because they assumed, that they would be next to be crucified. The disciples hope was not in Rome, eventually getting the picture and becoming a Christian Empire.

For the disciples, for the early church, and even for us today, their hope, our hope is in the fact, that they had a risen, and living Savior, and we have a risen and living Savior and that the power of the Holy Spirit was available to them, and to us.

They (the disciples and the early church) knew their experience with God had transformed their lives and they believed, without a doubt, that it could transform others. The same should apply to us today.

Think about this, the Kingdom of God, is not in Washington DC, nor is it in Austin Texas. The Kingdom of God is within you. Within you and I is the Holy Spirit. You have that kingdom within you.

How does this happen? It happens when we accept God's invitation to be a part of His Kingdom. Jesus tells us in John's Gospel chapter 3, verse 3. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

We become subjects of a kingdom within a kingdom. We are a part of the kingdom of this world, but our allegiance is to another kingdom, the kingdom of God.

Mother Theresa once said; "By blood and origin, I am all Albanian. My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to Jesus."

*The second truth that I wish to point out is that: The Kingdom of God transforms the world. The Kingdom of which we are a part, is not just for our enjoyment, and neither can the church just become a little holy club, where we isolate ourselves and become separate from the world.

This is too big to be kept to ourselves. The Kingdom of God goes against the radical individualism of our culture. When you belong to Christ, you become a person for the world, because you are to go out into the world.

You become a part of the larger community. Believe it or not, you and I are here to make a difference in this world. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says to us in the Book of II Corinthians, chapter 5 starting at verse 18). Paul writes: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

You know, it's frightening to realize that God's plan is to reconcile the world to himself and to use us, to bring about that reconciliation. But what could be a higher honor?

As we see what's going on in our world today, we know that there is a lot of hopelessness in the world, along with conflict, cruelty, injustice, oppression, poverty and so forth. It is almost to the point of depressing.

If you just keep your life to yourself, you will never have a part in bringing Christ's Kingdom here on earth. Fellow Christians, we are not called to sit on the side lines and watch, we are called to get out there and do the work that God has called us to do.

Yes we say, "we are to be in the world, but not of it". However, as a Christian, you need to be savvy in the sense, that you do not see yourself as separate from the world and aloof, but to take on a responsibility to further God's Kingdom in our corner of the world.

When God reigns and rules in our lives, we want to share what He has done for us, and minister to a world which is living in hopelessness, confusion and despair.

Never in the New Testament do we see individual Christians operating separately from the church. Christians work together for the purpose of bringing the world to Christ, and Christ to the world.

For instance, in the Book of Acts, the Apostles sell everything they own, in order to provide for the needs of others. The early believers pool their resources, and do not consider themselves to own anything.

The early believers relationships with each other, take on a new importance, as well as their responsibility toward the world. The early believers minister to the poor and the outcasts.

*The third truth that I wish to point out is that: The Kingdom of God is now. The Kingdom of God is not in the distant future, it is here, now! The church is living proof of it.

When Jesus showed up on earth, the Kingdom had effectively come. That means, that we don't have to wait for eternity to experience heaven.

After the resurrection, Jesus continued to emphasize the importance of the Kingdom. The writer of Acts, tells us in chapter 1, verse 3: "After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the Kingdom of God."

This idea of the present reign of God was preeminent on Jesus' mind. It was also on the mind of the Apostles. When Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he was allowed to meet with people and preach.

The writer of the Book of Acts tells us in chapter 28, verse 23 says: "After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the Kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the prophets."

*The fourth and final point I wish to make, is that: The Kingdom of God is not yet. But pastor, you just said a moment ago, that the kingdom is here, now! Part of the problem is that we keep expecting this world to be heaven.

Sometimes this world, can seem close to heaven, we get a taste of it, when we see a beautiful sunrise, or a sunset, or take a walk through the woods on a beautiful fall day, or see a star lit night, or witness the birth of your child, or to be surrounded loving family members and friends, that gives us a taste of heaven.

We have the privilege of living on this side of Easter. But the kingdom of heaven will not be experienced in its fullness until this present world as we know it, is over, that is, when Christ Jesus returns to this world in power and in glory, tearing down the kingdoms of man and ushers in His Kingdom.

We are an Easter people, and we believe that there will be a final resurrection, a judgment, the separation of good and evil and a new heaven and a new earth.

Wrongs will be righted; wounds will be healed; sorrow will be turned to joy, and we, as well as the whole world will be changed, as the scriptures tell us: "In the twinkling of an eye."

So we have so much to look forward to. We have the "Now", but we look forward to the "Not Yet" that is breaking into our world little by little each and everyday.

God has something wonderful in store for us. St. John in the Book of Revelation, chapter 11, verse 15 tells us about the time when: "The Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever."

So what this means for us is simply this: As you and I go about our day to day lives, we are a part of this kingdom, whether we realize it or not. Think about it, If it were not so, you and I would not be here this morning. The church (not just here in Welcome Texas, but across this country and across the world) is the visible proof of the kingdom pushing into our world.

And yes, even though when we talk about the kingdom, it can seem like such an abstract concept, or something that is so far removed from our everyday lives, who cares and what does it matter?

It matters because every "Born Again, Spirit-filled" child of God (and that would be all of us, who are baptized, and profess in faith that Christ-Jesus is Lord) who is living below their potential is living as a victim, when they should be victors.

Remember God has won the battle, Satan has been defeated, and Christ has overcome the world, we who are in Christ have the victory, it is ours!

When Jesus preached the kingdom message, He explained that there was a much better way, God wants His people to have life, not only a good quality of life, but to have abundant life, with the

promise of the forgiveness of sins and the hope to life everlasting in God's Kingdom, so that we can influence others, whose sole focus is the kingdom of this world (which will end) and to tell them the good news of Jesus Christ and what it means to be part of His Kingdom, one that never end. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, as your people, we live in your kingdom, and your kingdom lives in us by faith. Keep us looking forward to the day with hope and with anticipation to the fullness of your kingdom that will break into this world, where all things will be made new. Remind us, as we go about our day to day lives, as we face the cares and the concerns of this world, that your grace is sufficient and will sustain us in this life until that day comes. All these things, we humbly pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.