

April 9, 2006

New Beginnings

Matthew 4:12-17

- 12 *When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee.*
- 13 *Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali –*
- 14 *to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:*
- 15 *“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles –*
- 16 *the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”*
- 17 *From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*

Jesus had been tested in the Wilderness. In his solitude he had overcome his doubts. He knew what it was that he had been ordained to do.

The news that John the Baptist had been arrested was the bugle call to action. The old-old story, some go that others may come; one generation replaces another; one voice replaces another. King Herod thought he had stilled the voice calling out of the Wilderness. Sometimes things don't always seem to be

what they are. There is an old story that illustrates this point:

An old angel brought a younger angel down from Heaven for a test run on earth. As a part of their journey they stopped by a rich couple's house seeking lodging for the night. The couple grudgingly let them in. Rather than the guest room they gave them a cold, damp little room in the basement. A room in terrible shape with a big crack on one wall. Before leaving the next morning the older angel took the time to carefully fix the crack so that it blended in with the rest of the wall.

The next stop was a modest farm house. There they were greeted with open arms. The farm couple insisted that they sleep in their bed so that they would be well rested as they continued their journey. The morning silence was broken by the cries of the farmer's wife. Their one milk cow had died during the night.

The young angel was upset with what he saw, ***"How could it be? The rich couple treated us like dirt and you fixed their wall. Then these wonderful people lose their cow and you do***

nothing to help.”

The older angel replied, “Things are not always as they seem. Through the crack in the wall I caught the glimpse of gold. Knowing how much that couple worshiped money I covered the crack so they couldn’t find the gold. Last night the messenger of death came for the farmer’s wife but I gave him the cow instead.”

John the Baptist was in jail. The voice was silent; another more powerful voice was ready to take its place.

Jesus was faced with the problem of place, people and message. Where would be the best, most effective place to proclaim the Good News? Who would be the people most receptive. And of course, what was to be the message?

Jesus settled on the place. It was to be in the commercial town of Capernaum. Capernaum was located at the upper end of the Sea of Galilee. A town near the trade route between Damascus and Egypt. People of all races and cultures coming and going.

Capernaum was located in the District of Galilee. The district was not large, about 50 miles long and 25 miles wide. It was, and I think still is, the most fertile region in Palestine. It was a densely populated region. According to the Jewish historian Josephus there were about 2,500 people per square mile. There would be even more if you didn't count the Sea of Galilee in the acreage. It was written "*Judea is on the way to no where; Galilee is on the way to everywhere.*" One more thing, and a very important thing, the influence and power of the scribes and Pharisees was not as prominent in Galilee as it was in Jerusalem.

Jesus had found his place. He shut the door on the life he knew in Nazareth, the past, and opened the door to the future, a new beginning.

Josephus says of Galileans, "*They were ever fond of innovations, and by nature disposed to changes, and delighted in seditions.*" Here was a people, while endowed with impulsive chivalry were quick to temper. The Talmud describes

them as, *“more anxious for honor than for gain.”* It reminds one of the Scotch-Irish that were the early settlers in this part of the world. Here was a people open to and exposed to new ideas. Quite a contrast to the closed minds of those who made up the religious leadership in Jerusalem. Jesus had found his people.

Jesus began his ministry in the town of Capernaum preaching to the people of the Galilee. His message was that of his forerunner John the Baptist, *“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”* Or as Dr. Moffit puts it in his translation, *“Repent, the reign of Heaven is near.”*

Here is a religious doctrine that man can grasp, can remember, can repeat. Repent, turn around, a mind change based on new knowledge, a new appreciation, and a new awareness.

In a work titled “The Acts of Peter” Jesus is quoted: *“Except you make the right hand as the left hand, and the left hand as the right hand, and that which is upwards as that which is downwards, that which is before as that which is*

behind, ye shall not know the Kingdom of God.” For us to face existence necessarily means that we must face that which provides us with the creature comforts, food, shelter and clothing. There is no minimizing the importance of these to our existence. But are they the most important, the primary reason for our existence? Jesus calls us to about face, to look to God, the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven or as Moffit puts it, *“The reign of Heaven”* is realized when a person takes the “yoke of the Kingdom” upon himself. That “yoke” is found, among other places in the Bible in the book of Deuteronomy, *“... you must love the eternal your God, with all your mind and all your soul and all your strength.”*

“Repent, who me? What have I got to repent for? What need do I have to turn around? I’m a pretty good fellow. I meet my responsibilities to my family, my church, my community and my work.”

Quite honestly I don’t find any really good reason to turn my life around. I am pretty satisfied with the way it is. Oh I

need more time for sure, but other than that, I don't see the need for any real changes.

This is especially true when I compare my life with Dr. Barkley's four different elements necessary for there to be a repentance:

1. He says there must be a realization that my actions are wrong. Okay there are some things in my past that I am ashamed of but I have put them behind me. I have reached that point in life where all I want is peace and quite. I'm not going to knowingly hurt anyone.
2. He says there must be sorrow for my wrong doing. But, if I am not conscience of my wrong doing how can I be sorry?
3. He says there must be a changed attitude to life, to conduct and to action as a whole. Looking back I can see a gradual change in the way I see things, the way I do things, but nothing revolutionary.
4. He says there must be in change in action to fit the change in mind. Now I can equate to that. When I see I have done

wrong I have tried to change both my thought process and my actions. As I have grown in age I see through the glass a little less darkly and I try to adjust.

Then Barkley says that there is one other thing, "*A man cannot take any of the steps of repentance with out the help of Jesus Christ.*" That statement highlights the purpose of our present study, to determine how Jesus lived his life, not so much as to what he said, but how he lived. In this study we can develop a yardstick by which we can measure our own life, the good, the bad and the indifferent.

The nightly cable news is a study of man's depravity, man's inhumanity to man. The events of Passion Week blend right in with what we see in the breaking news.

The good people of Jerusalem and the pilgrims that had gathered in that city for a religious celebration to honor the Creator's great acts of liberating the Jews from the cruelty of the Egyptians. Into this crowd of good people rode a good man from Galilee with his message, "*Repent, for the realm of*

Heaven is at hand.” The crowd missed the call to repentance. They saw only the mighty works of God that would release them from this yoke of Rome. To them it was God’s intervention to free up the Jewish people that mattered, not whether they loved God with all their being.

Jesus didn’t deliver what these good, hard working people expected so they turned their backs on him to face and listen to voices more attune to their own. Voices clothed in splendid robes wearing their badge of authority. Authority that called Jesus a fraud, a fake. So they broke the greatest life that ever lived on a cross.

In Jesus Christ we see life, real life, not existence. He comes that we might know the way to the fulfillment of life. It is through Christ and his life that we find both the need and the enabling power to turn around and face God.

Pastor's Message

All humanity belongs to one of three kingdoms: the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of Satan, or the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of this world embraces all those who live for themselves first, for the things of the here and now. They have no firm principles nor set standards. Their purpose is to conform to what is popular and to pursue what is personally and socially profitable. They are reeds shaken by the wind and plants growing without depth of earth.

The chief characteristic of the children of Satan is the ruthless use of their fellow men for their own advantage to the hurt of those whom they use. It is fatal to fall into the hands of one who is ruthless in pursuit of his ambition for position, possessions, or power. To wilfully sin against one's fellow man by word or deed is the most heinous of offences which can be committed. The evil is compounded when the offender takes advantage of innocence, ignorance, or helplessness.

No one has better described those who belong to the kingdom of heaven than Robert Louis Stevenson, "The kingdom of heaven is of the childlike, of those who are easy to please, who love and give pleasure."

Let every man judge himself and own up to which kingdom he is striving to belong.

PRAYER

Eternal Father, if I am not now of the kingdom of heaven, make me a child again in spirit so that I can enter into it. Amen.