

Repent and Believe

Mark 1:14-15

The time is fulfilled - that's what we celebrate whenever we come to the Lord's Table, isn't it? As we read in our responsive reading this morning, Jesus arranged His death to coincide with the killing of the Passover lambs, and in so doing, He was showing His disciples that He was the One Who would fulfill, would bring to completion so much of what the prophets had predicted for so many years. For Jesus was the true Passover lamb, the One sacrificed in the place of all His people. He was the firstborn, the Son of God slain so that God might pass over them and their firstborn, sparing them the judgment they all deserved.

But Jesus fulfilled more than just the Passover ceremony. For He was also the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David, the One God promised would rule over His people forever. As we read responsively, Jesus' authority extended even to directing the movements of waterbearers in the streets of Jerusalem. His knowledge was so complete that He knew Judas would betray Him, even before he left the dinner table that night. Truly, someone with such a level of command could be none other than the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

And that's why Jesus could say, even at the outset of His ministry, that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. Now, given the politics of the day, that was hard to believe. Verse 14 reminds us that Herod, who was ruling over much of the area at the time, was a vengeful and capricious ruler, insisting on satisfying his own perverted desires, condemning righteous men like John the Baptist who would dare to hold him accountable to God's law. We are no strangers to such rulers, are we? But even in the face of such human injustice, Jesus could say that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand – for wherever the King is, there is the Kingdom.

And we also celebrate that great truth as we gather around the Lord's Table today. For everyone who has been baptized and made a public profession of faith in Christ, in other words, everyone who has announced their allegiance to King Jesus is welcome here – and that isn't just limited to members of this congregation in particular or Presbyterians in general. No, the citizens of the Kingdom of God are found in many different denominations, in every nation throughout the world today, and all are welcome at the King's table.

For that's another amazing truth we celebrate today. You see, it isn't just the citizens of the Kingdom who gather today – the King is here as well. Just as Jesus came to be with the people in Galilee, pronouncing the presence of the Kingdom, He is also spiritually present here. No, we don't believe that this bread and wine materially change into the body and blood of Christ, but this is not just a meal of remembrance either. No, we understand that Jesus is spiritually present in these elements, and that those who come to the table in faith truly commune with Christ, becoming one with Him as He becomes one with us.

But how can all this be true? Because of something else Jesus promised at the Last Supper, something we read responsively this morning. Think about it – Jesus knew He would be betrayed, and He knew who would betray Him. He knew He would die on that cross the next day. But He nevertheless insisted that He would one day sit down again with His disciples in His Father's kingdom.

How could He say that? Because of the essential fact of the Christian faith, the greatest evidence of the presence of the King among us: because of the empty tomb. Jesus knew He would die, but He also knew He would rise from the dead on the third day. And He knew that He would ascend into Heaven, where He rules and reigns over all the kingdoms of the world even here, even now. It is our living Lord, our reigning King Who summons all Who trust in Him to His table today.

So, how should we respond to His call? Well, the good news is that Jesus didn't leave it up to our imaginations. No, in today's passage, at the very beginning of His ministry, He told us two things to do, two ways we need to live in the presence of the King. And the first thing He told us is that we need to repent, which means to turn around.

And that just makes sense, doesn't it? For it's not possible to be a citizen of the Kingdom if we go on in active rebellion against the King, and that's really all that sin is. No, if we would be in a right relationship with our King, if we would be welcome at His table, we need to turn away from sin, from self, from anything that stands between us and Him. We need to stop looking even to good things like work and family to give us meaning and purpose in life – for when we do that, we are putting them in the place of our King. No, if we would truly repent, we must look to our King alone for guidance, for meaning, for truth. We must love Him, the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, with all we are and all we have.

And that's why Paul admonished the Corinthian Christians that they needed to examine themselves before coming to the Lord's table. For we need to do the same thing, searching our hearts and minds, probing the truth of our relationship with God. Now, it's obvious that the King's table isn't set for those who haven't yet made a public profession of faith, bowing the knee in surrender to Jesus. It's obvious that unwilling rebels have no place in the presence of the King. But this table is also not for those who profess faith, but at the same time aren't trying to live out that faith in their daily lives. Those who are unrepentant, living in defiance of the King's commands need to get their hearts right before coming into His presence.

But that doesn't mean this table is only for perfect people, or for those with the audacity to claim such perfection in this life. For remember, Jesus told us to do two things in the presence of the King – we must repent, but we must also believe the gospel, the good news.

And what is that good news? Well, that's the central thing we celebrate at this table, isn't it? The good news is that none of us can possibly save ourselves through our own efforts. In fact, none of us are able in our own strength to repent, to turn from sin and turn to God. No, the fact that Jesus had to die on the cross proves that none of us are anything more than sinners in need of a savior.

But the good news is that we have such a Savior. The good news is that Jesus shed the blood of the covenant for us, paying the debt that all our sins deserved. And the good news is that His sacrifice is available to all who would simply trust Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves – to die for us, to save us from our sins. No, this table isn't for those who think they have it all together. This table is for sinners who know they need a savior.

Yes, the King has come. Yes the King is here, spiritually present in this bread and this fruit of the vine. And He invites all of us to repent, to turn from our sin and surrender to Him, accepting His gracious pardon. He invites all of us to believe the good news, that He Himself has paid the price that

we might be forgiven, dying so that we might live with Him forever. Let's accept His invitation. Let's come to the table.