

## The Kingdom of God is NEAR

A sermon for July 3, 2016

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Lansdowne UMC

God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as your Word is proclaimed, we might hear and respond with joy to what you say to us today.

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There's going to be lots of time for you to learn more about me, so for the sake of staying on task today, there is only one thing that you really need to know about me: I am a time traveler. I don't want to brag, but yes, it's quite amazing actually. Just recently I traveled back nearly 2000 years to ancient Israel. You don't believe me!

No really, I do it all the time. It's perfectly safe. I actually took you all with me. Well, it's you in the future, so you don't remember it...yet. It all gets very confusing, so don't worry about the details. But I want tell you what happened, because the story we read from the tenth chapter of Luke is actually about us. We're in the bible!

So a couple of us were sitting together in a house not far from the sea of Galilee. We'd just started to have our lunch. The neighbor's camel was hitched out front right next to our door-- that's a vivid memory. We were enjoying our little reprieve from the summer sun when I saw someone walking toward our house.

Something wasn't quite right about him. I didn't recognize him, so he definitely wasn't from around those parts-- but it was more than that. He didn't have a bag! How could that be? If he's traveling without a bag, then at least he should've had some money... but there was no

sound of coins jingling. He didn't even have an extra pair of sandals. What would he do if his wore out? This guy was just a mess!

So the guy comes up to our door and says, "Peace to this house." It's a little formal, but it's sorta like the standard Jewish greeting of *Shalom*. I don't usually invite strangers in, but something was different about this man. I don't know-- I invited him to come in. After all, I figured, he doesn't have anything for his journey, so he's probably at least hungry and thirsty.

But as he stepped over the threshold into our home-- it's really hard to explain if you weren't there, which you were... ah, this time travel stuff really messes with your mind doesn't it!? Anyway as he walked into our house... it was as if-- I can't think of another way to describe it-- I was hit by a *wave* of peace... a wave of hope.

Maybe you've experienced something a little like this before. You know how some people walk into a room and it doesn't matter what the situation is, you just know that things are going to be ok. It's not as if your circumstances have actually changed, but somehow, there's some peace in the midst of it. Well, when this guy walked in the room it was as if Peace himself had come into our home. Something had actually changed within me.

"My name's David," I said. "What's your name?"

He said, "I'm James. I'm a follower of the Lord Jesus of Nazareth. He's on his way here. And so I've come to you to tell you that the Kingdom of God has come near to you."

"Kingdom?" I should have been more polite, but I said "We've got the Emperor Tiberius here-- I wonder what he's going to think about this kingdom of yours. You walked in here completely helpless-- you don't even have a change of clothes, let alone a weapon-- and you think you're going to set this Jesus character up as your king?"

James said, “Well, I can see you don’t really know the history of God’s people all that well, so it’s going to take some time to explain and show you what God’s Kingdom is all about. It’s really hard to explain it if you haven’t seen it for yourself, so Jesus-- and us disciples-- we usually talk about it in parables.”

I said him, “I guess that makes sense. Sometimes things are hard to explain if you haven’t seen them with your own eyes. We’ve got these thing called fireworks. \*Laughs\* I’m imagining trying to explain them to you. It’s kinda like... fire... that we... throw into the sky. Yeah this is really hard to explain.”

He said, “Let me stay with you a few days, and I’ll tell you all about this good news of how God’s kingdom has come near. And while I’m here, bring to me anyone in your village who is sick. I’ll pray for them so that they can be healed. I can only stay for a few days, because right now there are only 12 of us who are going out to spread this good news, and we have lots of places to visit to prepare them for the coming of the Lord.”

So over the next few days, James stayed with us, and did just what he said. He healed the people who were sick-- he even cured a few people of their blindness! And he taught us about how all of God’s promises were coming true in this man Jesus-- the history of Israel and the history of the whole world was coming to its climax! Since I was just a visitor to that time, it took James days to explain this. Everyone else in the town from back then seemed to catch on very quickly. I’ll try to give you the gist of it:

James had to start with the beginning, telling us how God created everything and called it “good.” God created humanity to care for and to govern the good creation, and to live in close relationship with God. But humanity abused its freedom, and turned away from God. Humanity

rebelled against God's reign. Humanity began to think and to do evil. Humanity became imprisoned by evil.

But instead of turning his back on humanity, God decided to choose someone that he would use to point people back to their true King. His name was Abraham. Even though he was very old and didn't have any children, God told him that he would have a huge family, and that through him "all the nations of the earth [would] be blessed."<sup>1</sup> Abraham's *descendants* would be the ones who would point the world back to its true King-- God. And so Abraham did have a son, named Isaac. Isaac in turn had a son named Jacob. And it was Jacob that wrestled with God and went away limping and blessed. And God called Jacob "Israel."

Well, Israel had *twelve* sons. And from these twelve sons came twelve tribes, to whom God gave a mission. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, and said, "I, the Lord, have called you for a good reason... I will... give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon."<sup>2</sup> You can see why this took James a few days to explain this...

So the twelve tribes of Israel were given a mission by God, to be people who pointed the world back to the one creator God. They would show the world what it looked like when God was in charge-- when God was King. This was the job of God's people. This was their vocation. And because God had given Moses God's law, the Torah, they would be able to be a holy people-- a people set apart, among whom God would come to dwell. And through this, Israel would point toward the day when the whole earth would be full of God's glorious kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 12:3, 18:18, 28:14.

<sup>2</sup> Isa 42:6-7. See also Isa 49:6.

But the message had not gone out. Sin had corrupted even God's law itself so that the law was unable to create the people in whom God would dwell and reign. The people who were supposed to fulfill the job of Abraham's family-- the people who were supposed to be a blessing to others-- they turned inward and failed to live out their calling.

But James brought us the good news: God is at last coming to dwell with his people, to make peace with those who had made themselves enemies. And to do this, God has sent his own Son. And this Son, Jesus, had gathered around himself 12 disciples to represent the fulfillment of the mission of the 12 tribes of Israel.

And even though we could tell from his actions, James explained it in words: in God's kingdom, everyone is taken care of. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, whether you're a local or an immigrant, whether male or female, whether you're educated or uneducated. God is a just ruler that looks after his people.

And then James told us even more good news: through Christ, it's open season on citizenship in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is now open to anyone who trusts in this good news and whose heart and life is changed as a result. God is making peace with those who have been enemies-- God is giving out peace to any who receive this good news with joy. And when you are at peace with God, God will come to dwell among you-- even in you!

When James had finished telling and showing us all these things, he said that he needed to go on to the next town. After he left, we kept on praying for God's kingdom to come so that God's will would be done on earth. And Jesus himself came, just a few weeks later.

Here's the thing that blew my mind. Jesus gathered together all of us in the village who had received peace with God-- everyone who had accepted the good news of the kingdom. There were 70 of us that day. I

expected that he would make us into club or something-- you know, so that we could talk about how great it was to be at peace with God. But just like that he told us that he was now sending *us* out. We were to go out just like the 12 disciples had. I told you we were in the bible!

He said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." And when he said that I realized that I myself had become a laborer because of James' prayers for me-- because God had worked through James to give me this good news-- good news that I was desperate to hear and I didn't even know it.

And then I thought about all of the surrounding cities and villages, I realized that there were so many people that needed to hear this good news. They needed to know that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. They needed to know that peace with God was now available, that they too could enter into the kingdom of God. They needed to know, so that they too could go out and share this good news. They needed to know so that they could go out and *be* this good news.

And so we went out, and amazing things happened! Even the demons submitted to us. So we went back to Jesus and told him, and he said that as we were out in mission, it was as if Satan was crashing down from the throne that he had usurped from God. Of course, we knew that God's reign hadn't come fully yet, but that the forces of evil had been dealt a horrible blow as we lived out God's mission in the world.

Then Jesus said to us something incredible: he said, "Nevertheless, don't rejoice because the spirits submit to you. Rejoice instead that your names are written in heaven." This is what I think he meant: Whether you get to see the the fruit of your labors or not, you can have joy and peace because you are a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

So my future fellow time-travelers. Is God's peace with you? The scripture talks about this as a peace that passes all understanding. It's not dependent on your external circumstances, because it's a gift of God communicated to our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit. Are you ready to accept God's gracious offer of peace?

"The Kingdom of God has come near to you." Jesus said that proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom was the reason for which he was sent. And if it's at the core of Jesus' mission, and it's at the core of the mission that he gives to the 12 and then to the 70, I think you'll agree that it's worth spending some time on. It's kinda hard to explain everything this means, so let me stay with you a few days, and I'll tell you all about this good news of how God's kingdom has come near.

In the next four weeks, I will be leading us to consider how we can be people who live up to our calling-- who succeed in the mission that God is giving to *us*. It's us in the bible! How can we people who point to the reality that in Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has come near?

Those who were reading their bulletins carefully noticed that the word "NEAR" in my sermon title is capitalized. In each of the next four weeks, we will be considering one attribute that we each must cultivate in ourselves in order to be disciples who point the world to the nearness of the kingdom of God-- and the word NEAR is going to serve as our mnemonic. And God willing, each of the sermons will be available online at [lansdowneumc.org](http://lansdowneumc.org)

I know tomorrow is the 4th of July-- America's *Independence* Day. But right now I want you to consider making it a *dependence* day. A day when you say, "Jesus, I want your peace. I want you to reign in the whole world, but why don't you start with my heart. I'm ready to receive your good news, and with your help-- by depending on you-- I'll be ready to be sent into the world... to point people to the only true King."