

**A Red Door**  
A Sermon by David Barker  
January 22, 2012

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
Mark 1:14-20

Imagine Jesus, in the wilderness...forty days, no food no water, nothing to break the monotony was it not for Satan and his temptations...

- Jesus must've had a lot of time to think...to pray, to be sure, but also to think
- he's about to inaugurate his earthly ministry...it's why he has come, why he was born
  - he knows what will happen: every miracle, every healing, every parable...who will accept him, who will reject him, who will betray him...
  - he knows how it will end: how and when and where
- the magnitude of the moment cannot be lost on him: the Word has become flesh, the Way has arrived...salvation for all creation is at hand
- all those forty days, Jesus must've thought: how to begin?
  - what words do you say to announce the arrival of the redemption of all peoples?
  - what words do you use to inaugurate the most momentous event in human history?
- Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of God...Jesus, who could've chosen any words...indeed, didn't need to speak at all, chose to say this:

*The time is fulfilled...the Kingdom of God has come near...repent...believe in the Good News*

It's always seemed to me that these words Jesus chose to announce the beginning of his earthly ministry must be extraordinarily *important* words...perhaps the most important words he ever spoke

- I think, in fact, the case can be made that every other word he spoke for the whole of his ministry was an attempt to explain these first words: *the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom has come near, repent and believe in the Good News*

If Jesus had forty days to think up these words, we've had 2000 years to figure out what they mean...and, for the most part, we have because, for the most part, the words are straightforward enough

- The time is fulfilled*...the time has come when the prophecies of Messiah have come true
- repent*...turn around from the evil ways you've been living and come to me, the Christ
- believe in the Good News*...put your faith in the fact that the God who created you wants more than anything to be in intimate relationship with you and the Way for that to happen has now been provided

So, yes, for the most part, these first words of Jesus *are* straightforward enough...for the most part

- the time is fulfilled, repent, believe...these are words addressed to all of us, but addressed to us as individuals because they require individual initiative
  - recognize the Messiah has come...repent, turn your life around...believe
- these are essential things, obviously, but they are things, if we choose to undertake them, we do for ourselves
  - they are about us, as individuals...individual experience, individual salvation
- but there *is* the matter of those *other* words: *the Kingdom of God has come near*
  - what do *those* words mean and what, as repentant, believing followers of Christ are we to do with them?

There has been no little debate these past 2000 years as to what, precisely, the Kingdom of God entails, but this much is clear...

- in saying that the Kingdom of God has come near, Jesus is saying that God's new world order has arrived...God's rule in history is here and it is now
- and we know, at least in part, what that looks like...we only need read the Sermon on the Mount...we only need read the Old Testament prophets with their constant admonishing of the Israelites to care for the least among them, to seek justice and righteousness
  
- but*...unlike Jesus' other words—repent, believe—these words about the Kingdom, while addressed to us as individuals, are not about us as individuals...they are about *others*
- undoubtedly, in speaking of the Kingdom, Jesus is speaking of individual ethics and values and behaviors
  - that is, after all, the very thing the Sermon on the Mount addresses: how we, as individual children of God, are to live our lives in light of the Good News
- but as much as the Kingdom may involve us as individuals, the Kingdom cannot be reduced to individual behaviors, no matter how Godly
- there is another, more important dimension to the Kingdom altogether, and it is this dimension, I think, that make Jesus' words the *Kingdom of God has come near* so difficult

And this dimension, in a word, is *politics*

- in general, mainline Christianity and Presbyterians in particular, don't like to mention "Jesus" and "politics" in the same breath
- in seminary, Presbyterian pastors-in-training are admonished, "Two things you never discuss in church, certainly not from the pulpit: sex and politics"
- well, in the church these days we seem to be talking about sex all the time, maybe because, as a culture, we seem to be talking about sex all the time
- but politics we avoid like the proverbial plague...at least most of us Presbyterians do
- maybe it's a vestige of the historical separation of church and state, but to talk politics from the pulpit makes people squirm...and I understand that, I really do

I grew up in the church not wanting to hear politics...that was for radicals and activists...people who protested, chained themselves together as human shields in front of nuclear plants...for hippies and tree huggers

--nothing decent and in order about it, no good could come of it

--and my guess is that right now, many of you are getting the slightest bit uncomfortable wondering just exactly where this sermon is headed

Well, you can relax: I'm not about to embrace a party platform or endorse a candidate

Yet, somewhere in the back of my head, all that time I didn't want politics fouling my faith, I knew: Jesus was a profoundly political guy and the Gospel was full of profoundly political ideas...

--the very word, *Kingdom*...it's political...and those Jews and Gentiles who heard Jesus speak of it, heard it that way

--the Kingdom involves social justice, and social justice then as now involves principalities and powers...and that is political

--certainly, this can be given expression in embracing party platforms and endorsing candidates, and perhaps should be

--but as political as Jesus was, that wasn't really what Jesus was about...Jesus was about something else

--we can see it in what happens after Jesus speaks those all-important first words inaugurating his earthly ministry...

And what happens is that he calls his disciples

--there's a wonderful economy in Mark's telling of the story, but I suspect that's because there was an economy in what happened

--Jesus said to Simon and Andrew and James and John, "Follow me" and, immediately, they do

--Jesus' call to the disciples was individual, addressed to each of them

--as much as it was a call to discipleship, it was a call to embrace those first words Jesus spoke

--I am the Messiah...stop how you're living and follow me...believe that I am the way to the Father

--in responding to Jesus' call, the disciples weren't putting their faith in a party or a platform, not in any ideology or philosophy

--in responding to Jesus' call, they were putting their faith utterly in Jesus himself

--and in responding to Jesus' call, the disciples didn't do so because they saw it as an exercise in self-help, as a way to heal all their hurts and solve all their problems

--because in responding to Jesus' call, they were also acknowledging that, yes, indeed, the Kingdom of God *had* come near

--in choosing to follow Jesus, they were embracing God's agenda for creation, internalizing its priorities, turning in a new direction to bring their lives in line with what God was doing in the world

--they had next to nothing to go on but the word and person of Jesus himself, and there was no discussion...no room for debate or negotiation

--in being confronted by Jesus, they were confronted by an ultimatum:  
accept or refuse

--believe, repent, follow...or stay right where you are, just as you are

--it was a pattern that Jesus would repeat over and over again, with virtually everyone he met...all, one way or another, receiving the same ultimatum—believe, repent, follow—with the same choice: accept or refuse

So: in inaugurating his earthly ministry by announcing that the Kingdom has come near, Jesus, I think, is saying this...

--the way things are is not the way things are supposed to be

--it's about very public and, whether we like it or not, very political issues in the here and now

--the appropriate response for each one of us is to repent and believe, not merely for our own individual good but, collectively, for the good of all God's children

--the appropriate response is for each one of us to catch God's agenda, internalize God's priorities, and bring our lives in line with what God is doing

--it is, in fact, an ultimatum...an ultimatum we either accept or we refuse

--and if we accept, we must do so trusting solely on the word and person of Jesus

We can be radicals and activists...people who protest...hippies and tree huggers...Boulder, after all, is only ten minutes away...but we don't have to be...

--the politics of the Kingdom can be decent and in order...the politics of the Kingdom can be *quiet*

If you drove to 206 E. 4<sup>th</sup> St in downtown Lexington, Kentucky you'd find a modest two-story house with a red door and a porch...built, like most houses in the neighborhood, some 60 years ago

--it is the house of Geoff and Sherry Maddock, a young couple with a young child named Isaac

--next to the Maddock's home is a vacant lot that once belonged to an Episcopal church  
--Geoff and Sherry managed to get the church to donate the lot so they could turn it into a vegetable garden...a community garden

--chances are, whenever you arrived, you'd find on the Maddock's front porch, sitting and talking and laughing, neighbors

--and should you arrive on a Friday evening, you'd be invited to join them for the weekly community dinner Geoff and Sherry host, and you'd get to eat vegetables just picked from the garden

Sherry tells the story of the day one of her neighbors asked her, "Did you hear all the commotion last night?" to which Sherry answered, no, not a bit, we must've slept right through it

- how could you? the neighbor asked, it all ended up on your front porch
- it seems that a man had stumbled down the street in the middle of the night...a man who had been stabbed multiple times...and he'd ended up on the Maddock's porch
- you see, the house at 206 E. 4<sup>th</sup> Street with the beautiful community garden right next door also happens to be in the middle of the neighborhood with the highest crime rate in the entire city of Lexington
- the neighbor called the police and EMS, who came and took the man away
- "You know," the neighbor told Sherry, "it's funny how everyone, one way or another, always seems to end up on your front porch. It must be a safe place."
- the neighbor left and Sherry went and looked and sure enough, there on her porch, blood stains
- then Sherry remembered how the week before a mission team from a church in Georgia had painted their house and had painted the front door red
  - "I'd always wanted a red door," Sherry said
- and after the painting was done, one of the mission team members, as they were leaving, asked Sherry a question
  - "Do you realize that the color red represents sanctuary? You find a home with a red door, it means you've found a safe place."

Geoff and Sherry Maddock are not radicals, not hippies or tree huggers...they are simply a family who, when confronted by Jesus and his ultimatum, caught God's agenda, internalized God's priorities, and brought their lives in line with what God was doing

- like you or I, they could've chosen to live most anywhere but, trusting solely on the word and person of Jesus, they chose 206 E. 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Lexington, Kentucky
- they planted a garden...they share their lives and their blessings with neighbors...
- and in the midst of the highest crime rate in the city, in a house with a red door, the Kingdom of God has powerfully, quietly, come near