

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

So begins Jesus’ ministry.

You’ve heard the saying, seeing is believing. If that’s correct, then it might have been a struggle to believe in the good news for the people who first heard that.

The people to whom Jesus spoke lived in an occupied land. Their rulers were often harsh and corrupt. They used the threat of death to keep people in line.

In the Galilean countryside, life was hard and poverty was a fact of life. Sickness and accidents claimed lives. And in the absence of family, there were no safety nets.

The response of anyone in that time and place could have easily been...this kingdom of God you speak of...where is it? I don’t see it. Is it even possible?

And now, almost 2000 years later we could say the same thing. If seeing is believing, it can frankly be a bit hard to believe the kingdom of God is anywhere near right now.

The middle east is one long roller coaster of escalating tensions and then pulling back from the brink of all-out war.

People of color still disproportionately live in poverty and are over-represented in the correctional system.

In Lincoln, the Community Health Endowment group does a study called Place Matters. The study maps income levels, various health factors and life expectancy across the city of Lincoln.

The map shows that the average life expectancy of people who live in poor neighborhoods is as much as 22 years less than people in the wealthiest areas.

Broken families and abusive relationships threaten the well-being of too many vulnerable children and adults.

Would-be refugees and immigrants are caught between a dysfunctional and sometimes cruel immigration system and a home that is too dangerous to stay in.

Climate change really is affecting the planet and the creatures who live here.

You may see other things that make it hard to believe that the kingdom of God has drawn near.

In the meantime, generally we all agree that our system of government is nearly paralyzed by entrenched partisanship that reflects totally incompatible world-views.

But there it is...Jesus said the kingdom of God has come near. And he has never retracted that statement. Do we believe him or not?

Maybe, seeing isn't believing. Maybe it's the other way around...believing is seeing. We don't necessarily need to doubt what our eyes see. But when we say that believing is seeing, it means there's something beyond what our eyes can see.

Maybe that's what's needed to trust what Jesus is saying here. We need to see the world through the eyes of belief – we need a new worldview. That's what it means to repent.

Repentance is a misunderstood word. I've probably preached this dozens of times...we usually think repentance means to be sorry for the things we do wrong.

X that out of your brain. Being sorry for your own personal wrongs is an element of repentance, but it is incomplete. Because it's only about us as individuals, it ultimately blinds us to the full vision of God's kingdom.

Repentance means to change your mindset...to change your view of the world and everything in it...to bring your worldview in line with God's and with the Kingdom of God.

Repentance ultimately is our response to the amazing grace of God which brings the kingdom to us. Repentance moves us from "seeing is believing" to "believing is seeing."

As we work our way through Mark's gospel, we will keep Jesus' declaration that the kingdom of God has come near in front of us. And as we go through the gospel, we will grab on to the different ways of seeing the kingdom.

For this morning, I want to focus on Jesus' choice of dinner companions. They are not up to snuff, at least in the eyes of the religious law experts...they are tax collectors and sinners.

Tax collectors were typically corrupt, lining their own pockets at the expense of taxpayers. And we're not really told what the issue was with the sinners.

All we know is that all of them were people with whom a good religious person should not associate. And yet there Jesus is.

When Adam and Eve first ate the fruit they weren't supposed to, they wanted to be God, judging good and evil.

We've been doing it ever since. When seeing is believing, we're pretty quick to judge people based on what we can see.

We are of course called to address evil, but we too often do it in a way that focuses on punishment rather than healing.

We divide people up into good and bad. We want the good rewarded and the bad punished. That punishment takes all sorts of forms, sometimes violent.

But that wasn't Jesus' way. Instead, he had dinner with the people others considered bad. Because in the kingdom of God, believing is seeing. And Jesus believed there was more to the tax collectors and sinners than what others saw.

When we believe that another, no matter what they have done, is a child of God, it allows us to see something other than the negative label that has been applied to them.

When you believe that you yourself are a child of God, no matter what you've done, you can see something other than the negatives about yourself.

In a world of people who want things one way or the other, Jesus shows us a third way...a way of grace.

Jesus called Levi, a despised tax collector, to be one of his followers. And that's where things started to change for Levi.

See Jesus recognizes in Levi and the other tax collectors and sinners what needed to be healed...forgiven...transformed. Jesus didn't ignore evil...Jesus went and had dinner with it.

Jesus recognized sin for what it is...sickness in need of healing.

For Jesus, what is so visible to everyone isn't all there is to even the worst people. And here's the kicker for us. The kingdom of God is apparently going to include people we don't think deserve to be there.

I want us to grasp Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God because it is in fact already here. It came with Jesus. And yet it's not quite all the way here either.

Our call is the same as Levi's call...it's to follow Jesus...it's to model life in the kingdom of God.

We are called to be new wine.

The old wineskin is our belief that people are good or bad and therefore deserve either reward or punishment. The new wine is this third way...this way of healing and transforming through love.

This third way explodes our old wineskin of judgment and retaliation. This third way means seeing through the eyes of faith...it means that believing can lead us to see things differently.

That is the good news for us. Just like Levi, Jesus calls us into something new. Jesus calls us into a new worldview...Jesus calls us into repentance.

And that call ends up being our own source of healing, forgiveness, and transformation.

It turns out that the phrase seeing is believing only gets us so far...seeing leads us to believe the world is a total mess...and deep in our hearts, sometimes we worry that we're a mess, too.

But Jesus tells us that believing is seeing...believing that the kingdom of God truly is near inspires us to believe that maybe it really is...so we look closer. When we look through the eyes of faith, when we believe God is at work, we begin to get glimpses.

We can see the things the Community Health Endowment is doing to improve the health of people in low income areas and say that's a glimpse of the kingdom of God unfolding.

We can see the events of the last week, and we can say, maybe it was the hand of God that pulled us back from the brink of war.

Seeing through the eyes of belief in the good news gives us the love we need to see in others...and ourselves... the woundedness and fear behind the sin.

Seeing through the eyes of belief gives us courage to bring love and healing into our own encounters with others. And each time we do, a little bit more of the kingdom of God becomes visible.