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Sent #1
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

February 24th, 2019
Prisoners of Hope
Matthew 4:12-17

We will never exactly know the sequence of what happened between John the Baptist being arrested and the launch of Jesus' public ministry. All that Matthew tells us is that when Jesus heard John had been arrested; Jesus left Nazareth and moved to Capernaum by the sea. It was there Jesus began his public ministry. Whatever he had previously been doing or studying – that period was over. With John's arrest the stakes were higher and it forced Jesus into the spotlight. I like to think of Jesus having a very visceral reaction to the news of John's arrest, like a final straw breaking for him and forcing him into the action. Without John as the front-runner, now it was just Jesus. And Jesus was ready to go. Matthew references Isaiah saying that Jesus' movements from Nazareth to the seaside was part of the prophecy to bring the good news to the people of God – the people who sat in darkness finally had seen a great light.

Matthew says, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is Jesus' inaugural address. The kingdom of heaven has come near. The arrest of John the Baptist was the sign for Jesus to lift the banner. The kingdom of heaven has come near. God's empire is breaking into the darkness. Jesus of Nazareth is now embarking on a public mission to save. A mission to enlighten. A mission to manifest the presence of the Almighty. The kingdom of heaven – has come near. That is the new word; it is not a continuation of John's message. It is a completely new sermon being preached. The kingdom of God has come near. For the rest of Jesus' public ministry and beyond – the disciples will wrestle with just what this sermon means for the world and for their lives and callings.

Today, as we begin our six-week series on the kingdom of God – we simply are being asked by Matthew to hear this message with fresh ears. Let the words of Jesus startle us. The kingdom of God has come near. This is fundamentally a message of hope and good news. This is a message for people who had been walking in darkness...people burdened by life...people uncertain about the future. The kingdom of God has come near. Jesus says it – Jesus believes it – Jesus embodies it. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is going to point to the kingdom; he is going to describe it for us, he going to try to help us believe in it – even if it is not 100% tangible. He says in the parables the kingdom of God is like a seed, it is like leaven, it is like a net, it is like the wheat and the weeds. The kingdom of God is near, all around, within, beyond. The kingdom of God is like a lamppost, it is like a dinner table, it is like a handwritten letter. The kingdom of God is where truths are imparted, where faith is bolstered, where love is received, where hope is kindled, where God is present.

The kingdom of God is elusive – it is tangible enough to get your head around somewhat but not tangible enough that you can completely pin it down. Maybe

that's why Jesus spends so much time trying to point to it – see it there, and over there, and like that, and with them, and in this way.

I can imagine all of the people hearing Jesus' inaugural sermon nodding their heads and clapping their hands in enthusiasm – yes, yes – the kingdom, yes that's wonderful! Then they nervously side eye their neighbors and wonder if they are the only ones who don't really understand what Jesus has just said.

This is kind of how I feel every time the first chapter from John's gospel is read - *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* As it continues I resonate with the poetry and the images and the affirmations of faith but still, though having heard it hundreds of times, still I cannot fully digest its truths. As Paul writes, 'for now we see dimly.' The kingdom of God has come near, yes; I see it, sort of, sometimes, maybe? The kingdom of God has come near, yes and even when we don't see it or struggle to see, still then we are called to believe.

Faith feels this way sometimes – like a dimly lit candle flickering in the midst of darkness, fog, and clouds. Christian faith is belief in things that cannot be clearly seen but that must be wrestled with and then relied upon as our greatest hopes. Washington Post Journalist Michael Gerson preached recently on this message at the National Cathedral, discussing his struggles with debilitating depression. I quote some of his grasping: "At the end of all our striving and longing we find, not a force, but a face. All language about God is metaphorical. But the metaphor became flesh and dwelt among us...I suspect that there are people here today -- and I include myself -- who are stalked by sadness, or stalked by cancer, or stalked by anger. We are afraid of the mortality that is knit into our bones. We experience unearned suffering, or give unreturned love, or cry useless tears."

Gerson talked about the things he had written lately in his journal "You are a burden to your friends." "You have no future." "No one would miss you." He talked about his willed cheerfulness failing, souring of his own company, and skimming on the surface of his life afraid to look below into the depths. These were ways for him to cope but not thrive. Ultimately Gerson's faith in the face, of God, in Jesus becomes his banner of hope and good news. The kingdom of God has come near – like a song flooding our ears, like a friend's embrace enveloping us, like the words of scripture giving us manna for the moment. The kingdom of God has come near in the transcendence of the divine into the mundane places of our lives - office buildings, and waiting rooms, and terminal gates, and school classrooms, and kitchen tables. The kingdom of God has come near in the places where there is illumination, and connectivity, and spirituality. The kingdom of God has come near lifting our sights from places of despair, depression, and doubt towards glimmers of the light of the divine.

Jesus is in the world with this message on his banner. The kingdom has come. God has come. The kingdom of God has come near to you. Can you see it? Can you hear it? Can you feel it? The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. As Christians we are called to believe in it and look for it and cling to it even when things are dark and difficult. Jesus' first sermon gives us that vision. Not because of what we might be seeing today but because of what we believe. Desmond Tutu says, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."

There is a line from the prophet Zechariah that says: *return to your fortress, O you prisoners of hope*. The kingdom of God, as a metaphor, as a promise, as a truth becomes for people of faith a fortress – a place to return to where we can find our hope and faith restored. For even those of the most robust faith will occasionally find themselves knocked off course and needing their vision restored.

In this last year in the process of rebuilding my home, I learned a lot about construction. Things I never wanted to know nor will I probably ever need to know about again. I have this distinct memory of standing in what had previously been my bedroom looking up to the blue tarp of a roof. The roof, the ceiling, the insulation, the wires, the rafters were all hanging and falling and begging for help. The beams having been badly burned in the fire I assumed would need to be removed and replaced. The contractor explained that instead they would be stripped of the char, and then they would be sistered to new beams. This was a new term to me. I learned that a sister stud is a secondary stud installed alongside the existing and damaged wood in order to reinforce its strength. The new beams come alongside the original beams and reinforce them. Together these beams connected to each other would become the framework on which the house would be rebuilt. How is that for an image of faith? The broken and bending and damaged - sistered to God's love and strength. That is exactly what faith in Jesus Christ does for our lives – it reinforces our foundations.

To those who feel they are wading through darkness and rubble and looking for reinforcements – let us receive that image, that metaphor, that truth - that the kingdom of God has come near. We have been sistered to God through Jesus. He has become our foundation and fortress. Again and again we are called to return to this truth, as prisoners of hope, those sistered to a God who will not leave us, who comes to us in the face of Christ, who reinforces the broken parts of our lives and gives us a new vision and abiding vision for our lives. The kingdom of God has come near – the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light!

Amen.