



Roanoke, Virginia  
January 27, 2019

## *“The Kingdom in Time”*

*Matthew 4:12-17*

**George C. Anderson**

Our church has had a difficult three days. Alexa Cannon’s death shocked us all and we are all doing what we can to join Sam and Cathy in doing what Cathy so beautifully stated: “[hold Alexa in light and love.](#)”

Today’s sermon was largely written anyway. This was a sermon I was going to preach a few Sundays ago but shelved due to a snowstorm. I have re-worked it for today and I hope it is OK. We might not be in much of a mood for humor, but there is humor in a song I quote at the beginning. I kept the illustration because the song points beyond itself to a more serious world.

That said, allow me to frame the hearing of our passage. Jesus’ public ministry begins as the public ministry of John the Baptist ends. Very soon after John baptizes Jesus, the Jewish King Herod has him thrown in prison.

But here’s the thing about God’s Word-  
the Word that exposes sin,  
that calls one to take stock and change one’s life,  
that sometimes does as it did Jesus after his baptism  
drives one into a wilderness of self-examination...

Here’s the thing about God’s Word. A king can kill its messenger, but the Word won’t stay silent.

When John is arrested, Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness, and then emerges with a calling to take up where John left off. In his first sermon, he preaches the same *two-point sermon* that John did. Listen for those two points and listen also for the Word of God that won’t be silenced:

<sup>12</sup> Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:



<sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—  
<sup>16</sup> the people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
light has dawned.”  
<sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

My brother, Bruce, plays the banjo and wrote a song that tells a story. I’ll quote and paraphrase the lyrics but remember, bluegrass is better heard from someone who can sing it.

Daddy was a miller  
Mother kept a cow  
Cornbread and milk  
Now you know how

I had a pet rooster  
It had one leg  
Mighty fine rooster  
But it couldn’t lay an egg

Then comes the chorus:

Cornbread and milk  
Eat it any way  
But you can’t eat cornbread  
For supper every day

Mondays, Tuesdays,  
Wednesdays too,  
We’d eat cornbread  
Till cornbread was through

With the next two verses, the singer tells about how much he loved that one-legged rooster and how much the rooster loved him. It followed him everywhere, watched him do his chores, and even slept in the same bed.

But then one Sunday, he couldn’t find his one-legged friend. He sings:

I checked with the chickens  
The cow in the barn  
Family checked the basket



Where mother kept her yarn

I had a little rooster  
He had one leg  
Mighty fine rooster  
But he couldn't lay an egg

Cornbread and milk  
Eat it any way  
But you can't eat cornbread  
For supper every day

Thursdays Fridays  
Saturdays too  
We ate cornbread  
Till cornbread was through

(Final verse)  
I got called to supper  
But I didn't want to eat  
Supper was good  
Mother cooked a treat

I rarely missed Supper  
Those days were few  
But Dumplings for supper  
Somehow, I knew

Cornbread and milk  
Eat it any way  
But you can't eat cornbread  
For supper every day

Bruce put to lyrics a story my father told of growing up during the Great Depression in Appalachia and his adopting a one-legged rooster as a pet. As one of 11 children living during the depression on a farm near Horseshoe NC, he learned it was not a good idea to claim as a pet a potential source of protein

Many days, cornbread and milk was the Anderson family meal. They raised plenty of other food sources on the farm- vegetables, pigs, cows, chickens, maple syrup- but sold everything they could. They wouldn't eat eggs except on Easter. They went to school, but schoolwork had to wait till after chores were done.



Some of you know my Dad and know he is a great storyteller and has a great sense of humor. Hearing his stories, it made you feel like you wanted to grow up like he did and be in a family like the one depicted on *The Waltons*; poor in things but rich in love.

Dad would remind us, though, that poverty during the depression was not like poverty today. Poverty then was defined as lacking basic human necessities: food, water, shelter. Absent were many of the safety net programs that help provide food and shelter for the unemployed. With one out of four eligible workers unemployed at the height of the depression, all other available means of help, like organized charity, were overwhelmed. Crime, divorce, alcoholism, prostitution, smoking, family abandonment all increased substantially. Oh, and suicide rates increased by 20%. Many did not emerge from the depression stronger and better for the experience.

Imagine a dinner devotional at my father's family table, after they had finished their meal of cornbread and milk. Imagine Syble, my father's mother, opening the Bible and reading our passage. How would they have heard the line, "**Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near?**"

I can tell you right now about one way they would have heard it. They would have heard it as the promise of an escape if only one repents. If they would just repent of their sins, accept Jesus as the light of the world, they would be saved... saved not from the harsh realities of poverty in Appalachia, but saved from some eternal experience of hardship that had no hope of ending.

Yes, "**Repent!**" would have dominated their hearing. When an injury or lasting disease could lose you your job with no compensation- with children depending on parents to keep coming home and keep finding ways to put food on the table, there was little to no margin of error for major mistakes. The cost of selfishness could be loss of shelter and food for not only you but those who depended on you.

But, that emphasis on "repent" can overwhelm the passage... make us miss something exciting, something hopeful and warming, in what Jesus is really trying to say. Yes, when John the Baptist preached this two-point sermon at the end of his ministry- though he did not know it was the end- perhaps the emphasis of his two-point sermon was on the first point, "Repent."

I won't suggest that Jesus has a problem with where John places the emphasis. This is Matthew's stern Gospel after all, not Luke's more warm-hearted one where one might even catch Jesus laughing. Still, I can't help but believe that if we could see Jesus preaching these words at the very beginning of his ministry, freshly responding to his sense of calling to proclaim what he would keep saying is good news,

- we might see his eyes a bit wide, not so much from fury but from excitement.
- We might hear in his voice, not anger, but some sense of urgency that his message be heard.
- We might sense some eagerness that those who are listening to them would hurry up and address those things in their lives that are holding them back, so he can tell them the good news he only has so much time to tell; that
  - beyond the warning, there is an announcement;
  - beyond the judgment, there is a word of hope;
  - beyond the reckoning there is a beckoning.



“You, take stock of your life, confess what it is that you need to confess so that you can clear the air between you and God,” you can hear him say. Because the kingdom is here. Not just in the life to come, which is the only message Appalachian revivalist preachers had for depression scarred people hoping for an escape. But *here! Now!*

There are geographical clues in the passage to back me up. John preaches his two-point sermon outside Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel and the center of abuses of power and wealth. Jesus preaches his two-point sermon moving away from Jerusalem, into the countryside of Galilee. The nickname for Galilee is “Galilee of the nations.” Bruner says that it is like saying the region is the “melting pot of the nations.” By moving away from Jerusalem and into Galilee, Jesus is moving toward greater Israel and the wider world of new beginnings. And by moving into Zebulun and Naphtali, he has chosen to move into the first parts of Israel taken into Babylonian captivity to proclaim his message of *release* from captivity.

- Yes, Jesus speaks of a kingdom that comes from heaven to earth, from God to us, but is *present now*. Rome is in charge, there is plenty of wrong to point at in the way things work and for whom, there are lives that need to change, but *the kingdom is now*.
- Second, the kingdom is *present in the moment of its proclamation*. Messages of hope, of God’s presence and power to heal and change things are beginning to become fulfilled simply in their hearing as hope is inspired and fresh vision gained.
- Third, the kingdom is now in the one who is announcing it. Jesus himself is a sign of God working something new in the world. Through Jesus’ words, actions and even death, God shines.
- Finally, the kingdom is now in a lived, historical sense. In the words of Dale Bruner, *it is seen anywhere there is a “breakthrough of justice and peace in society.”* Anywhere there is a show of selfless compassion, or an act of kindness, or the working of reconciliation, the kingdom is breaking through.

It is on that last point I want to dwell now. Any visible breakthrough of something of God’s reconciling love is a sign that even in times that call for change, the kingdom is already present.

My father, who emerged from the depression as a young man who felt called to ministry will tell you today that God’s claim on his life did not come in some conversion experience in the war or in a college classroom. He knew what it was like to have family hanging together in difficult times, finding reasons for laughter, joy and hope. He saw neighbors pitching in to help each other. While some may have been crushed by the depression, he was among those who emerged from the depression and war, not because he pulled himself up by his own bootstraps (that’s a myth), but because the kingdom of God was near in ways that compassion, courage, hope and resources were shared. He wanted to serve the God he believes ultimately was behind it all.

What can this passage might mean for a family like the Cannons right now? Right now, I truly believe their focus is also on the second point of Jesus’ sermon. Their desire is to focus on how the kingdom of God is breaking through during a dark time.



Earlier than maybe I would be able to do it, they are seeing light and love reach them... first in gratitude for having known and loved Alexa- having her in their life- celebrating her empathy for others and courage in tackling challenges. They want to celebrate that... and that is what we will do at 11:00 on Wednesday morning.

Second, they are seeing the kingdom break in through the family and friends surrounding them, the meals brought to them and the meal schedule already full... in the cards, letters and texts sent to them. The visits made to them. They see how others love and miss Alexa with them and share at least a little of their pain. Somehow the Word of Gospel goodness won't be quiet even during a time when many others are smart enough to be quiet themselves, not offering platitudes but simply presence and prayers.

Yes, so much in our world and in ourselves needs to change for far too much harm and pain is caused by those who think only of themselves. Jesus sees it and says it, but says also that the Kingdom of compassion, love and justice is breaking in. Here! Now! For you! And through you, for others.

