

“Introduce the Kingdom of God”

Matthew 3:1-3

Sermon Notes/Life Group Questions

Life is full of stories. Big stories ... little stories. Sad stories ... happy stories. My story ... your story. Our life's purpose is found when we connect our story with His Story. And life is at its best when we help those around us connect their story with His Story. And life doesn't get any better than when we are a part of their story of becoming more like Jesus. As we live out the heart of the Deer Flat family to be like Jesus and to help others be like Jesus, we don't simply want to tell the story of Jesus. We want to be a part of the story of someone becoming more like Jesus.

We embrace the call of Jesus to Go. We embrace the command of Jesus to love God and our neighbor. But we don't Go, loving God and neighbor, alone. We don't do this by ourselves. We are part of a community – a family. And it is in the relationships we share, with one another and with our neighbor, where lives are radically transformed. Broken lives become whole and healed as they find and come to know Jesus.

But to help someone become more like Jesus, we sometimes have to first prepare the way for Jesus. We have to help them get ready to hear and know and love the voice of Jesus. And one of the ways we do that is by introducing the Kingdom of God. This morning I want us to look at the Bible and into the life of Jesus so that we can better understand how to introduce the Kingdom of God.

Let's begin by looking at Matthew 3:1-3. READ.

Our first question this morning: What is the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven)? As we read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John we find both of these expressions – the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. Scholars suggest that these terms are synonymous. When Matthew records a specific saying of Jesus, he will use the phrase Kingdom of Heaven. Mark and Luke will record the very same

saying of Jesus but use the phrase Kingdom of God. Another reason it is believed that these phrases are synonymous is that Jesus Himself used them interchangeably. In Matthew 19:23-24, "... Jesus said to His disciples, 'I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.'" A final reason why it is believed that these terms are synonymous is that traditional Jews were taught not to speak or write the name of God. Thus, they would refer to His Kingdom without using God's name, and call it the Kingdom of Heaven.

We know that the Kingdom of God is important because Jesus referred to this more than any thing else in His teaching and preaching. This phrase occurs over eighty-five times in the Gospels. Jesus taught about forgiveness and a host of themes, but Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God more than any other theme. Another way we know the importance of the Kingdom of God, is that this is the message that was preached as Jesus began His ministry. In Mark 1:15 we read, "The time has come, Jesus said. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news."

Okay, the Kingdom of God is important, but what exactly is the Kingdom of God? Every time we pray The Lord's Prayer, we refer to the Kingdom of God. How is the Kingdom defined in The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13? Let's look at what Jesus said. "This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...". In this prayer that Jesus gave us, He also gave us His definition for the Kingdom of God. Notice the specific words again that Jesus gave us to pray: "...Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...".

What is the Kingdom of God? How did Jesus define the Kingdom of God? He said that heaven is a place where God's will is done. Jesus then said that we should pray that God's will would also be done on earth, just as it is in heaven. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is anywhere where the will of God is being done. When you and I obey the words of Jesus, God's Kingdom is there. When you and I agree to be like Jesus, God's

Kingdom is there. When you and I agree to help others be like Jesus, God's Kingdom is there. At work or at home ... alone or in community, when we are doing what God wants, then that is where we can find the Kingdom of God.

As we go back to our original text, we see a story about John the Baptist. He was preaching in the desert. He had one message. If he would have been a musician they would have said he was playing a one string banjo. What was his message? "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near."

Now to understand this, we need to ask who is John the Baptist? The story of his birth is in Luke 1. Mary the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist were relatives (Luke 1:36). Jesus and John the Baptist may have been distant cousins. John the Baptist was born six months prior to Jesus. We know that he lived in the desert until it was time for him to begin his ministry. The same angel – the angel Gabriel – that came to Mary to tell her that she would give birth to Jesus also came to Elizabeth to tell her that she would give birth to John the Baptist. He was called John the Baptist because a significant part of his ministry was to baptize new believers. He was also given the title of John the Baptist so that he could be differentiated from John the beloved – one of the twelve disciples.

In Luke 1:17 the Bible says that John the Baptist was "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord". Who is he preparing the way for? The angel Gabriel said that John the Baptist was to prepare the way for Jesus. Jesus was the promised Messiah and John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for the arrival and ministry and message of Jesus. But, why is he preparing the way? John the Baptist is one of the most significant transitional persons in the Bible. He was a bridge, with one foot in the Old Testament and one foot in the New Testament. His ministry ended almost four hundred years of prophetic silence. God's people had been clinging to the ancient promises of the prophets that one day there would be a Messiah. Because of the disobedience of God's people, their earthly and political kingdoms had been over run by other nations. As a people they had been taken captive and carried off into strange lands. They had been

waiting a very long time under difficult circumstances for the fulfillment of God's promise. John the Baptist was sent by God Himself to get them ready for Jesus. Lastly, as we look at John the Baptist, how is he preparing the way? Matthew 3 tells us that John the Baptist wore clothes made of camels hair and had a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He made his home in the desert. He lived without any fanfare because he knew that there was One to follow him who was greater than he was.

In spite of his simple life and message, John the Baptist had a great anointing from God. Many people listened to his message, confessed their sin and agreed with God, and repented and turned away from their old life and ways. And as they did John the Baptist baptized them. So many people were being baptized by John the Baptist that they came to him and asked if he might be the Messiah. In John 1 it says that John the Baptist freely confessed that he was not the Messiah. John the Baptist told people that he must become less so that Jesus might become more. John the Baptist said that Jesus was so great and that he was so insignificant that he was not worthy to even untie the sandals that Jesus wore. John said that he baptized with water but there was One to come after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The culminating moment of the ministry of John the Baptist was when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. And as Jesus came out of the water after His baptism, God spoke from heaven and said, "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). And from there the ministry of Jesus is inaugurated. And John the Baptist, he begins to fade away until his tragic death.

One of the great things about the Bible is that one story seldom stands by itself. It is often worthwhile to ask how does this fit into the big picture of His Story? As we look at the message of John the Baptist, we find that he is quoting from the prophet Isaiah 40:3. Centuries before the birth of either Jesus or John the Baptist, the prophet Isaiah had a revelation from God and gave this prophesy, "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare for the way of the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God'."

Look at the big picture. Isaiah the prophet tells of one who will come from the wilderness introducing the Kingdom of God and preparing the way for Jesus. John the Baptist is born and fulfills this prophecy. He introduces Jesus by saying that the Kingdom of God is now near. John the Baptist baptizes Jesus as Jesus begins His ministry. And what does Jesus teach more than anything else? “The Kingdom of God is not only near – it is here”.

Let’s keep looking into the story. How did Jesus introduce the Kingdom of God? Let’s look at Mark 1:14-20. READ.

Jesus said, “The time has come”. Those who knew the word of God and the ancient promises of the prophets must have felt great excitement. Jesus said that the time ordained by God had now come. It is like a child riding in the back of the car for what seems to be an endless ride, often asking “are we there yet?”. It’s like a child waiting in the final days before Christmas watching the tree all decorated with wrapped presents all around, asking each morning “is it Christmas yet?”. It’s like a bride and groom waiting for their wedding day, just counting down the days until their day finally arrives. It is like an expectant mother to be waiting nine months until that little life can be held in her arms – and finally the day arrives. God’s people had been waiting for so long. And now they hear the words of Jesus as He said that the Kingdom of God is now near. If only they knew how near it really was. Jesus said, “Repent and believe the good news!”
Simply awesome!

Again, let’s keep looking into the word of God to ask, how did Jesus preach this message with His words? Jesus went from village to village teaching and preaching and healing. Jesus said the time has come. The Kingdom is near. Repent and believe in the good news. As we have already noted, this is the theme that Jesus taught more than anything else. More than anything else, Jesus wanted His hearers to know that the Kingdom of God was now near. It was nearer than they knew. Everywhere He went He invited them to repent and believe.

But as we look at the Gospels and the story of Jesus, He did more than simply preach this message with His words. How did He preach this message with His life? His Words were clear. And the way He lived His life was just as clear. We look at the woman caught in adultery and see that Jesus forgave when others were ready to condemn. The disciples wanted to keep the children away from Jesus, but He invited them in. The lame and deaf and blind were told to be quiet and not to bother Jesus, and He stopped to touch them with healing words and hands. The stories of how Jesus preached not only with His words but with His life are grand.

The point I want you to understand is that Jesus did indeed preach that the Kingdom of God is near. But we must understand that He preached this both with His words and with His life. And if the Kingdom of God was the theme most often taught by Jesus, how do we “preach” that the Kingdom is near? What we do here in the Deer Flat family is never about me. But I want to share a personal story to help illustrate what Jesus is calling us to be and to do. (A personal story for Roger and Ellen.)

(Picture of Roger and Ellen with friends at Yosemite)

Ellen and I were asked by the church to take on a new ministry in 1999. And as a part of that assignment we were asked to relocate from the east coast to Los Angeles. We had visited LA before but had never actually lived there.

Now, I grew up riding a dirt bike with my brothers. When Ellen and I were newlyweds, we had motorcycles that we enjoyed riding together. But as we began our family and the expenses that went with raising a family, we sold the bike. But, there we were in LA as empty nesters. We rode along the beach, into the mountains, and across the desert. I said to Ellen, “this would be a great place to ride a bike again”. And to my surprise and great joy, she simply said, “Okay”. The next week I was in the local Harley-Davidson dealer. We had never owned a Harley before, but I convinced Ellen that we should buy one simply for the sense of “Americana” associated with a Harley. Ellen gave me her blessing, and I placed our order. A few weeks later we were riding a brand new black

Road King Classic. I dressed it up with a little chrome and put a little more beef into it with a stage one kit and performance pipes. After all, any Harley rider knows that “louder is safer”.

We began to ask how and where to meet other riders. We were told of a group that met every Friday night for a dinner ride. The next Friday night, Ellen and I rode over to introduce ourselves. We knew no one, yet we were accepted because we had the right ride. One of the great things about the Harley culture, is that if you have the bike – you are in. Later on they begin to find out who you are and what you do, but as long as you have the bike you are welcome. The Harley is your ticket in.

We found out that our new Harley friends would meet at a local burger stand and take some time to visit with one another – sort of what we would call fellowship. And then someone would eventually ask who was hungry and where they wanted to eat that night. As a group they would then ride in formation to a selected restaurant, enjoy an evening of dinner while continuing to regale one another with story telling. Finally the evening would come to an end, and we would say our good-byes and ride home.

One night we were riding to meet our friends. As we approached I sensed the voice of the Lord saying to me: “Roger, this is your small group – your Life Group”. I knew that it was the Lord. He wanted me to begin to use this gathering every Friday night to begin to introduce His Kingdom. Now, I knew I couldn’t show up and announce to these Harley riders that this was now a Life Group and that I was their leader. So Ellen and I instead tried to begin living out what we could not yet say.

It was almost New Year’s Day. The Harley culture loves a party. I knew that there would be a party somewhere on New Year’s Eve, so I asked Ellen if we could host the New Year’s Eve party at our house. My wife is one of the bravest women that I know – she said “Yes”. We invited all of our friends and got ready for the party. A few days before the party I realized that some of our friends who would be at our house were going to need to have a smoke (a cigarette!). And Ellen and I didn’t have any ashtrays. So I

called Paula and asked if she would bring a couple of ashtrays. She said sure. As she arrived, she handed me the ashtrays. We placed them on a table outside on the patio and made it clear that when ever they needed they were welcome to step outside and have a smoke. And from time to time, Ellen or I would step outside to the patio and spend some time with them as they lit up.

To be honest I really don't care for cigarette smoke. I don't like to breathe it even when it is second hand. But Ellen and I had grown to love these friends. And so I endured the smoke so that I might continue building the bridge – even painting the bridge that might help them get ready for Jesus.

The next morning as I cleaned up the patio and picked up the cigarette butts, I was reminded to thank the Lord as I did. With each cigarette butt I thanked the Lord for the privilege entrusted to me to introduce His Kingdom and show His love to these who had now become our friends.

A couple of weeks later, Paula – the same friend who had brought the ashtrays – told us as we met for the dinner ride that she had stopped smoking. She said it was kind of funny. She simply no longer wanted to smoke. I smiled. You see I had never said anything about her addiction. Ellen and I just wanted to show her love.

That was only the beginning for Paula. She was truly released from her years long addiction to smoke over a pack of cigarettes a day. Paula and her husband Steve came to church with us the following Easter where they began to rekindle a relationship with the Lord. Today they are in church every week, often with their children and grand children. Together they give leadership to the local chapter of Black Sheep – a ministry to help Harley-Davidson riders become like Jesus. Paula participates in women's ministries leadership both in her local church and in her region. Their lives have been radically transformed, and they are now busy helping others learn how to become more like Jesus. Now they are introducing the Kingdom of God to others.

You see sometimes we do need to speak the words of truth and tell others that the Kingdom of God is near. Sometimes we do need to speak the words of truth and invite people to repent and believe in the good news. But there are other times when we need to live the words. We can live in such a way that people begin to understand that the Kingdom of God is near. Our life can call people to repentance. We can live in such a way that our life can call people to believe in the good news.

This is the power of relationships. This is how church is less what we do and more who we are. This is how church becomes less what we invite people to each Sunday morning and more what we take to people all week long. It is a matter of helping people become more like Jesus as we live to introduce the Kingdom of God.

Friends, you are here because you want to be more like Jesus. Together, we pray that we can help others be more like Jesus. This is the heart of our Deer Flat family. We embrace the call and commandment of God to “go, loving God and neighbor, making disciples”.

It’s not about Harleys. It is about looking at whatever is in your hands and on your heart and giving it to the Lord to use. Do you like sewing, quilting, running, old cars, mountain trail rides, the BSU Broncos? Whatever it is, how are you using those things to introduce the Kingdom of God? You can use them for your own personal enjoyment, or you can offer them to the Lord to be used to build bridges with your neighbor. You can use these things to help prepare the way for Jesus.

As you leave this place and moment of worship, I pray that you will consider these life changing questions of practical application:

- What is your story of introducing the Kingdom?
- How and where can you begin preparing the way for Jesus?
- Who does God want you to begin with?

Closing prayer and invitation.

