

Mark 1:14-20

January 25, 2009

South Plains

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

### What Is Our Good News?

Last week, my granddaughter heard there was going to be an inaugural ball. She does not know or care very much about the transition of power in a democracy, but she knows that when you have a ball, you get dressed up. So, she came to our house last Tuesday with her princess dress from Halloween, ready to dance and looking for a likely prince. The atmosphere of expectancy is everywhere.

We know a little about expectant excitement ourselves as we look forward to breaking ground on Kirk Hall. We're not quite ready to break out the golden shovels, but we're making real progress as you will hear after this service. That's good news. But, of course, the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the best good news that makes progress in building Kirk Hall worthwhile. Everything we do is shaped and guided, inspired and energized by the gospel. So, it seems to me that this Sunday, with our annual congregational meeting upon us, this is an appropriate occasion to remind us all of the reason for the existence of the church with all its meetings and programs, hopes and dreams.

We have good news to announce. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus who "came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled,

and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news (Mark 1:14-15)."

A word about the words themselves, "good news." We think of the word "gospel" which means literally "good news," as a religious word associated exclusively with Christianity. But, in the time of Jesus, good news was a secular term often used for news of a military victory. There were celebrations roughly comparable to our tickertape parades when good news of a victory was announced. The word had political overtones because any word from the emperor was gospel on account of coming from the emperor.

Thus, when Jesus announced the good news of God, the gospel of the kingdom, people heard it as a joyful word. Everything we do in Christ's church, everything we say about Jesus builds on the deep joy of that original proclamation in Galilee. Sometimes we forget the emotional quotient of our message and our identity. The Christian message is first and foremost a happy word, glad tidings of great joy.

Of course, there is a sobering side to the gospel and we cannot forget to include the whole story as we work through the implications of this news. But, first tell the good news. When a visitor walks in this sanctuary and receives a friendly welcome, that's part of our good news. When a commuter driving on Route 22 sees this red brick building nestled in a beautiful grove of trees and glances at the sign to read "South Plains Presbyterian

Church,” we want the impression to be of a place to rest and be thankful for the beauty of God’s world. When a parent leaves a child in our nursery, they can be content that the people caring for their baby will be loving and kind. Those are first steps in conveying the joy of Jesus’ proclamation. I need to tell you that one reason we have taken so long to get started building Kirk Hall is our determination to keep South Plains as a place that brings a smile to every passerby.

The gospel, the good news of the kingdom, is more than just smiles and giggles. It offers lasting joy. It brings the satisfaction of unassailable peace. It promises hope, hope able to endure loss and pain. This good news comes packaged in a person, embodied in the man Jesus of Nazareth. It includes both the content of his teaching and the experience of his life. When a child comes home from school and calls through the house, “I got an A in math, Mom,” that’s very different from reading the report card with an A. The content of the news is exactly the same, but the impact goes much deeper because the child who earned the A brings the news. Jesus is both the messenger and the message. That means we are invited to believe the words he speaks, but more importantly, we are invited to believe him.

“The time is fulfilled..., repent and believe in the good news.” Timing is so important. If General David Petraeus had argued for his strategy in 2003, he would have gotten no where because the time was not right. But, in 2007 he brought experience and research to a

commander who was in trouble, and the course of the war in Iraq turned. When two people fall in love, it’s more than compatibility, good looks and hormones. It’s timing. They’re ready to commit, ready for a life partner.

When Jesus invites us to repent, he is inviting us to turn our lives in another direction because the time is right, the time is fulfilled. A change now will make all the difference in the world. The time is fulfilled for the building of Kirk Hall. More importantly, the time is fulfilled for us to turn to believing the good news, believing it is really true. The time is right for our neighbors to believe the good news. That means the time is now for us to tell them about Jesus’ importance in our lives. The time is at hand to tell them South Plains is a community of people where they can follow Jesus.

I was talking with a good friend the other day who is heavily involved in serving his community. He serves on the Habitat board, a literacy program and the human relations commission. Reflecting on this past week, he commented, “You know, I can’t remember hearing that Martin Luther King Day was designated in 1994 as a day of service.” I agreed. I certainly had not seen the holiday in that light. Perhaps we missed it because right now, when hard times have hurt so many, now is the right time for us to step up our efforts at community service.

Part of the good news we proclaim is that the church of Jesus Christ offers avenues of service to the hungry through the food banks we support, service to the

homeless through Habitat, service to families through Sunday School and youth programs, service to the lonely through fellowship events, service to the world that God loves so much that he sent his Son with a life of love to share with us all. The time for selfishness is past. The time for service is fulfilled.

Our good news is news of salvation. And by salvation we mean a better life, a more joyous life, a life centered not on ourselves, but on our relationships with a loving God and with each other. For many, an unselfish life will mean a definite turn away from getting and toward giving. This is the opportune time in our national history, but also in the history of South Plains Church for us to renew our commitment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves and to follow Jesus.

As soon as Jesus starts proclaiming the good news, he begins sharing it concretely by making friends. He casts his net wide to include all sorts of people. The calling of the fishermen Simon and Andrew, James and John, is a kind of parable for the life of the church. The story indicates that these simple fishermen felt such an urgency to follow Jesus that they left their nets. James and John left their father with the hired hands to run the business. Later in the gospels, we see them with boats, so they may not have abandoned their property and their families completely. But the point is clear: they turned from an old way of living and began a brand new chapter in their lives with Jesus.

No longer would they fish only for the tilapia that still are found in the Sea of Galilee. They would begin fishing for people. Nothing is abstract about the heart of this good news. It's person-centered. Buildings have their usefulness. Money is necessary for programs. Doctrines and theology guide our work. But, at the center of all we do are the benefits of Christ for real people. That's why we talk so much about forgiveness and hope and new life. That's why the best advertisement for Christianity is not the flash, not the sizzle, not even the smell of good food. Our best advertisement is walking around Albemarle, Fluvanna and Louisa counties. It's the lives of the people who come here to worship every week. We need to cast our nets wide because we have good news.

The atmosphere in this nation is full of expectant excitement. It happens every time we have a new president. I don't know how long it will last. I do know that the excitement in South Plains will build as we see your dreams for Kirk Hall materialize. Those dreams will become reality as we share the good news of the kingdom, the good news of God, the good news of Jesus Christ.

The time is right for us to share the joy with others, the joy of new life with a loving God. In many ways, SPPC has been extraordinarily blessed by God. The time has come to share those blessings, to cast our net wide to include others so that news, good news. God's news reaches everyone who will hear.