

**Homily – Rejoice! The Kingdom of God is Here**  
**The Rev. Susan Arnold**  
**January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church**

Jesus proclaimed: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

In Matthew's account, Jesus has just arrived in Capernaum after having been baptized in the Jordan River by John, the infamous baptizer, and then his grueling wilderness journey. He immediately begins to carry on John's message "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near".

Unlike John, though, he is not baptizing the people. Instead, he is curing "every kind of disease and sickness". I think it is important to note that, as was John, Jesus was preaching to Jewish people. When he proclaimed, "Repent!" he was addressing the same issues that John raised regarding the heavy burden placed on the poor by the hypocritical religious leaders who capitulated to the Roman government--and also those of the poor who had given in to the pressures; losing their faith that Yahweh would send them a savior.

The poor had their own distractions from worshipping Yahweh according to Jewish Law. Their life was harsh and it likely was not easy to keep worship and prayer at the forefront of daily life--not unlike us today. Their repentance was to turn from their loss of faith and diminished hope.

The Jewish people were walking in the darkness of that lack of faith and diminished hope creates.

Into this, Jesus enters.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.*

Those who lived in the land of deep darkness...the poor in spirit.  
I think this is the greatest message Matthew gives us in his Gospel.  
We can fast forward through the centuries and find the same injustices and hypocrisy today, whether religious or secular. We can find the same poverty and despair. But the message is clear that because of Jesus, no one needs to live in a "land of darkness"-- no one needs to suffer without hope.

Matthew further reminds us that Jesus chose helpers to carry forth that Good News. He called them from their preoccupation with their secular jobs to bring to the poor,

the sick, the lonely, the neglected, the outcast, the Good News that their hope, their salvation was at hand and what they needed to do to receive it.

Created in the wake of Jesus' ministry is a community of followers that grew and grew and grew. **This** is how the Kingdom of Heaven comes near.

A kingdom is nothing without inhabitants. It is how the inhabitants of that kingdom work together under their Lord Jesus Christ's direction and how they treat one another that makes it the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew was written at a time when the community of Christians had spread beyond Capernaum, beyond Jerusalem, beyond the borders of Israel, and beyond the Jewish people. It now included Gentiles. Christians, both Jewish and Gentile converts, were suffering under the Roman rulership. The Jewish converts were also suffering an identity crisis because they were no longer welcome in the synagogues. So, Matthew wrote to them to give them encouragement, to remind them of their faith and hope; Jesus, the messiah.

They had repented of their old way of life, exchanging it, transforming it, into the way of the Kingdom of Heaven. Presiding Bishop Michael gave us a wonderful term to cover what the community of Jesus is all about; "*The way of Love*".

The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians that we heard read this morning:

*"that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."* In other words, in the Kingdom of Heaven, everyone takes care of each other, working together for the good of all. This tends to smack at the individualistic take care of your "own self" culture in this country.

But Jesus' life's ministry demonstrated just the opposite. Jesus tells us **we** are the instruments God uses to bring this about because **we** have repented, **we** have been transformed, and **we** are now living into the Kingdom of Heaven. Just last week we renewed our baptismal promises to do just that.

And caring for each other is not exclusive to the people we know. Isaiah's hope-filled words tell us:

*"For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken"...*

Please turn to the very front of your bulletin and look at the bottom of the page. Here at St. Barnabas, our Mission Statement is to be... Let's read this out loud together. **"God's discerning, inclusive, Christ-centered church, engaged in outreach ministry, growing discipleship, and life changing worship."** This mission statement was carefully and thoughtfully written by a vestry chosen by this community.

I have been with you for almost 7.5 years and in that time I have been privileged to be a part of the growing into the Kingdom of Heaven and God's way of love that this statement points toward. This is not an idle statement. It is an action statement.

God's discerning--we belong to God in Christ Jesus and, we continually, through prayer and community discern God's call to us.

God's inclusive--we invite and envelope with love all who come through our doors no matter where they are on their spiritual journey.

God's Christ-centered people--we boldly proclaim that we are Christian--lovers and followers of Jesus.

Engaged--we strive to work with our wider community to address many social issues of need. We have Bible study and other adult education on spiritual topics.

We have some of the most thoughtful and spiritually uplifting worship services that have proven to be actually life changing because worship of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is how we are renewed to carry on the work of growing the Kingdom of Heaven.

This same work as started by those first four Apostles that Jesus called there on the shores of a lake some two thousand years ago, has continued to grow through the centuries.

We here at St. Barnabas are carrying on that work because we have the hope that we may someday say: "REJOICE! The Kingdom of Heaven is here!"