

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
June 14, 2020

Proclaiming the Kingdom in a New Context:
Matthew 9.35-10.8, Proper 6, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Well, we just heard the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ! We just heard about Jesus going about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and curing those who are sick. He had compassion on the crowds because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He proclaimed to them the good news, the Gospel, of the Kingdom of God. Things were going well. Momentum was building. Jesus' ministry was expanding. People were hearing about the radical and healing love of God and being transformed by this good news of Christ.

But he was just getting started. Jesus then gathered around him twelve of his closest friends because it was time for them to be set loose as agents for his Kingdom also. We have their names listed here and if you look closely you might even find your name among the list. Jesus gives them instructions for Kingdom sharing, saying, "...go, proclaim the good news that the Reign of God has come near." Jesus gives them authority. Here's how you know the Kingdom is at hand: cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. "But make no mistake," Jesus says, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

Ever since Jesus and his disciples began proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, the Church has formed communities of people bound together by this Kingdom way of life. How do you know the Kingdom is at hand? People are being healed, the dying are being brought back to life again, outcasts are welcomed in, and evil forces are sent running. We give our lives to Christ through his Church for these very reasons and it's Good News indeed that God's way is our way.

But we have to notice in our reading that Jesus tells his followers things are going to change and it ain't always going to be easy or good. He warns them that the world is going to look very different for them than it has before. And I have a feeling that you have noticed that our world is looking rather differently than it did before also. This Coronavirus has been no joke. It has shut down the world and a population equal to the size of Henderson County has died in the US alone because of this thing.

Now we find ourselves in a similar place as disciples. We are sent as agents of the Kingdom of God, we are members of this particular Kingdom community, and things are changing around us which are making us ask how we are to proclaim that good news, how we can be the Church, in

our current reality. Our bishop, Jose McLoughlin, and his office have provided terrific leadership for us because they know we all miss Church the way it was before, not unlike how Jesus' disciples must have felt when their world changed. And Bishop Jose also understands at this stage in the pandemic that we are adapting and finding ways to go about life as best we can. We want to worship as a Church also. But here's the thing, our gathering must be centered in that same Kingdom of God way of life as always. We come to Church to be made whole, not to contract deadly diseases, and so our bishop has asked us to pause and to think through how we gather. He has given us direction and a lot of good questions to struggle with as we figure this out. Deacon Sandy and I met with the vestry on Thursday night this past week and we discussed the many logistics of trying to host worship in a way that is safe and responsible for those who feel comfortable participating.

This morning I want to begin bringing you into this conversation with more details to come in the days ahead. Here is what we know so far.

- We are going to continue to share worship online for any who prefer to participate this way in the weeks ahead.
- Our Bishop has asked that we follow the recommendations given by the state of NC and other experts, including that all worshippers wear masks, family groups are at least six feet apart, and that we limit attendance at this point to 10 people inside and 25 people outside.
- In fact, he is strongly encouraging outdoor worship because the risk of contracting COVID-19 is greatly reduced in open air. You will find we are now renting a large white tent, at considerable cost, which is set up in the back corner of our parish hall parking lot.

We still have a lot of details to work out but your vestry and clergy recently agreed that, in dialogue with our diocesan office, we should have a plan in place to gather for in-person worship on Sunday, June 28. We will be emailing a survey to you to help us better understand how comfortable you are with in-person worship at this point so we can plan a service schedule for groups of 25 people at a time.

In the meantime, you may join me, starting tomorrow, for Morning Prayer at 9am, Monday to Thursday, in the Rector's Garden or under the tent (depending on weather). We will also try for the next two weeks Evening Prayer in the same place at 4:30pm, Monday to Thursday, again, starting tomorrow. Masks are required. Bring a lawn chair if you have one. Bring your own Book of Common Prayer and, if you don't have one, you're Episcopalian so now is the time to get one. Contact our office for recommendations. I have a few to give away if money is tight. We are also asking all of our committees, all of our ministries, to begin developing a plan on how to resume their Kingdom work safely.

Lastly, we are so grateful for your patience as we figure out what our common life will look like in the days ahead. It's going to take some trial and error like we are seeing with operations everywhere. People are figuring this out and we will, too. We are with you and we know that you're with us also. Remember each person must take responsibility for their own safety and for the safety of this parish as we think about reconvening. We will respect your decisions.

Jesus told his disciples in our Gospel that things are going to look differently than before because the world is changing, but our work remains the same. As the Church, we are sharing the Kingdom of God however we can, whether it's online, in small groups, under a tent, in the garden -- we will press on with the work God has called us to do. We are in the business of sharing the Good News of God in Christ. We are sent out to bring healing to the sick, to share life in the midst of death, to welcome in those who have been rejected, and to reject the demonic forces of our world. Our work remains the same and now we get to see, very much like the Apostles, what it means to leave our spiritual home, to experience a new context, and to do the work God has given us to do at this current moment. God is with us and we are with each other. The Kingdom of God is near. Amen.