

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Today's gospel reading contains the first words out of Jesus' mouth in the Gospel of Mark, and you could think of it as Jesus' mission statement, the whole point of his coming and of Mark bothering to pass on his story. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." That's the mission statement. And he follows that up with an exhortation: "repent, and believe in the good news." The past ten days or so have been a chance for me to apply this mission statement of Jesus to my own personal life in a way that all of us have an opportunity to do at certain times of our lives. I mean those moments where life is put into perspective by the immediate possibility, or the devastating reality, of death. As I mentioned briefly before last Sunday's service, my father collapsed at home on January 10 and was rushed to the nearest hospital by EMTs, who had to administer CPR. We got word of that just as choir practice was finishing up, and when home, packed our bags, and drove down to St. Louis. We may or may not have exceeded the posted speed limit. If we did, we did so safely. I won't go into the details, but over the next couple of days it was looking like dad would not pull through. So on Saturday morning, I decided that it was time to arrange for a bedside service of Commendation of the Dying. It's the Lutheran version of what our Catholic siblings call "last rites." I probably don't talk about this service enough, except when it is needed. You should know that we have this service, so that you can call me if it is needed – or another pastor in the distant future after long I am retired. It is a simple service that remembers the dying person's baptism, traces out the cross on their forehead that they were marked with in baptism, and commends them into the care of God. It is particularly meaningful to the one who is dying if they are awake and alert. And as I remind everyone I do the service for, there is no obligation to die after the service is done. It is repeatable. We waited until my last sister got to town at 5:00, and had my parents' pastor lead the service. The hospital allowed a group of us to be in the room, and through the miracle of modern technology, we were able to include extended family via Zoom. Helen and I returned to Champaign for last Sunday's service, which conveniently the bishop was here to preach for, and then we packed our bags, including funeral clothes, and headed back down. Well, dad did not die, and over the past week has made a remarkable recovery. He is scheduled to have a pacemaker put in tomorrow afternoon if all continues to go well.

That's the happy ending to the story. Except, of course, that it is *not* the ending. Dad is going to die, just not, apparently, right now, and we will be able to have some more time with him. I'm going to die too. And so are you. But for the moment we live in the grace of the life that God has given each of us, something that I, at least, do not appreciate enough, as recent events have demonstrated.

So how does Jesus' mission statement and his call to action apply to my life in light of these recent events, and to your lives as you face such events in your own lives? There are four components to Jesus' inaugural address: 1. The time is fulfilled, 2. The kingdom of God has come near, 3. Repent, and 4. Believe in the gospel. I'm going to take them a little out of order and put them in the order that I think they actually encounter and move us. First, the good news. That seems to be the last thing here, but really it's the second: the kingdom of God has come near. *That's* the good news. But what does it mean? It means that God has not left the building, that God is not asleep at the wheel, and that God is not leaving us to manage the mess we've created for ourselves on our own. God has decided *not* to give up on God's good creation and

instead to wrestle back control from all of the forces and powers of this world that defy and rebel against God, and that draw us away from God with all of their empty promises. If that does *not* sound like good news to you, it might be because you are believing some of those empty promises and finding yourself comfortable with the world as it is. That is a real temptation for those of us in our particular socio-economic demographic. Jesus' announcement, however, means that what *we* are often comfortable with in life is actually *bad* news, both for us and for the world that God loves. And that means that the genuinely *good* news of God taking back control might feel *uncomfortable* to those of us who are happy with the status quo.

And that, of course, is what the repentance part of Jesus' message is about. Repentance means recognizing and coming to grips with our misplaced loyalties and values, our alliance with violence and wealth and our neglect of the common good. Repentance means not calling good evil and evil good, or benefitting at the expense of others. Repentance means, literally, changing our minds about things, having a change of heart, and as a result of that changing the course of our lives, redirecting our loyalties and values and alliances.

But *that* is a tall order. Repentance does not come easily, especially for the comfortable. And that's where the "believe" part of the message comes in. Before we can repent, we have to trust that the changes repentance calls for are changes we actually want to make. Let me give you a mundane example from daily life. I exercise not because I particularly like running or doing pushups, or squats. I *hate* squats. But I exercise (when I do!) because I believe that it is good for me, that it benefits my health and my quality of life. I endure the discomfort because I trust that it will achieve the promised goal. And that is what believing in the gospel is. It means trusting that what God is up to in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, is the way to life that really is life, genuine, abundant, and everlasting, even if it feels uncomfortable and unappealing at first. Believing the gospel means finding hope and joy in a life turned away from the self and toward others. It is a tall order, that kind of believing, that kind of faith and trust, but here's some more good news: it is not our work, not something we are under pressure to accomplish, "or else..." Faith is God's work, the work of the Holy Spirit, who gets busy creating faith every time we remind ourselves and each other of the good news of the kingdom of God that has come near in Jesus Christ.

I'll end, then, where Jesus began: "The time is fulfilled." The kingdom of God is not pie in the sky by and by. It is not a distant future paradise up in heaven. The kingdom of God is coming right now to a location near you, from heaven to earth. *Now* is the time for God's creative and redeeming work in you and in the world around you and through you. *Now* is the day of God's salvation. Now is the time for repenting and believing the gospel. Of course it's hard to live every moment with such awareness and such urgency. It often takes a crisis, like your father being taken to the hospital, or a serious, life-threatening diagnosis to shock us out of our business as usual. But when those crises come, and come they do, they can be particularly good opportunities to hear and be opened to God's good news for us and for the life of the world. And, as I have found over the past week and a half, they can help us truly to appreciate what we do here each Sunday as we gather in Jesus' name around word and sacrament. These are life and death matters that we hear and taste and enact, week in and week out, through which God is at work for us and for our salvation. "The time is fulfilled," dear people of God, "and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the gospel." That is the good news that is leading to the real end of the story, through death and back to life again. May we trust its promise, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.