

**God's Kingdom at our fingertips** (based on Matthew 4:12-23)  
Pastor Hubert Den Draak, Jan. 26, 2014



Today is the day of our Annual Meeting, so I guess today's message is sort of a "State of the Church" message. For the last couple of weeks I've been trying to decide exactly what I want to say to you about our congregation, this community of faith we call Pinegrove United Church. Where has it been, where it is now - and where it is going. And all that in 10 minutes or less, because we have more to do after this service...!

But we really do need to talk a little bit about who we are, and the direction in which we're being called. Not easy stuff... And then I read the Scripture passages that are offered for this morning, I realized they talk about exactly that!

The New Testament text talks about how Jesus' ministry began immediately following the arrest of John the Baptizer. John's many followers are paralyzed with fear and don't know where to turn. His once so spectacularly successful movement... is falling apart fast. And in this climate of fear and oppression Jesus wants to start *his* ministry? Talk about bad timing!

And in the Old Testament reading, Isaiah offers God's hope and loyalty to the people of Israel where things are going from bad to worse. Or as Isaiah puts it so strikingly: they are a people "walking in darkness" and "living in shadows". There just doesn't seem to be a way out of the downward spiral they got themselves into. They must have thought Isaiah had a screw loose to see hope in their hopeless situation!

And even though these words are thousands of years old, they still speak to us, as individuals and as a faith community. *We know* what it means when bad things happen: irreplaceable people in our lives get sick or leave, jobs are lost, the money stops, - and everything seems to fall apart.

Now as people of faith, there's two ways of responding to situations like these: you can get panicky and shore up your defences, pouring most of your energy and resources into keeping what you still got so you won't lose even more.

Or, after the first jolt, and before the first panic sets in, you stop... You stop and think: hmm, what does this really mean? What is God telling me (or us)?

I met someone who had been diagnosed with a life-threatening form of cancer. He had been through surgery, through chemo and all the rest, and had still a long way to go. He didn't know whether the cancer would kill him or whether he'd survive it. But he told me that it was the best thing that ever happened to him. It forced him to take stock of his life, to ask himself all the tough questions he had been avoiding. And now he's doing things with a focus and a clarity he never had before.

"The cancer made me a better person", he told me. Think about that: cancer had made him - not a sick person, or someone to be pitied - but a *better* person, and at peace with whatever might happen. It's an extremely humbling experience to hear someone say something as profound as that.

A lot of times great ministry begins that way; something shakes us at our core, usually something negative; it causes us to re-examine our selves, and we are led in new directions.

This congregation has also been through some tough times, although not nearly as tough as the person I just talked about. But we have lost some wonderful folks who were central to the mission of this congregation; there have been some frictions in the past, and maybe some of it still lingers; we've seen our youth all but disappear, attendance is slowly declining. And some of us are getting tired to keep things going...

We're into our 59th year now, and we're trying to figure out what to do next. As we're doing that, it's important for us to realize - no, not important: *essential* - it's essential for us to realize that it's not all up to us; God is leading us in all of this - if we only stop and listen to what God might be telling us; if we only tune out all the noise we are making.

Matthew, in our text this morning, realized that very same thing; he links the end of John's movement, its "failure" if you will, to an old prophecy, as if to say, "Look, even here, God is still at work. There is no "Plan B." This has always been "plan A", right from the start. God will not be stopped by this - and neither can we."

And next, we hear Jesus' message, "Turn away from your sins, for the Kingdom of God is near!" Where is God leading us, says Jesus? Toward God's Kingdom. And if we get shaken up and walloped in the process, well, that's not a bad thing because on our own, we get too settled in our ways, and too comfy. It's too easy to keep doing things the same way, week after week, and year after year.

Remember the resistance when "Voices United" came out, 20 years ago? And when "More Voices" came out, you would think it was the end of the world for some congregations. Change anything in church, and a lot of folks get upset. Just see what happens when you ask someone to sit in a different place, even in the same pew - it ain't a pretty sight!

Now, I don't believe by any means that all change good, but we do have to allow ourselves to get shaken up every now and then, or we become complacent. We are not here to be comfortable. We are here in response to Christ's call: "The Kingdom of God is near!" That's not comfortable - that's *exciting*; that's a call to action!

You may have seen this funny bumper sticker: "*Jesus is coming. Look busy!*" Seems I'm not the only one who thinks it's funny, you can even get t-shirts and buttons and coffee mugs with those words printed on them. And just as with anything that makes you smile, it also makes you think. Because we recognize ourselves in it, don't we? All too often we're so busy with our own things and managing our own well-meaning agendas, we sometimes forget it's not about our agenda - it's God's. And every now and then a big, dramatic jolt can remind us of that, and we go, "Oops, right - sorry God, I forgot..." And we change our ways (I hope!); we "turn away from our sins", the sins of complacency, and choose a new, life-giving direction.

Jesus' message is "The Kingdom of God is near." Jesus proclaims that this Kingdom is present among us, right now. It's in the bread and wine we share, in one another, in our neighbour, in the people who live in this community. God's Kingdom is staring us right in the face. It's not somewhere far away - it's so close you can almost touch it. That's why Jesus instructs us to pray "your Kingdom come *on earth*, as it is in heaven." And it shakes us up and calls us to action, it calls us to change our lives and bring them in tune with that reality.

*That* is what we, as Pinegrove United Church are called to do in 2014. Jesus calls his disciples (in other words, he calls *us*) in the awareness that God's Kingdom is so close you can just smell it. Matthew's passage ends with the disciples abandoning everything, they changed their lives around to follow Jesus, to witness him proclaim the good news of the God's kingdom, caring for people, healing them without exception, healing relationships. And pretty soon, they find themselves doing those very same things. Who would have thought?! Not those first disciples, that's for sure. And maybe we don't, either. And yet, Jesus tells us, you can do it. Just try.

As you listen to our committees share what they are doing and where they are asking us for our support, I pray you will hear Jesus calling, "We need some change! The Kingdom is near! Don't just *act* busy - *act!*" And I pray you will hear God's still, small voice, assuring you: "And when you do that I'll be with you; just trust me!"

Christ calls us; God will lead us. How do we act?

Amen.