

God of all time, teach us to recognize your reign and your power, and to jump into your kingdom with both feet.

Amen.

Now is the time! The realm of God is here! Change your hearts and lives, and believe this good news!

In his first sermon, Jesus declares that God's kingdom has arrived.

This kingdom is not a location – it's a whole new reality, not limited by time or space. God's realm exists in **any** place and time in which God's authority is recognized, over and above all other authorities.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus talks more about the kingdom of God than any other subject. Starting from these first moments of his public ministry, Jesus proclaims that the realm of God is the reason for his incarnation.

Through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers experienced the kingdom of God.

And by following Jesus' teachings, we too are meant to live in the knowledge that God's kingdom is at hand.

If the kingdom of God is so important to Jesus – and by extension, to Christians – we'd better figure out just what, exactly, it means.

Unfortunately, Jesus never told us, "the kingdom of God means exactly this." As usual, Jesus spoke in parables.

He referenced God's realm throughout his ministry, trying to teach the disciples just a bit more about what it meant, as though each teaching were a puzzle piece and hopefully by the end of his life, his followers would have assembled the complete picture of what God's realm was supposed to be.

So, in order to understand the reign of God, we too must piece together the various teachings of Jesus throughout Mark and the other Gospels.

Let's start with the most familiar.

In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God for the arrival of the divine reign.
Your kingdom come, your will be done.

When we pray this line of the prayer, we ask for the same thing twice.
The realm of God exists whenever and wherever the will of God is done.

This reign isn't concerned with occupying a particular piece of holy land, or protecting a region from outsiders who may wish to live there. The realm of God isn't something that can be achieved by military conquest. It isn't about human power, in the form of kings or prime ministers or presidents.

God's realm is about recognizing that the highest power belongs to God alone, and not to humankind.

How appropriate.

This is also the theme of Ash Wednesday, which we observed last week. God is God, and we are not. Thanks be to God!

In this first Sunday in Lent, the theme is reiterated – all power and glory belongs to God, forever and ever. Amen!

But back to the meaning of the kingdom of God, which was so important to the ministry of Jesus.

If context means anything, in the reign of God, temptations may happen, but they do not have power over us.

This is what Jesus has just experienced, right after his baptism, and right before he begins preaching. Jesus emerges from the wilderness having conquered temptation, and ready to teach everyone about God's kingdom!

And so he does.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus teaches us that God's realm is secret – it is something that not everyone is able to understand (4:11).

Jesus also tells us that God's realm is powerful – it will not be subject to any earthly authority (9:1).

God's realm is mysterious and full of life, like a seed planted by a farmer (4:26-29).

And God's realm will grow beyond our imaginations, just as the smallest seed grows into the largest plant (4:30-32).

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of God is a joyful surprise – like a treasure discovered in a field, or a pearl worth a great fortune (Mt 13:44-46).

The reign of God permeates reality, like leaven in bread dough, and it changes things completely (Mt 13:33).

God's realm is about not judging others, and about remaining prepared for whatever may come (Mt 13:24-30; 13:47-50; 25:1-13).

It is the place where we can expect God's infinite grace, but in which we are also expected to extend that grace to others (Mt 18:23-35; 20:1-16).

God's realm is here! It's happening! Believe it, and let that belief change the way that you live!

Jesus is direct.

If he were a woman, he would have been criticized for not being nice enough.

But direct communication worked for men in antiquity, as it does today, and so Jesus' message made its way out into the world, where it made a difference in the lives of many.

Jesus taught about God's realm through parables and prayer, but also through his actions.

In the kingdom of God, illness has no power. That is why Jesus performed so many healings.

In the realm of God, there is no hunger. That is why Jesus fed thousands of people, without question.

In God's reign, foreigners are cared for, as Jesus cared for the Canaanite woman's daughter.

In the kingdom of God, children are welcomed and honored, just as Jesus honored and welcomed them.

In the realm of God, evil has no place. That is why Jesus performed so many exorcisms.

In God's reign, death is not the final word. This is why Jesus raised people from the dead – and more importantly, why Jesus himself was raised from death.

God's kingdom has no limits – all things are possible – even walking on water! (when it's not frozen)

In the realm of God, women are honored and believed.

Women were the first witnesses to the most unbelievable event in history, Jesus' resurrection. And for thousands of years, people have been believing those women, and lives and societies have been changed because of it!

The realm of God is always a place where the best is expected from each person.

Exploitation of others is not allowed. This is why Jesus' anger was permitted when the moneychangers in the Temple were exploiting worshippers.

Outrage is allowed in God's kingdom, but only to the extent that it brings the whole reality into closer alignment with God's will.

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

*Hey! God's reign **has** come! Believe in it and follow God with your whole being!*

This is what Jesus teaches today, at the very beginning of his public ministry.

And because we already know the rest of the story, we have an idea of what Jesus meant when he was talking about the reign of God.

No aspect of life remains untouched by God's reign.

Health, economics, politics, family, society, religion, education – any institution of the world, anything that could possibly hold power – all of it changes when the realm of God arrives.

Jesus came to earth to reveal to us the kingdom of God.

Through his teaching and actions, we know what God allows and expects in the divine realm.

By extension, we also know that many things are excluded in God's kingdom.

In the kingdom of God, there are no wars. There is no domestic violence, and there are no school shootings.

In the kingdom of God, there is no bullying. There is no sexual assault, and no victim blaming.

In the kingdom of God, there is no exploitation of God's creation.

There is no child abuse.

No murder.

No stealing.

No unfaithfulness.

In the kingdom of God, there is no judgment, except that which comes from God.

That means that, among humans, homophobia is prohibited.

Xenophobia is disallowed.

Even nationalism is frowned upon, to the extent that it comes at the expense of other people and nations around the world.

Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God to the world, and indeed, through his ministry, we know what that reign looks like.

So how do we join in?

On a most basic level, we opt in to the reign of God at our baptism, just like Jesus did.

As many of us learned from Martin Luther's Small Catechism, baptism signifies the death of the old person and the birth of a new one – the end of our sinful nature and the beginning of a life of faith.

Every day is a new chance to faithfully live as God intends.

When we choose to do this, we are helping to bring about the kingdom of God.

And as we follow through on our baptismal promises – as we continue in our lives of faith – we choose to follow the values of God’s reign rather than the values of this world.

Our actions and our words can reflect the ministry of Jesus.

As faithful participants in the kingdom of God, we practice love, and not hate.

We work for an end to violence.

We seek healing for all.

We treat all people with honor, as beloved children of God. We respect God’s creation, value the possessions of others, welcome strangers, and refrain from murder, stealing, and unfaithfulness.

This is what the kingdom of God looks like.

And we are part of it.

We have the power to make it rule the world, over and against the military and political and economic forces that strive to exploit and ignore the humanity of others.

God’s way is a better way.

Jesus tells us:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!

Let us make it so.

Amen.