

Text:

Matthew 3.1-12

Big Picture:

Matthew continues his introduction of Jesus, the Messiah, with a description of John, who takes on the role of prophet, telling people of Jesus' coming. This coming is not something that will happen in the future, but has begun: the kingdom of heaven, he says, has come near.

Preparing for the Lesson:

Our text today represents a jump of about 30 years or so. We will soon find Jesus as an adult, but before we see his earthly ministry, John “the Baptist” is introduced by Matthew as a precursor of the one to come. Within John’s message, we find several themes and ideas that Jesus will pick up throughout the book of Matthew. (For example: “brood of vipers” 3.7 & 23.33; “repentance” 3.8 & 11.20-21; “producing good fruit” 3.8 & 7.16-20; “children of Abraham” 3.9 & 8.11-12; “fruitless tress” 3.10 & 7.19; “judgment by fire” 3.11-12 & 5.22; “gathered grain” 3.12 & 13.30.)

Perhaps the most important is the statement John makes that the “kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the exact call Jesus will later take up (4:17) as he begins his earthly ministry. The tense of the verb come near can be understood to mean that the coming of the kingdom of heaven is something that has happened and is in full effect. It is not just something that came near in the past: it is near and continues to be near.

NOTE: “Kingdom of heaven” is a phrase Matthew uses often. He prefers this phrase over Mark and Luke’s phrase “kingdom of God,” primarily using heaven rather than God in identical passages. Some have indicated this as the result of Matthew’s Jewish tendency to not speak/write the name of the Lord, but there are times when he does use the phrase “kingdom of God.” While his Jewishness may be the reason for this, it seems better for us to assume that this was a stylistic preference on Matthew’s part. Either way, the meaning of the phrase does not change. It is a way to indicate the reign of God is now beginning or God is taking control.

For John and his hearers, this fact forced the need for a response. One cannot live in the reality of the presence of the kingdom of God and simply continue business as usual. John’s call was a call for repentance, which would mean a change of life for his listeners. The idea of “repentance,” at its root, is simply to change your way of life. Notice that Matthew does not mention that John is preaching a baptism “for the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 3.3). For Matthew the confession of sin is not an act that needs to be absolved so that people can go back to their righteous way of life, but an understanding that their entire way of life up to this point will now be changed. In a sense, we could say here repenting means living in a new reality, that of the kingdom of heaven.

There is a sense in which John’s message is not completely in harmony with where we live today. For many of us, we are followers of Jesus, including having made the decision to put him on in baptism. In that sense, we already are aware of the reality of the presence of the kingdom of heaven. However, we often live contrary to that way of life. This world we live in is temporary (true) and is full of sin (true) and so we are simply passing the time until we get to live in the “real” kingdom of heaven up in the clouds (not so fast). The call of Jesus in the book of Matthew is to live a life of righteousness because the kingdom is here. Jesus,

the one who will judge (3.12), has come and calls us to repent and live our lives to reflect our participation in the kingdom of heaven. We act in the right way now not so to hopefully make it into the kingdom at some point down the road, but because we are already a part of the kingdom. The kingdom is here!

Possible Lesson Outline:

As I have mentioned before, be sure to spend time letting everyone get to know one another in your group. This is especially important if your group has new individuals who are a part of it. The groundwork you lay here will pay off with great dividends throughout this year.

Also, be sure to spend some time identifying the purpose of your group. Every group is different and people attend group for their own specific reasons. If you do not spend some time ensuring that everyone is on the same page about what you want to do in the group, you open yourself up for the possibility of conflicts later. Specifically, I would be sure everyone is on the same page about the following areas:

- Leadership – Who will lead each week? If you want to lead every week, that is great, but your group will probably be healthier in the long run if you share leadership duties with others.
- Schedule – Are you going to eat together, and if so, for how long? How long will your group meet? What time will you start? How rigid will you be on time constraints? How much fellowship time will you have versus how much lesson time? Are you going to have a prayer time? Worship?
- Children – If you have children in your group, how will you handle the children during the lesson time? Will they be included? Will someone watch them in another room? Will they be allowed to just play in another room?
- Hosting – Will you meet in the same location every week? Will you rotate? How will you schedule a rotation?

You have heard it said: You never get a second chance to make a first impression. To begin your discussion time, ask your group to share about a time they made either a fantastic first impression, or a really lousy one. (My guess is that people who have been in dating relationships—that is, most of us—probably have a host of stories to tell here, including, perhaps, one with our spouse.)

Ask discussion questions.

Close with a time of prayer.

For the Kids:

Spend a few minutes having the children of the group tell you about John the Baptist. You might ask them to tell you what they know prior to reading the text. Then after reading John's description, have them share their reactions. What would they think if they saw John the Baptist today? Do they think they would have seen him as someone pointing to Jesus? Why or why not? What kind of person do they think they would have been looking for if they *were* trying to find Jesus?

Discussion Questions:

1. If you were going to start a religious movement, what would you want your initial press release/public relations to say? How does this compare to what you see John saying about Jesus? Obviously hindsight is 20/20, but in what ways is this the perfect start to Jesus' earthly ministry? In what ways did he do it all wrong?

2. John the Baptist is certainly dressed the part of a prophet and Matthew tells us that John indeed fulfills the prophecy of another prophet, Isaiah. Why do you think John the Baptist needed to arrive on the scene before Jesus?
3. What do you think of when you hear the word “repent?” How do you think someone who did not follow or even want to follow the Jewish religion would have received John’s call? How do you think someone who felt like they had their Jewish faith “all together” would have received this call?
4. How does knowing the kingdom of heaven is near change your reaction to being called to repentance? How does it affect how you want to live your life?
5. Why is living life like heaven is way down the road, some place we will be after we are long gone, dangerous for our faith? In what ways does it miss the point of how we should be living a life of faith today?
6. What is the biggest challenge you face in living your life like the kingdom of heaven is really right here, already present and going full force?
7. In what ways can you as a group work together this week to better live within the presence of the kingdom of heaven?

Prayer Ideas:

As you pray this week, be sure to include not only a prayer that we would live better as people living within the current kingdom of heaven, but also include a request that your time together as a group will be fruitful and people will follow Jesus better as a result.

What’s Next:

Next week’s section is Matthew 3.13-4.25. Within One Groups will be looking at 4.18-25.

Text:

Matthew 1.18-3.12

Summary:

Matthew continues to introduce us to Jesus, who he knows and we are learning is the Messiah.

Key Points:

Although we often see the genealogy of Jesus as the introduction of Matthew's gospel and then the texts that follow the "main" story, Matthew is actually setting the stage for Jesus' ministry throughout all of the first four chapters of his gospel.

Joseph considers divorcing Mary (Being pledged to marry someone carried with it the same legal status as being married. You could not just ask for the ring back and move on in Jesus' day.), but is told by God that this son is actually God's son and so follows through with this marriage. In this, Joseph is the legal father of Jesus, thereby fully establishing his connection in the Davidic line.

Magi or wise men from the east come and worship Jesus. This is to be contrasted with Herod, a Jew, and "all Jerusalem with him," who are troubled by this pronouncement of a new king. You would expect the Jews to be favorable toward Jesus, but in fact, it is foreigners from the east who worship him.

The prophets had already written that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene, but since Joseph was from Bethlehem, one might suspect Jesus was not actually the Messiah. The prophets had also indicated the Messiah would be called out of Egypt, which certainly did not fit Joseph. Matthew makes certain to include the geographical journey Joseph, Mary, and the newborn Jesus undertook, which only confirmed and fulfilled the prophet's words. At every turn, the objections to Jesus being considered the "real" Messiah are being removed.

Finally, John the Baptist comes proclaiming the need for repentance (changing your way of life) because the kingdom of heaven is near. In other words, God is now taking control, so your life needs to be lived like that.

Possible Reading Schedule:

The reading schedule can be adjusted to fit best your circumstances. You might find reading through the entire text a couple of times during the week better for you or perhaps reading a chapter a day twice works well. The following is a suggested schedule to read through the text for this week in seven days:

- Matthew 1.18-25
- Matthew 2.1-6
- Matthew 2.7-12
- Matthew 2.13-18
- Matthew 2.19-23
- Matthew 3.1-6

- Matthew 3.7-12

Discussion Questions:

NOTE: These questions will be geared toward discussions with your family during your studies. They are intended to help you to continue to think about the text throughout the week. Feel free to adapt them as you see fit for your specific family situation.

- Matthew doesn't really talk much about Joseph, aside from these couple of verses. What kind of man and father do you think Joseph was? What do we know about Joseph just from what Matthew has told us?
- How does knowing that God is with you help you be more confident to live a faithful life? In what ways does you experience the presence of God with you?
- Why do you think King Herod and all of Jerusalem were worried about Jesus, who was called the king of the Jews? Why do people believe that following Jesus means their life will be worse than it was before, that is, why do people feel like they will lose something if they follow Jesus? In what ways has trusting in Jesus made your life better?
- What do you think you would have done if you happened upon Mary and Jesus during the time they were in Bethlehem? How do you think your response would compare to the response of the Magi, who worshipped him?
- Matthew tells us about a couple of moves Jesus makes with his family, which both saves him from threats and also fulfills prophecies made about Jesus. Why is it good to know that this man Jesus was the man the prophets talked about when they wrote about a coming Messiah? Why do you think it was important for Matthew to point out all of the ways Jesus fulfilled what the prophets wrote?
- What do you think you would have thought if you saw John the Baptist on the side of the road today? Do any of these things make you think John was an important person in telling us about Jesus? What kind of person do you think you would look for today if you wanted to hear about Jesus coming?
- We often think about the kingdom of heaven being a place far away that we go to after we die. The idea of kingdom of heaven in Matthew is not about a far away place, but a place and event right now. It is about God being in charge of all of the world and through Jesus, his reign being a part of our lives. How is your life different knowing that God is in control of the world and because of Jesus we are living under God's control?

Things to Do:

NOTE: Each week within this section, there will be a list of activities that will help you and your family better process the story of that particular week. The activities will be focused on including the entire family, but can be done by individuals as well. The idea is that you pick and choose an activity that best fits your situation.

- Read and compare all of the stories about the birth of Jesus in the four gospels. What is similar about every one? What is unique or different in each one?

- We are told that Jesus is Immanuel: God with us. Talk about the ways you see God with you in your daily activities.
- Find all of the references Matthew makes to Old Testament prophets in the first three chapters of Matthew. Look these references up.
- If you do not know about him, research King Herod.
- Get a map of the time of Jesus and find all of the places Matthew talks about in the first three chapters of his gospel. Draw the journey that Jesus and his family took.
- Plan and participate in a family worship time that gives thanks to God for the gift of Jesus.
- Draw a picture of John the Baptist.
- Better yet, create a John the Baptist costume. Extra points for eating locusts!
- Think about things that happened to you during the previous week. How would a person react in that situation if they did not believe in the kingdom of heaven being near? How would people react if they *did* believe the kingdom of heaven is near? How did you react?
- Memorize the key verses for this week: Matthew 3.1-2.