

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 25, 2026

Text: Matthew 4:12-25

*“Heaven’s Bright Kingdom”*

Today we heard Jesus’ first sermon. It was short and sweet. He said, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* According to Matthew, it was exactly the same one preached by John the Baptist to those who came to hear him before Jesus came on the scene. Jesus was not plagiarizing though. He was presenting Himself to His hearers as fulfilment of the promise John proclaimed: “the kingdom (or the rule or reign) of heaven is at hand.”

At the Jordan, after John baptized Jesus, He received heaven’s approval from the Spirit descended upon Him and from the Father singing His praise. “You are my Son, my chosen, trusted co-ruler.” After hearing of John’s arrest by Herod, Jesus left Judea. He went north, back into the region where He had been raised, but not to Nazareth, his hometown. This was the former territory of the Israelite tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, now known as Galilee. He did not go there in retreat, to seek asylum away from the violence just suffered by John in Judea. Jesus went there in fulfilment of the promise of God.

Isaiah was one of God’s greatest prophets of the eighth century BC. He warned the kings and the people of Israel and Judah that God was offended by their unfaithfulness. Judgment was coming. It would be meted out on them by the cruel armies of foreign nations. Israel in the

north was conquered by Assyria in Isaiah's lifetime. The people that survived that war were mostly rounded up and marched off into exile, while other conquered peoples were resettled there. Though a remnant of Israelites remained in the land, they were soon absorbed into those brought there by the Assyrians.

But Isaiah also preached a surprising promise of God, one that gave hope of renewal for the people of the north land. *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined"* (Isaiah 9:2). His prophecy went on to promise the birth of a great king, who would rule over God's people forever (9:6). Yet as the years, decades, and centuries passed, that king was never born. The people exiled by the Assyrians were never heard from or seen again. God's promise, it seemed, was forgotten. Darkness still ruled.

Then Jesus returned to Galilee. He preached the kingdom of heaven. He went from town to town, preaching in their synagogues, and *"healing every disease and every affliction among the people."* Here it was: that promised light shining in the darkness of the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Here was the promised king!

No wonder crowds of people were so quickly drawn to Jesus. Of course, Peter, Andrew, James and John dropped their fishing nets, and came running when He called them. For so long they had dwelt in darkness; finally, a light shone on them!

But there was also something that seemed off about this. Jesus certainly had great power. He could heal the sick. He delivered people from demonic oppression. He even raised the dead. Yet He made no move to recruit an army or to seize a piece of a land and declare it His royal territory. The reign that He announced did not satisfy the expectations of all who had waited for a king.

That is why Jesus' preaching always included the call to repent. The kingdom of heaven was truly present in Jesus, even though He did not seem to be the sort of king for which people had been looking. Heaven's reign defies the wants and whims of fallen humanity. God knows and gives what His creatures truly need, not necessarily what they want. Jesus came not to build Himself a kingdom like all the others of this world. His authority to reign came from His Father in heaven, and His kingly work was the reconciliation of rebellious man to His God and the salvation of the fallen world.

So Jesus preached, "Repent," which is to say, "Put aside your pipe dreams of earthly power, peace and glory, and pay attention to me. Listen to me and learn what it means to be and to live as a child of my Heavenly Father. Bear in mind that the sin you have inherited has warped your minds and skewed your desires; you are stumbling aimlessly in the dark. Watch me to see what the Law really demands of you. You cannot fulfill its demands. You live under the shadow of God's just judgment for all your

selfish ways. You can never pay your debt or transform your nature. Look to me, for I am your Light.”

Jesus came as the King of heaven, the Son of God who took on human nature, so that He could deliver us from sin’s darkness. He brought the light of God’s royal giving, suffering, and dying love to shine life’s darkness. The cross upon which Jesus was nailed and hanged is His throne, where He exchanged His holy life for the life of the fallen world. Jesus surrendered to death for us, and God raised Him from the dead to make us to live with Him forever. Jesus is our Gracious King.

Forgiveness of sins is the precious currency of God’s kingdom. God, for the sake of Jesus, His dear Son, forgives us for all of our sins. He receives us as His children and makes us heirs of His kingdom through Baptism. He speaks His Word and fills us with His Spirit, by whose power we daily trust in God, put off our old sinful ways, and give ourselves in love to our neighbours. We forgive and love others as the Lord forgives and loves us. He gives us the holy body and blood of Jesus with bread and wine to renew us in faith and hope and keep our hearts set on the life of glory and peace promised to us when Jesus our King returns.

Jesus’ first sermon, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,” sets the pattern of light for our lives. Whether this world rocks and rumbles around us chaotically, or it smiles and seductively slips its arm around us, it is neither our home nor our true kingdom. We hear the voice of Jesus call

us to turn from its love of money, its lust for power, and its disregard for others to prize above all things God's gifts of forgiveness, His call to serve, and His promise of eternal life. Amen.