

January 24, 2021

Third Sunday after Epiphany

*"Do You Know the Time?"*

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 ~ 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 ~ Mark 1:14-20

The scriptures we heard today are all about telling the time. Every first-year student in seminary learns the difference between two Greek words for time. *Chronos* refers to clock time, as in "chronological" time. *Kairos* is about timing and timeliness ... about the meaning and possibilities of a given moment ... about the seasons of life and the spirit of the age. *Chronos* is momentary ... *Kairos* is momentous. *Chronos* is constant. *Kairos* is a perception which leads to immediate action. So, when I ask "Do you know the time?" I don't want you to look at your watch ... I want you to look into your heart.

It's an important question. It's the question God is asking us today through the passages of scripture we have heard. Do you know the time? Can you read the signs? Do you understand what moment you have come to in your life?

God sends Jonah to Nineveh ... the enemy of everything decent ... the capital of violent, imperial, abusive, oppressive power. He wants Jonah to say, "Ya'll have forty days to live." (Well OK, maybe God doesn't have a Southern accent, but you get the point.) Jonah was to deliver an ultimatum. As you know, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the land we now call Iraq. Their leaders were awful ... always invading the people around them ... torturing, killing, plundering, subjugating. Everybody hated them. Except God. This is an amazing story, and I don't mean the part about the great fish that swallowed Jonah whole and spat him out alive. It's amazing because God cares enough about the Ninevites to give them a chance to repent. It's more amazing that these Ninevites actually pay attention to the prophet and repent. But most amazing of all is this part, this tenth verse in the third chapter: "*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it*" (Jonah 3:10). God changed God's mind!?

What? Everything isn't predetermined ... set in stone ... running an inevitable course? We can change God's mind with our behavior? What do we do with that? Well, Jonah gets furious because he would rather see them obliterated than saved ... but God changes God's mind ... because what God wants most is for the Ninevites to be saved!

The Apostle Paul confronts the Christians at Corinth with the urgency of the moment and the behavior it requires. He tells them to change their ways ... to re-prioritize their behavior. You don't stop to do laundry when the house is on fire. You don't argue about who's been working harder when the tornado is bearing down on the farm. You don't pause to look at your watch

when the tanks are rolling over the hill. Because it usually sneaks up on us ... because it is almost always a sudden realization ... *Kairos* has an urgency, even an emergency to it. Paul says, "*The appointed Kairos has grown short. The present form of this world is passing away*" (1 Cor 7:29, 31). This calls for an entirely different course of action, a brand-new ethic ... quite apart from the ordinary dog-eat-dog style of *that* ... and *our* ... and *every* day. Paul says, being a follower of Christ means living in the *Kairos* of God's new creation ... right now ... because we see something happening ... we see someone coming ... we see someone at work that most of the world doesn't see.

In Mark, Jesus of Nazareth responds to the arrest of John the Baptist by going public with his message, which Mark calls "the good news of God." Jesus wanders the Galilee preaching, "*The Kairos is fulfilled, the dominion of God has come near.*" This *Kairos* calls for an immediate response ... "*Repent, and trust the good news*" (Mark 1:15). As you know, this old biblical word "repent" means "turn around; head in a new direction." It doesn't just mean "turn from your wicked ways." It means "stop wasting your time on things that don't matter." In the very next sentence, Jesus steps up to Simon and Andrew, who are busy fishing, and says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." No waste of words ... not a moment to lose ... just "Follow me." And *immediately* ... Mark says ... *immediately* ... they leave their nets and follow him. That's what *Kairos* requires ... an immediate response. Next Jesus goes to James and John, and Mark says he *immediately* (there's that word again) calls them to follow, and they do. Are any of us ready to respond to God *immediately* ... to change our whole life course *immediately* ... to follow Christ *immediately*? Why not? Why not?

"We're always too busy," a clergy colleague said to me once. And we were. But it's hard to know what to let go of ... how to step off the treadmill ... where to slow down. Everything we are doing is good (we're chronic "do-gooders"), but sometimes the good gets in the way of the best. Where do we find time to help each other? Where do we find time for reading and prayer and contemplation? Where do we find time to restore? And of course, we are not unique in this regard. Everybody I know is too busy.

We have the fanciest timekeepers in the history of the universe ... atomic clocks, day planners, smart watches, smart phones, calendars with inspirational slogans encouraging productivity. But we still haven't learned how to manage our time. The truth is, time manages us. To make things worse, we've disconnected ourselves from the rhythms of the sun or the days of the week. With electric lights and net-connected computers, we can work 24/7 ... with just a few breaks to collapse in fitful rest.

In *Receiving the Day*, Dorothy Bass says that all the fourth graders in the town where she lives are required to use datebooks ... not the little pamphlet calendars the greeting card companies hand out ... but the kind business executives use. They are being taught to manage their time.

But Bass wonders: "What are we communicating to them about the society in which they live? Are we preparing them to enter an economy that intends to squeeze every minute out of them, sooner or later?" I would say, yes, we are. We are socialized to be productive ... as if our usefulness to the system were the sole meaning of our existence. But the system is dehumanizing, skewed, out of kilter. We are trained to feel guilty for "wasting time," but who decides what time is wasted and what is not?

Even this time of worship may feel like "wasted time," and by the standards of our society these days it is. We aren't producing wealth or manufacturing product here, are we? But long ago at creation God built us to be 12/6 people, not 24/7 people. And God ordained a sabbath ... built into the way we are made and then commanded against our greed ... one day a week, time off, time out, time away from time, time to spend with God.

In *The Clock of the Long Now*, Stewart Brand notes with irony "It was the monks (of the medieval Catholic orders) who taught us to tell time." They ordered their days by prayer ... stopping whatever they were doing to mark time with moments in eternity. This continues in monasteries to this day. The first mechanical clocks were invented for the monasteries and only later used in the town square. The little clock strapped to your wrist is a direct descendant of the prayer practices of these monks. But when was the last time any of us said, "Oh, look, it's noon. I've got to stop and pray!"

I know, sometimes sermons can seem to last an eternity, but as Brand also notes, "Eternity is the opposite of a long time." The eternal moment is the timeless moment ... the moment that contains all time ... all at once. We are creatures of time. The clock always catches us to drag us along again. God alone is eternal ... and only by our connection to God do we participate in the eternal at all. So, the whole point of worship is to step into the eternal presence of God ... and at least for a little while ... to let go of time.

Here in worship, in this eternal moment, we jump off the treadmill of time in order to discern the *Kairos* of our lives. In the midst of our busy days, we do not stop ... we cannot stop to look, to see, to behold the larger context of our existence. But here, before God, we stop. And God shows us our lives ... if we are willing to listen ... if we are willing to see. Eternity measures our time, what is worthy, what is abiding, what is trivial, what is truly wasted. Some people aren't willing to stop, look, and listen. It's too scary. It might ask of them, require of them, make absolutely necessary some radical changes in how they're spending their time ... maybe even demand an entirely new direction. If they stop, they'll see the house *is* on fire, the tornado *is* bearing down, the tanks *are* rolling over the hill. I guess they figure if they don't stop to look, it won't happen, the catastrophe won't come.

But we are all mortal, and catastrophes do come to all of us in one form or the other. In the news from a doctor, in an accident nobody foresees, in a global pandemic ... in a severe economic downturn ... your moment will come, and so will mine. I don't mean to sound so morbid today ... but before the eternal God we see how brief our time is, and therefore how precious. This is not a pitch to say, you better get busy, you better not waste time, you better wring every drop of productivity you can out of every frantic second. Productivity matters, but ultimately, it doesn't matter most ... and there are times when productivity is a waste of time.

What does matter most? That's an important question, isn't it? I know it has something to do with our relationship to God. I know it has something to do with reflecting God's image, embodying God's love. But are we supposed to do something? Or are we supposed to be something? Or is it not at all about any one of us, but all of us together? Worship is where those questions rise, and we try to let God give us answers.

I can't answer for you precisely the question of what time it is in your life. I could say more about what's happening in the world ... what I think may be coming for all of us ... how things could well happen that would change life as we know it and shatter our false security instantaneously ... but you can see those things as well as I. I can't tell you what time it is in your life, but I think I can tell you God's answer to the question of what matters most. When Jesus went into Galilee preaching, "*The Kairos is fulfilled, the dominion of God has come near. Repent, and trust the good news,*" he immediately called people to "*follow me.*" And I think that's the answer ... follow him. Whatever the *Chronos*, whatever the *Kairos* of your life, follow Jesus. Consider the moment ... trust the good news ... and follow him. And he will lead you to life in God's eternal now. May we pray?

Creator God,

You give us minutes, hours, days and years. Thank you. And by your eternal presence, we can have the time of our lives. But in this eternal moment of worship, help us to understand we cannot change the past so there is no use in dwelling there, and we cannot guarantee the future so there's no use in dwelling there. We have only this moment we can change by our action, only this moment to reorient the past and reshape the future. God of time and eternity, in our own lives today - for Christ's sake - help us to know what time it is. Amen.