



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Time is Now”

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Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 Mark 1:14-20

January 31, 2021

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

There is a particular urgency to Mark’s gospel we hear in the choice of words used as well as the pacing of events. John the Baptist proclaims, “Get ready, prepare the way of the Lord,” baptizes Jesus who is then driven into the wilderness to be tempted and angels to wait upon him. And suddenly we are here. John has been arrested and Jesus begins his ministry and starts calling disciples.

So this talk of Jesus calling disciples had me thinking faith, or perhaps I should say, considering the variety of ways any one of us thinks of our relationship - or understanding of God in our life and how it can be a great comfort. A grounding source of prayer and support. Faith draws us not only to God but toward each other, makes us a community ...and in some ways because of this, a resource to each other.

But do we think of faith, our understanding of God in our life as something *pressing*? Does faith call us through a sense of urgency?

Both our readings this morning have a bit of urgency or immediacy about them. There is Jonah, who does *not* treat the task he has been given with any kind of urgency for himself. Quite the contrary. Marty mentioned this last week referring to a part of Jonah’s story that precedes today’s reading. Jonah has been thwarted in his attempts to at minimum delay or completely ignore what he is supposed to do. Procrastination to the nth degree? No, it is something more than that.

In our portion today we hear God say, “Get up and go” and finally he begins the urgent message he has been given, “Forty days more!” he finally shouts out to the people.

And from this particular prophet, we do not get a plan laid out for *how* these people can avoid the crisis, what steps they should take, we just hear a rather sudden response, “The people believed God” and changed. If we went further with Jonah’s story we would find that Jonah actually resents the fact that the people *he* didn’t think deserved it- actually “got it” and then lived it. So no, it is not Jonah but the people of Ninevah- the people who were culturally and contextually his enemies, who believed God and responded as if the time is now!

And then we hear in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' very short sermon beside the sea, "repent and believe" and that the good news has *already* begun, is already with them. Once again, as I mentioned a couple weeks ago, these soon to be disciples have not yet seen - nor are they waiting around looking for something to happen. They don't ask for proof, a miraculous answer to prayer, or for Jesus to have some important title that would give him power to get things done. They just step out and step in.

Now we could get caught up trying to imagine how they could just drop their nets and leave everything behind, their possessions, work life, family. Just like we might empathize a bit with that rich young man who walked away grieving when Jesus invited him to let go of possessions and status and then follow him.

An important piece to remember here is that Jesus came to them in the life they were *already* living. Is it possible Jesus knew who they were and what *they* needed when he invited *them* to "fish for people?" And let's remember, for instance - Jesus didn't approach Zacchaeus the tax collector - a known outcast - and ask him to come down out of the tree and fish for people- he invited *himself* over to Zacchaeus' home in order to let Zacchaeus know *he* was the one being welcomed into the Good News - that was already there with him.

And this begs a question for us...and the question is not whether God is already acting in our world, in our lives? The question is how will we respond? And what of our selves will we bring to it? What do we do about and with this Good News now?

Each of our lessons today have a crisis or urgency surrounding them.

And we have been living in a time of crisis and urgency. For sure *any of us* can say as Frodo did in The Fellowship of the Ring, "I wish it need not have happened in my time." And yet acknowledge like Gandalf, "So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for *them* to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given."

What do we, as people of faith, do with the Good News we have already been given?!

And yes, it is true... we have been God's church within and through these times. Finding ways to gather for worship and fellowship and prayer, finding ways to learn and study together. Finding ways to be connected....But not only of these things more internal to us. We together have tried to step out and in to immediate and pressing needs of outreach and care.

The Benevolence board for instance has sought to be aware of particular needs and offered grants to some budding nonprofit initiatives - above and beyond the "regular" giving from the church resources that are created through *all of you*.

Some of you have stepped in and run errands for people who cannot get out, made phone calls and written cards in an attempt to stay connected... Every week you hear about the refilled bin outside that you and the neighborhood around us keep filling. Just yesterday, I needed to take some things out of that box and put inside the front doors because it was overflowing, and the lid would not close.

And if there is any remaining *urgency* around these things that we *are* doing, it is for all of us to be open to listening and learning about who or what we may *not* be aware of. Is there something else or more God wants us to see?

But how do we make room to do that?

Are there things we might need to let go of, in order to be responsive now?

Again, in both our readings there is this sense of “the time is now” and it is *meant* for us to hear...now.

There is so much about our lives – especially lately, that carry a “we will just have to wait and see” that creates havoc or complications for our usual planning. And yes, we realize that there *are* some situations that are pretty much out of our direct control that bring about that “wait and see” response... In many cases it is hard to plan around doing “A” until “B” happens.

But not this, not faith – for *in it* the time is always now. There is nothing about commitment to life, to God, to each other, to hope, or to purpose that carries a “wait and see.” We don’t need to wait for God to be with us, nor do we need to wait for some miracle or miraculous event to happen first. We don’t need to have particular situations line up in order for us to believe the Good News. And we certainly cannot expect or need (or want?) our way of life to go back to the way it was 1 year, 10 years, 50 years ago.

Part of believing, trusting the Good News of God is to simply live it in the life we have now!

So, what does the “Good News” look like to you?

Is it when you see a revival of the spirit flowing through the life of the church- or the life of leaders and people around the world...or even in your city? Is it when you see peace and equity as a desired and acted on goal? Is it when you see tangible healing of people and the earth? Is it when you see *real* connection and community being lived out, even during these times? Is the Good News happening when we see freedom from constraints related to physical and mental health, finances, isolation, addictions, anger and division?

Are *any* of these things perfected now? No, but the time to live them is NOW. The world, your city, your neighborhood, your family is full of opportunity to respond as those who believe.

Remember our Advent series this past December? The theme was Waiting in, Hope, Love, Joy and Peace? While we hoped each of us in the whirlwind of preparations would take on some thoughtful stillness within, there was nothing passive about this. Because we already *know* the time is fulfilled as we put up decorations and wrapped presents, and as we took them down again.

We already know the time is fulfilled, the Gospel or Good News is alive as we watch the news or simply watch the snow falling outside...as we meet crisis and as we live our regular everyday things.

If we believe our text today is any kind of guide for us, then we can be assured by the example of these disciples who committed to God *before* they fully knew who he was and exactly where *their* path would lead them. They made a choice to believe that the time is now. We make that choice.

Joan Chittister, an author we have read in Tuesday Book Group, has a recent book titled, *The Time is Now* in which she wrote toward an urgency of response to God by “living out our faith

on the streets of the world rather than just talking about it. Faith, [she wrote] is invalid unless you are living it.”

As a small aside, I have to confess that this book is on my shelf in the pile of things to read someday. Yesterday as I was getting ready to leave for the day - I stood and turned and saw right at eye level the theme and Gospel words I chose for this sermon sitting in that pile and laughed at myself thinking of the many things I plan to get to when...I have time. Ah well, always room for improvement!

I do not mean to stand here and shout, repent! *Start* living your faith! As I mentioned earlier, I *see* a lived faith in you and in this church and in others... in so many ways, don't you? And yet- winter, isolation, fatigue, longing for and waiting for “x, y, z” to happen to help us feel good about the world - means we probably need reminders and encouragement that again, no matter how true all those things are, the time is now, the Good News is being fulfilled and continues to be. And best of all, this means we must take part in it.

I would like to close with these words that are not mine, but are on a sheet of Benedictions and Blessings I have saved. It is titled a Scottish Blessing:

Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us; so be quick to love, and make haste to be kind; And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you always.

The time is now, today, and the time is now in all the week ahead offers you.

Amen