

## JUST WHEN IS THE TIME RIGHT?

Epiphany 3-B

January 21, 2018

Mark 1:14-20

Today's readings are packed with a sense of urgency. The gospel of Mark, from which I just read, already has Jesus calling disciples, and their response comes in a word that will become *a habit* by the time we get to the end of the gospel: "Immediately, they [Simon and Andrew] left their nets and followed him." Then Jesus sees James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and "immediately he called them." The urgency in Mark's gospel is because the time is fulfilled; not meaning that it's 4:00 in the afternoon, but rather that the time is right. In Greek, the time of day is *chronos*—*the chronological time, the hour of the day*. The right time, the opportune moment is *kairos*—what we like to call God's time, signaling the fullness, completeness, or urgency of the moment.

The God moments in time are the opportunities that we don't want to, or dare not overlook. The Apostle Paul writes to the people of Corinth letting them know that God's plan is unfolding right now—the kingdoms of this world are coming to an end. It's time to pay attention to what God has to say. It's time to prepare for what God has planned. Paul insists on the urgency: don't get married, don't build up distractions in your life that might keep you from missing the message.

I want to say that Paul's language is perhaps figurative, and I want to hope that the Zebedee brothers did not leave their dad in the boat as abruptly as the evangelist makes it sound; but my wishful thinking dilutes the message. That message has a lot to do with where we focus our energy, and to what things we give real value. In our weakness, we cling to our things, and the world around us that we believe we've created—with such intensity, such desperation, that we fail to see the God who is intent on getting our attention.

In our Old Testament reading, God sent Jonah to proclaim to Nineveh that they needed to reorient their hearts and minds. This time the urgency came with a specific deadline: "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." But Jonah had a hard time breaking away from his worldview, and with good reason. He had no use for the people of Nineveh because they were the conquering Assyrians who had brought down the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. These people were hardly considered "friends" or even potential friends. How could God possibly think of showing mercy to them? It would have been like sending American missionaries to Tokyo a week after Pearl Harbor. Small wonder Jonah tried to run away, and it took a storm at sea, a big fish, and God calling on Jonah "a second time." Even then, Jonah took on the task grumbling all the way and [spoiler alert], Jonah was none-too-pleased when the Ninevites heeded the warning, gave themselves over to God, and asked God to spare them.

The common thread in each of our readings today is that there comes a time when we realize we need to turn our lives around, to change focus, to respond to God's call to us. Jonah was tasked with reluctantly trying to convert his enemies; Paul knew that the Corinthian people had to give up their love of wealth, their allegiance to "other gods," and their general lack of concern for "the other." Jesus needed helpers to recruit other helpers, because God works in relationship. Think of the message of Martin Luther King that we judge (accept) others by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. Think of Gandhi or Mother Teresa, or Pope Francis or whomever you believe to be the most welcoming and accepting. And know that being a follower of Jesus means reaching out in places where we might never think to go; because the grace of God happens for people and in places we'd never expect to see it occur. You and I have

been called to go into those places and to minister to those “others” whom God also called “good.”

Last weekend, people in Hawaii received a false alert indicating that a missile was headed their way. In the time span leading up to the rescinding of the alert, panicked Hawaiians tried to make connections with the people they loved the most, believing that the end was near, and the time to make things right was *now*.

Then you understand the urgency. “There’s no time like the present.” Or: “Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who journey with us; so be swift to love, and make haste to be kind.”\*

When it comes to doing the work of God in the world, and sharing the Good News of Jesus, the time is right, the people are equipped, and the message is what this world urgently needs to hear. Amen.

\* Attributed to Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821-1881)