

Good Timing

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea- for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James some of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

There has been a lot of news to pay attention to in this last week- a Republican primary in South Carolina now moved to Florida, continued unrest in Syria, a capsized cruise ship off the coast of Italy. And alongside of this is news within our own denomination, which I imagine many have heard very little about with the exception of clergy, some lay leaders, and those beloved denominational nerds among us. (You know who you are.)

This past week, the Fellowship of Presbyterians, a group of about 2,000 clergy and lay folks met in Orlando, Florida. At this meeting they began to establish guidelines for entry into a new reformed body called the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. At the end of February, the Next Church, a distinct group of about the same number of clergy and lay folks will meet in Dallas, Texas. They will meet to discuss how to renew the PCUSA- the denominational configuration to which we belong.

The question at hand at these gatherings is this- What is the future of the Presbyterian church?

These aren't the only ones talking, but they are the focused ones. Both are taking on the worries of declining memberships and closing churches, while offering hope for faithful renewal and growth. Both are doing so with very similar talking points- better evangelism to young

adults, more intentional connections, more focused mission- but with very different plans.

What is unclear is what will come of it all; who will be willing to change; and where we are being called. What is clear is that it's about time that we had these conversations. I imagine that these questions of future are not new to you. To borrow an image from our text this morning, our denomination and our churches for the most part, have been spending a lot of time tending to our own nets- in internal conflict, worry over declining rolls, and nursing aging congregations and aged buildings. Not that these things are unimportant, but it seems as though it is time to step out of our familiar boats and acknowledge also that God is speaking something new among us.

Turns out that this is a similar challenge set for Simon and Andrew, James and John that day by the Sea of Galilee that Jesus came proclaiming. So, what an auspicious time to find ourselves early in Jesus ministry as he puts out the call for disciples.

You know, the Gospel of Mark is known for it's timing- quick bursts followed by long periods glossed over for the sake of a story.

Already in just 14 verses we have been introduced to John via the prophecy of Isaiah, introduced to the divinity of Jesus via the muddy waters of the Jordan, and introduced to the humanity of Jesus via the wilderness temptor.

But yet, just when we're afraid we may miss something if we look away- Mark's pace slows just a bit. It's like that scene from *Ferris Buellers Day Off* when Principal Rooney races to catch Ferris skipping school, running through the halls but careful to stop to walk as he passes each classroom.

We begin after John was arrested. Jesus picks up where John left off, adding his own little spin by preaching repentance *and* calling all to believe in the good news.

Now, Maggie's cousins are well versed about the Good News. In Children's Church they learn this back and forth exchange- "What did I just read?" the priest asks. "The Gospel," they say. What does Gospel mean? Good News. What is the Good News? God loves us. How much

does God love us? This much! How do we know God loves us? God sent Jesus.

So here Jesus is, proclaiming the Good News that God loves us right alongside the message that the time is fulfilled- God's kingdom has come near- repent and believe in this Good News.

What does it mean that the time is fulfilled?

It means God's time-

kairos time-

holy time-

time different than all others-

time not counted by a calendar or watch.

Jesus is saying- God's time is fulfilled- the kingdom has begun. Imagine!
Every battle ceased.

Every stomach filled.

Every disease healed.

Every anxiety eased.

Every relationship mended.

Every grave empty.

Every tear wiped away.

All creation in joyful worship.

Maybe a last BCS championship for LSU?

(Hey, it doesn't hurt to hope, right?)

Clearly that's not what we know right now. We mourn, we worry, we plead, we hunger for this time to come- in our individuals lives as in our institutions. Clearly that's not what James and John, Simon and Andrew knew. But Jesus comes onto the scene saying something new. Look! The kingdom has come, and I am inviting you to be a part of it's unveiling.

What joy to hear those words from Jesus! I wonder if the fishermen recall in these moments those stories they grew up hearing about Jonah and the repentant Ninevites. Imagine the new lease on life the Ninevites had in those moments once they realized the capacity of God love. And the early disciples have it one better: for the very embodiment of Good News stands before them.

God's action is the first action, and then comes the call. God's grace is the first word, and then we act. One pastor puts it this way, "The reign of

God is not the product of discipleship, but the precondition of it.” So, Jesus says, the time is fulfilled- come on, we’ve got work to do.

You know, Jesus was known for his timing- saying just the right thing at the right time to get people to take notice. No wonder they set aside their nets and take the first leap off that boat and into a new future. Jesus is offering a new identity—from fisherman to disciple.

“For they were fishermen”, we’re told. As if that should be the beginning and the end. Jesus comes and says something different. In the kingdom in which we are already living, you are no longer just fishermen but also disciples.

“For we are church people,” we say. As if that should be the beginning and the end. Jesus has come to say something different. In the kingdom in which we are still living, you are no longer just church people but also disciples.

It turns out that the church is very good at being church to those who know church. It’s what we know. But how are we at being church to those who don’t already know it, who aren’t church people, who fear or write-off or just plain ignore the church and it’s people, who see the very same troubles in our world that we do, but aren’t convinced the church has anything to offer there. There are more and more who fit in those categories these days.

There’s a small and established church I know, set in the midst of a big city. For years it dwindled and worried, dwindled and worried. For years it just maintained- set to tending it’s own nets of an old building in need of repairs and a faithful but weary congregation. But recently it is almost as if Jesus wandered by like he did that day at the Sea of Galilee. Today they are still small but growing- in particular their pews are being filled by those who I named above, because they found a welcome place to ask questions, to experience God in worship and in mission, to express their faith in unique ways that teach even the most stayed church people. What if that happened in more churches? What if that happened at a denominational level?

Jesus comes walking along the sea and stops to offer a new thing to those there. Not just a new task- not just another net to mend- no a

completely new identity. That of disciple. That of redeemed one. That of one living in and towards God's time fulfilled.

Repentance is part of this call not to be missed. Maybe the part that Zebedee and the other workers in the boat weren't quite yet ready for. Or maybe the tasks of life before them were all too consuming- we know the feeling. Sometimes it's hard even to have time to listen, much less to drop everything and follow. But I am convinced Jesus went back. Remember, God did not give up on those Ninevites.

Here *repentance*, that word that we have over time cast as dirty and worrisome and feared, is... well... something else. Enveloped by God's action of grace, repentance becomes a coming home, a turning back to God who has been waiting all along.

Like those fishermen, the church needs anything but a new task. We have enough of those. Enough so that we are tired, worn down, lacking the energy to imagine something different.

No, we don't need any new tasks, instead the church is in need of a renewed identity. What does that look like? This is the conversation that is happening all around us. It's the conversation about being evangelists; about being inviting; about being missional, and intentional, and faithful. It's about being disciples ready to enter the fray of healing, of casting out demons, of turning over tables, and offering our lives for the sake of the world that God so deeply loves.

James and John, Simon and Andrew, Levi- who will come along soon- and the others who make up the twelve; they grasp onto their new identity and hold on for dear life. For no sooner does Jesus reel them in with his proclamations of Good News and a time fulfilled- that they are sent right out to do the same. This is the call of a disciple- to proclaim the Good News and to live as though the kingdom were already at hand.

You know, God is known for her timing- just when you think you can sit back, it's time to pick up and see where God is headed next.

For we live in the time fulfilled- just as those disciples. How will we as a church show that we believe that the kingdom of God is at hand? Will we allow ourselves to be renewed in our identity as disciples or will we keep

our heads down and persist with our tired and wearisome tasks? This is not just a conversation to be had by clergy and elders and those beloved denominational nerds- no, this is a conversation that we are all invited into. It is as important at the local level right here on 900 Jordan as it is on the national front. How do we continue to be faithful? What energizes us to follow? What scares us into staying in the boat?

I *did not* attend the Fellowship conference this past week. I *will* attend the Next Conference in a few weeks- I believe that there is hope for rebirth within our own denomination and I believe we are headed that way. I don't know what to expect from the conversation. What I hope for is a gathering of those ready not for just another new task, but for a renewed identity that joys in God's outrageous, outgoing, out of bounds love. What I hope for is a church that is ready to lay aside our well-mended nets and to try something new with the urgency of those disciples Jesus met on the Sea of Galilee. What I hope for is the imagination to see the kingdom blossoming around us, and to follow the One who will ultimately bring it to its fulfillment.

What are your hopes for your church in the future?