

Three Words and a Call

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Mark 1:14-20



“The time is fulfilled.”

This is the first word Jesus speaks in Mark, a word about time. Not time as we measure it on the hands of a clock or the glow of a phone screen, but God’s time, what some philosophers and theologians call “deep time,” what was referred to in the Greek language in this text as “Kairos,” fulfilled time.

The clock time we know so well – the seconds and minutes and hours and days and weeks and years – is called in the Greek, “chronos,” and is where we get the word chronology. It is keeping time, calendar time; it is time that is, frankly, slipping away.

This past year, Kim and Chandler and I were wrestling the live Christmas tree into the stand when I had this strange feeling. I felt like we had just done this, like yesterday, or at least really recently. Had it been a year?

The other day, someone asked me when a specific ministry here started. I said I wasn’t sure, but I thought two or three years ago. Then I went into my files and discovered it started ten years ago. I looked at the year in astonishment. How is that possible, to turn ten years into two or three in my mind?

Those of you on Facebook know that often the first thing you will see on your feed is a “memory,” a photo from the past they are inviting you to post again. Have you ever had the experience of looking at the photo and the date and thinking, “How can that have been that long ago?”

I confided these experiences to a friend in Austin a couple of weeks ago, and his response was, “You know how everyone always said time moves faster as you get older. They were right.” I said in response, “That may be true for you but I’m not that old.” He reminded me I was older than him, and I was the one who came to him wrestling with the passage of time. And that I was a grandfather. He’s no longer my friend.

Chronos time, clock time, is the kind of time that is hard to manage. Because we are aware of its passage, we tend to either pine for the past, or re-live the disappointments of the past; and we tend to worry about the future, if we have enough or have planned enough or are sufficiently secure against whatever the future may bring. As a result, it is a rare thing to live, really *live*, in the present moment.

“After John was arrested...” That’s how Mark notes the time, the chronos time, of Jesus’ ministry. *After* John was arrested. John the Baptist was yet another Jewish prophet who came preaching about a great future day, and he has met the same fate as the prophets before him. The Jews under the fist of the Roman Empire were caught in chronos time. They looked to a glorious past when they were not occupied and they looked forward to a day in the future when God’s Messiah would come and free them from Roman oppression. John was the one many of them were flocking to in the desert, placing their hopes in his movement. Now, he was yet another figure in the past, another disappointment, another reminder that the kingdom of Rome was far more powerful than the glorious Israelite kingdoms of the past or the hoped-for kingdom in the future.

So, Mark notes the clock, the chronos clock – “*After* John was arrested...”

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.”

Here, in backwater Galilee, not in the corridors of power in Jerusalem or Rome, but in the place where people live, literally, hand to mouth. Not among the elite or sophisticated, but among the working poor. Here, not in the frenzy of the city, but in a land where time slows down, Jesus speaks of a fulfilled time, a Kairos time, breaking into the chronos of the world.

Here is where the word first breaks forth, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom is near.

And then, a second word: “Repent.” You know that this word means so much more than feeling sorry for your sins. It is not a word that calls us to reflect on the past in guilt or to fret about a future salvation in heaven, but is a present-moment, Kairos time kind of word – turn from the direction in which you are walking and walk another way. “Repent” is an ongoing way of being in the world when the kingdom draws near.

I read someone recently who said, “When we pray, ‘Thy kingdom come,’ we are also praying, ‘My kingdom go.’” When the kingdom comes near in the person of Jesus, we can no longer believe in our little kingdoms. We are turned toward the good news, the gospel, that is embodied in Jesus, and invited to place our trust, our ultimate allegiance, there.

And so they do, first Simon and Andrew, then James and John. They are confronted with Kairos time in Jesus, and in doing so, their time is changed such that they leave their nets, leave their former lives, and walk in a different way, the way of Jesus. They turn from the direction of their own little kingdoms, their boats and their nets and even their families, and they place these things in the perspective of the One they now follow, in whom the kingdom draws near.

We know from the rest of the story Mark tells that these and the other disciples Jesus calls have no idea what they are getting into. They do not understand the man who is calling them. The journey they will take will confuse and perplex them, and it is to a place they do not know. Nevertheless, in faith, they follow.

I think they followed because they sensed the kingdom in him, in Jesus. They trusted that the rule, power, and kingdom of God was at work in him.

But, for them, and for us, the kingdom is not self-evident. For them, chronos time was marching on. For them, John was arrested.

And for us? Some of us entering this sanctuary are all too aware of chronos. Loved ones close to death, chronic illnesses of the mind and body that dog our days, fractured relationships affecting those we love; not to mention a government that cannot function because of intractable differences, a world that still includes places so hellish that putting your family in a boat to cross a treacherous sea to an unknown place is preferable to home, a daily drumbeat of cynicism and hopelessness near and far.

We, the church of Jesus Christ, exist in this chronos. We cannot escape it, nor should we want to. Christ calls us into it. But we enter it not as people captured by chronos, but as a people who have detected another time at work within chronos – God’s time, Kairos time.

And so we sit with those who are dying claiming the promises of life, we lift the sick into God’s light and act as God’s agents of healing, we participate in acts of reconciliation in the most fractured of circumstances, we refuse to allow cynicism and hopelessness to define our posture in the world, we counter hate with love, violence with peace, we go into places like Lesbos under no illusions that we are going to fix it, but in faith that God is at work there and summoning us to join in that work. We pray, constantly, “Thy kingdom come, *my* kingdom go.”

I’ve been thinking a lot about time lately, how it passes so quickly, its fragility, its preciousness. But I find that in those moments when I can be present, there’s another time

that is as near as my next breath – it abides, it is full of life, it is eternal. A voice calls from within it to follow. And when I do, when we do, our time – all of it – is redeemed and given meaning and hope. May we as a people, may we as a church, embrace the time, repent, trust in the good news, and follow in faith. Amen.