I don’t know if Viktor Frankl heard at his high school commencement what many of us do – that we are in charge of our destiny, that we can (with sufficient hard work) be anything we set our minds to be. I don’t know if he heard some variation of “follow your passion,” “trust your feelings,” “reflect and find your purpose in life.” I don’t know if he heard read from the lectern the poem “Invictus,” with its memorable line, “I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul.” I don’t know if he heard, as I did at my commencement, the lines quoted from Thoreau: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

If he had heard those sentiments, they likely all went out the window when he and his family were rounded up in 1942 in Vienna by the Nazis and taken first to a ghetto and then a series of concentration camps. If he had some inkling that he was the master of his fate, it was washed away by the deaths of his wife, his mother, and his brother in the camps.

Somewhere along the way, as David Brooks observes, “it became clear to [Frankl] that what sort of person he would wind up being depended upon what sort of inner decision he would make in response to his circumstances.”

In his book, Man’s Search for Meaning, Viktor Frankl wrote, “It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly.”

The central insight of his classic book is that we cannot ever really control what happens to us, but we can always control how we respond to what happens to us. Put another way, as Brooks does in his book, in past eras people didn’t ask, “What do I want from life?” Instead, they asked, “What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?”
I wanted to explore the story of Jesus’ baptism, temptation, proclamation, and calling of the disciples as it is quickly narrated in Mark because here more than in any other gospel, one gets the sense that Jesus is not just a person, but an event. Jesus is a moment in history; Jesus is, as Karl Barth said, the crisis of history. Barth was thinking of “crisis” in its more formal sense as a clear moment that calls for a decision, an opportunity.

Listen to the words Mark uses. When Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are “torn apart.” The Greek word used here is schizo (the root word of schizophrenic), the same one used at Jesus’ crucifixion, when it is said the curtain of the Temple was torn in two “from top to bottom.”

It is here, with the heavens torn apart and God’s Spirit sitting on Jesus like a dove, that Jesus is given his identity. No one else hears the voice in Mark except Jesus: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

No sooner has this identity been given, no sooner has the Spirit alighted on Jesus like a dove, then this same Spirit seems to grow talons and “drives” Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit doesn’t nudge him, the Spirit doesn’t lead him, the Spirit doesn’t gently persuade him softly and tenderly; no, the Spirit “drives” him. The Spirit drives him to a place he doesn’t choose for himself, a place of temptation and testing, a place where his identity as beloved Son of God will be called into question for forty days. All Mark will say is that Satan was there, and wild beasts, and angels waiting on him.

We make a point around here of reminding our children and youth, and ourselves, that we are beloved children of God, that through the waters of baptism God claims us as God’s own. This is the summoned self we possess as followers of Christ. It is important to remind one another that beneath every label, every box, every category that others will put us in or we will put ourselves in, that beneath every one of those is this deeper identity. We are not white or black or brown people at our core; we are children of God. We are not Democrats or Republicans, conservative or liberal, in our essence; we are children of God. We are not, dare I say it this close to Independence Day, primarily Americans; we are children of God. We are not ever to be defined at root by our diseases or our differing abilities, by our failures or by our successes, by our careers or our quirks; we are, beneath all these things, children of God.

It is important that we remind ourselves of this crucial and indivisible identity, because all the things I mentioned above and many more, will happen. Life will happen. The wilderness will happen. We will be driven to a place we would rather not go. And Satan, understood as that which opposes God and God’s kingdom, will be there. And
wild beasts of one sort or another will be there. And God will be there. Frankl was right—
we can, by God’s grace, control how we will respond in that place. We can, by God’s
grace, see God’s presence in the wilderness, forming us ever deeper into God’s beloved
children.

And now Jesus speaks for the first time, summing up the gospel: “The time is
fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”
What Jesus has experienced, the nearness of the kingdom of God in his baptism and in
the wilderness, he now proclaims. Repent simply means to stop going in the direction you
are going and turn around. Jesus calls everyone to trust the good news that God is near,
that the kingdom is as close as our breathing.

This is the event. God has come near. It is the crisis of history in the best sense of
that word. God’s reign is within breathing distance—believe the good news of that!

The kingdom has come near. We do not have to live chained to our past. We do not
have to live in guilt or shame. We do not have to live bound to our sins or our
brokenness. To use an old Greek word for time—now is the Kairos moment. This word
for time was different from the other Greek word for time, Chronos, which is time you
tell by the sun, or by a watch now. Kairos time is time pregnant with the possibilities of
God, God’s time, set in the world’s time.

Frances Perkins’s Kairos moment came, according to David Brooks, after the
Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City, which took the lives of scores of people,
mostly poor workers, and called attention to the lack of safety standards. Not unlike the
recent fire in Great Britain, it raised serious moral questions. “After the fire, what began
as a career turned into a vocation. Moral indignation set her on a different course. Her
own desires and ego became less central and the cause itself became more central to the
structure of her life.”

Brooks uses the story of Perkins’s Kairos moment to call us to remember a
different way of looking at life—“We don’t create our lives. We are summoned by life.
The world existed long before you and will last long after you, and in the brief span of
your life you have been thrown by fate, by history, by chance, by evolution, or by God
into a specific place with specific problems and needs. What does this environment need
in order to be made whole? What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around,
waiting to be performed?”

Standing as we are in the church of Jesus Christ, I think it is fairly safe to assume
that we have been called not by fate or evolution or history, but by God in Christ into this
moment. And I believe Frederick Buechner is right when he says, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

It becomes clear that Jesus is the Kairos moment as he calls his disciples. They leave everything immediately, career and family, to respond.

And he stands among us today, in the Spirit, as he did by the lakeshore, calling. We live in a particular time and place. A quick look at the news on any given day paints in clear detail the world in which the beloved children of God live, the world to which the kingdom has come near. Where is that Kairos moment for you, the place where you can join in God’s kingdom work to make the world whole? Where is that moment for the church, this community, to make its good news voice heard in a world captured by so much cynicism and mistrust?

I think of Father Charles Strobel, the founder of Room in the Inn, a homeless ministry in which our congregation has participating in going on 14 years. That ministry really had its beginnings when he was a priest in East Nashville and began allowing homeless people to come into the church facility at night in the cold months. In 1986 Room in the Inn was officially started with four congregations. A week after it was started, Strobel’s mother, Mary Catherine, was abducted by an escaped mental patient, driven around for hours, and murdered.

It was that moment of crisis, driven into the wilderness, a moment when, as Viktor Frankl would say, Strobel could not control what had happened, but only his response to what happened. His response was to leave the priesthood and devote himself full-time to homeless ministry through Room in the Inn. He left a career and found a vocation.

Brooks says it – “Your ability to discern your vocation depends on the condition of your eyes and ears.” May our prayer ever be, “God, grant us the grace to see and hear you at work in the world, and the courage to follow.” Amen.