

“The Time Is Now”

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Based upon Mark 1:14-20; John 1:14-18

This week, while the eyes of the world were focused on the Inauguration with either delight and relief, or disappointment and frustration, the Lectionary invited us to consider a different inauguration. Call it coincidence or the work of the Spirit, but the text we just heard from *Mark* this morning includes his accounting of the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, was baptized by John the Baptist, and then driven out into the wilderness for a time to do some soul searching. In today’s text, he is finally back, and ready to deliver the first of what would be many speeches to kick off and describe his ministry. But Jesus’ speech was much shorter than those we heard this week: just a single sentence. In three phrases and with four verbs, he says what he needs to say, and then hits the road.

When I was learning how to preach in seminary, my teacher said that all good sermons should be able to be summarized in one focused sentence. Everything else is just unpacking or illustrating that sentence. Mark would have liked my professor because he also was very economical in his use of words, writing a gospel much shorter than the others. He made Jesus concise too. But that means that every word Mark used matters, and frequently has multiple meanings. Jesus’ inauguration speech is no exception.

“The time is fulfilled,” Jesus said, “and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.” In his commentary on *Mark*, Lamar Williamson Jr. has noted that that first phrase, “the time is fulfilled,” alone can be understood in at least three different ways.¹ The first way is in terms of God’s cosmic plan. In the grand scheme of things that only God understands, God decided during what we now call the First Century of the Common Era, that the time was ripe for the Kingdom of God, or the reign of God to begin in a whole new way through Christ. The second way “the time was fulfilled,” has to do with John the Baptist’s ministry. When Jesus was baptized, John was the big news in the land. His ministry, which called people to repent and change their bad ways before Judgment day arrived, was a compelling and transforming one. But it wasn’t a long one. By the time that Jesus came back from his weeks in the wilderness John had been arrested. Actually, in a chilling bit of foreshadowing, Mark says John’s ministry ended when he was “handed over,” a verb he would use again to describe how Judas ended Jesus’ ministry. But the point is, that Jesus’ ministry did not overlap John’s. They were never competitors. John set the stage, and when he was removed from it, Jesus stepped up.

The third way the “time is fulfilled” has to do with how we respond to the text. I want to save that for a minute to consider the rest of the text, so we know to what we are called to respond. Initially it sounds as though Jesus intended to pick up where John left off, calling again for repentance now that the time was right. But there is a critical difference between Jesus’ message and John’s. John was calling for people to confess their sins, to recognize their

¹ Williamson, Jr., Lamar, *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 41.

brokenness out of fear of punishment. In the context of John's ministry, therefore, the word repent, "*metanoia*" in the Greek, means to change the direction of your life. But Jesus' first sermon doesn't say anything about sin or judgment. Accordingly, when he says "repent," it is more likely that he was using the term in the more literal sense of "turn around." "Turn around and believe the *good* news," Jesus says. The good news in this case is not that Jesus is the Son of God, or that when we die we can go to heaven. It is that the kingdom of God was nearby or at hand. Thus, in effect, Jesus is saying, "Turn and look around you. See and believe the good news that God's kingdom is accessible now. You can dwell there now." When he says this, the tense he uses is one which describes something that happened in the past, but which is still happening now. This suggests that Jesus' invitation to step into the kingdom, and to live under the reign of God extends to us as much as to his first disciples.

It is good news that the kingdom is near, but that doesn't mean it's easy to believe it. Unfortunately, for many, even if they turn in circles, it can be just as hard to see it and believe it as it can be to hear God, the subject of last week's sermon. If God's kingdom is at hand, shouldn't we be able to see more love and grace and justice and mercy, and less violence, hatred, and suffering in the world? If it's nearby, shouldn't we at least be able to see something wonderful shimmering in the distance?

The challenge everyone faces to do as Jesus commanded, to believe the good news of the kingdom, makes me think about a children's book Julie Andrews wrote called, *The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles*, about a wonderful magical land.² In the book, an old and slightly odd professor tries to explain to three children about the reality of Whangdoodleland and how to get there, but they don't believe that it exists. So, first he has them look all around them intently, noticing colors and thinking about what everything would look like from different perspectives. The kids grasp that they are supposed to notice little details around them and use their imaginations, but still can't allow themselves to see and believe. So, the professor tells them to put on special hats, he calls "scrappy caps," or "sympathetic hats," which are designed to magnify their desire to see Whangdoodleland and minimize their self-conscious skepticism. Soon the children are able to see the image which is on your bulletin cover today, of a wonderful land that one can step into readily if one has the eyes to see it.

If only Jesus had handed out scrappy caps with his speech, then maybe more would know what he was talking about and could see it! Alas, he didn't, so many of us our left struggling to believe in something that seems more like a pipe dream than a current unfolding reality. But that doesn't mean we should give up. The Bible is filled with other suggestions for how to get in. For example, the author of *Colossians*, who liked clothing metaphors too, spoke about the importance not just of putting things on that help us to focus, like love, compassion, mercy, and patience, but also taking things off that don't belong in the kingdom, like anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language. (Col. 3:1-17). His words make me think of a song called "*Someone Else's Clothes*," by the great Broadway songwriter Jason Robert Brown. The song tells the story of a young man who changes his look and life after falling in love. He adopts new practices and lets a lot of old bad stuff go. The chorus goes in part, "You got jaded jeans? (Take

² Andrews, Julie, *The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles* (New York: Harper, 1974).

‘em off!) You got foul flannel? (Take it off!) You got burned-out boxers? (Take ‘em off) and put on the boots of joy!”³

This is effectively what the disciples did in the call story which follows Jesus’ inauguration speech. Jesus came walking by and said, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people,” and immediately, which is Mark’s favorite word, the disciples dropped the nets that had defined their old identities and stepped into this new one Jesus offered them: the identity of disciples who live under the reign of God. I have always had a hard time with the immediacy of their response. One minute they are fishing, working for James and John’s father, the next minute they are leaving it all without a second glance. Who does that? What about poor Mr. Zebedee left with empty boats and no sons? What about Peter’s family? We know he had a mother-in-law. That implies maybe a wife too, and possibly kids. The disciples didn’t even pack first, or swing by the bank, or anything. What was it about Jesus that made them drop everything like that? The movies, which typically depict creepy Jesuses, like the one Max Von Sydow played, don’t help. If Jesus had been like that my first reaction would have been “immediately” to turn my boat around and high tail it to the opposite side of the lake.

But then, years ago now, I saw Brad Sherrill’s production of *The Gospel of John*. Brad played Jesus with so much love and charisma that I finally got it. “Oh, that’s why they left,” I thought watching the show, “they fell in love with him.” I don’t mean this in a romantic way. I mean that Jesus’ love and goodness were so compelling, made him so charismatic, that it was just like the Jason Robert Brown song, the disciples would do anything for that love, including taking off their old identities. As the reading from the *Gospel of John* says today, “Jesus was full of grace and truth.” Grace in the Greek is *charis*, so Jesus was literally filled with charisma, grace upon grace. He was the embodiment of the grace, truth, and love of the kingdom, so the disciples didn’t need scrappy caps to see. All they needed to do was leave their old ways behind to follow Jesus.

This is what we need to do too in order to step into the kingdom. Part of the good news Jesus proclaimed is that we don’t have to believe first in order for the kingdom to arrive. The sequence goes in the opposite order. First the kingdom comes near, then we’re supposed to believe. So, half the work is already done. The rest comes when we allow ourselves to be drawn into the kingdom by our love of Jesus, and in the process, leave behind the practices and qualities that would hold us back. Incidentally, this is the third meaning of “the time being fulfilled” that Williamson sees: “Time for a decision on our part.”⁴ If the kingdom is at hand or at least nearby, then we have to decide where we want to live, for as Madeleine L’Engle wisely put it, “Everything that we do either draws the kingdom of love closer, or pushes it further off.”⁵

When Jesus preached “Repent and believe,” he used present tense imperatives, which means that we need to keep on doing these things in the present over and over again. A single decision doesn’t cut it. In our day the world is such a mess that we may need to decide minute by

³ See <https://genius.com/Jason-robert-brown-someone-elses-clothes-lyrics>.

⁴ *Ibid*, Interpretation.

⁵ L’Engle, Madeleine, with Carol Chase, *Glimpses of Grace: Daily Thoughts and Reflections* (New York: Crosswicks Ltd., 1996), 13.

minute because the kingdom comes in glimpses, not a fully realized reality. But it's there if we have eyes to see, when we see through the love of Christ. Steve Covey, the author of Seven Habits of Highly Effective People experienced this himself one day on the subway in New York. People were sitting quietly and calmly on the subway because it was a Sunday morning. They were reading their newspapers, or lost in thought, or sleeping off a late evening. It was a peaceful scene. Then, the peace was dramatically disturbed by the arrival on the train of a father with his children. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, grabbing people's stuff. It was very upsetting to those on the train already, yet the father did nothing. Covey writes what happened next:

It was difficult not to feel irritated. I could not believe he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild and do nothing about it. It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So finally, with what I felt was unusual patience and restraint, I said, 'Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you could control them a little more?' The man lifted his gaze as if coming to a consciousness of the situation for the first time, and said softly, 'Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either.' Can you imagine what I felt at that moment? Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw things differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently. My irritation vanished. I didn't have to worry about controlling my attitude or my behavior; my heart was filled with the man's pain. Feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely. 'Your wife just died? Oh, I'm so sorry! Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?' Everything changed in an instant.⁶

Instead of thinking of the kingdom of God in terms of something that we will experience some day when we are dead, or something that will arrive on earth some day in the future, instead of thinking in terms of eras and institutions, think about it as something that is always around us or nearby. It is wherever Jesus' values are visible or practiced— in compassion and mercy, justice, and wisdom. It is wherever love makes us cast off sinful or destructive behavior in favor of gracious and healing behavior. We can dwell under the reign of Christ right here and right now. We just need to decide to do so, as the disciples who have gone before us have. Our nation and our world have so much pain and negative thinking and behavior in them right now. But we can help change that. Minute by minute, hour by hour, the time is now for us to believe what Jesus came to proclaim and step into that kingdom that awaits all who have eyes to see it.

I'd like to close today with excerpts from a poem by Edwina Gateley called "Called to Say Yes." If Jesus' sermon was a little too short for you to believe and see, her words spell out the invitation in a way that illustrates the urgency of our making a decision to follow Jesus every day until we all can dwell in the fullness of grace upon grace. Gateley writes:

We are called to say yes.
That the kingdom might break through

⁶ Covey, R., The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (New York: Fireside, 1990), 30-31.

To renew and to transform
Our dark and groping world.

We stutter and we stammer
to the lone God who calls
And pleads a New Jerusalem
In the bloodied Sinai Straights.

We are called to say yes
That honeysuckle may twine
And twist its smelling leaves
Over the graves of nuclear arms....

We are called to say yes
That black may sing with white
And pledge peace and healing
For the hatred of the past.

We are called to say yes
So that nations might gather
And dance one great movement
For the joy of humankind.

We are called to say yes
So that rich and poor embrace
and become equal in their poverty
Through the silent tears that fall....

We are called to say yes
to a God who still holds fast
To the vision of the Kingdom
For a trembling world of pain.
We are called to say yes
to this God who reaches out
And asks us to share
His crazy dream of love.⁷

Amen.

⁷ Gateley, Edwina, "Called to Say Yes," JOURNEY WITH JESUS, posted May 10, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/560-edwina-gateley-called-to-say-yes>.