

“The Inauguration of Kingdom Time”
2 Corinthians 6:1-10 and Mark 1:14-20
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Reading the first chapter of the gospel of Mark, it is easy to form the impression that Mark was in a hurry to get to the start of Jesus’ ministry – and that he considered time to be of the essence. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not concern himself with shepherds or magi; by the 9th verse we are already at the River Jordan to witness Jesus’ baptism; 3 verses later, Jesus is in the wilderness with the wild beasts; and while Jesus’ time of temptation in the wilderness lasted 40 days – Mark reports on it in only 2 sentences.

It is a breathless pace.

Mark was clearly in a hurry to get to the point; and for Mark, the point seems to be articulated in the first two verses of today’s gospel lesson. Those verses begin with the editorial comment that Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. And then Jesus speaks. It is the first time in the gospel of Mark that Jesus has spoken. And what Jesus says sound a bit like a four point executive summary of the gospel: “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near; repent; and believe in the good news.

Jesus’ initial words convey both an announcement and an appeal; they are simultaneously a proclamation and an invitation; they offer a message of unprecedented hope but also a word of equally unprecedented challenge.

It begins with a simple declaration: the time is fulfilled. To appreciate the significance of that phrase, it is useful to understand that in Greek there are two different words that may be translated as ‘time’. The first is *Xronos*, which conveys the conventional meaning of clock time; but the second word – and the word Jesus uses here – is *kairos*, a word meaning time in the sense of existential opportunity; if you had a chance to read the quotation on the front of the worship bulletin, the moments Frederick Buechner refers to, when, by the grace of God, we catch a glimpse of what our lives are all about or even what life itself is all about – those are moments of *kairos* time. Moments when we recognize that the kingdom of God really is at hand – or at least moments when we recognize manifestations of the kingdom of God in the midst of our otherwise very unkingdom-like circumstances – those are moments of *kairos* time as well.

It is my understanding that throughout the month of January this congregation is working on the question: “I’m baptized; now what?” In that spirit, it seems to me that the inauguration of kingdom time – *kairos* time – coincided with Jesus’ assertion that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; and for those with ears to hear, Jesus’ call to repent and to believe the good news are an invitation to live according to the rhythms, cadences, and limitless possibilities of kingdom time rather than according to the stagnant banalities of *Xronos* time to which most of us are so painfully accustomed.

It is an invitation to repent; which is to say that it is an invitation to cease and desist from business as usual; to shut down whatever facets of the status quo are not worthy of the kingdom of God; and to embrace a more excellent way.

In the classic movie, Casablanca, there is a wonderful scene where Rick – the saloon keeper played by Humphrey Bogart – asks his friend, Sam, the piano player, a question born out of inebriated despondency: “If it's December 1941 in Casablanca, what time is it in New York?” And Sam responds with the only truly inspired answer to such a question. He says: “My watch stopped.”

A theological purist might argue with me – but I would suggest that repentance may be understood as the willingness to stop winding our *Xronos* watches – to let them stop - to set our internal chronometers to daylight *kairos* time instead – and to live accordingly.

We are invited to repent; and we are also invited to believe the good news; to be more specific, we are invited to believe the good news about God’s amazing grace; the sort of grace that Jesus talked about when he told a story about a man who had two sons; one of whom left home and squandered his inheritance; a prodigal son who would ultimately come home – cap in hand – admit that he was no longer worthy to be a member of the family; and a son who was surprised to find that he was welcomed home with open arms and with a party that lasted into the wee hours of the night.

Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated kingdom time, and today Jesus still offers us the same existential opportunity that he first offered to four fishermen by the Sea of Galilee; namely the opportunity to repent; to believe the good news; to follow him; and to live according to the rhythms, cadences, and limitless possibilities of kingdom time.

Earlier, I referred to that question: “I’m baptized. Now what?” It seems to me that the corollary of that question is “What would it look like for an individual – or a church – or an entire community – to live according to kingdom time rather than some other alternative.

As I have thought about that question this week, I have been reminded of a fanciful story I once heard about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. Once a great order, various forces and trends had contributed to a gradual decline, until the day came when there were only 5 monks left – the abbot and four others – all over 70 years of age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. As the abbot agonized over the seemingly inevitable death of his order, it occurred to him to ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might provide hope for the future of the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. “I know how it is,” the rabbi said. “It seems as if the spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. “It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,” the abbot said, “But I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?”

The rabbi responded, “No, I am sorry. I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that one of you is the Messiah.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask what the rabbi had said. The abbot answered, “He couldn’t help. We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving – it was something cryptic – was that one of us is the Messiah. I don’t know what he meant by that.”

In the days and weeks that followed, the old monks pondered the rabbi’s words, and wondered whether there was any possible significance to what he had said. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He

has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. I know I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this way, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect as well.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends. And finally it happened that some of the younger people who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while someone asked if he could join them; then another; and another. And thanks to the rabbi's gift, within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality. ⁱ

That is only a fable, of course. But it seems to me that the degree to which we choose to live according to the rhythms and cadences and possibilities of kingdom time is –

the degree to which we act as if the fable were true;

the degree to which we act as if each person we encounter just might be the Messiah;
the degree to which we treat ourselves and others with the respect that Jesus himself deserves.

Which is to say “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

One final story: Martin Luther King’s final speech is best remembered for Dr. King’s statement “I have been to the mountaintop”; because it is part of the curriculum for your small group studies some of you have been reminded this week that during that speech Dr. King spoke of the occasion when he had been in New York City autographing copies of his first book, when a woman approached him and – without warning – stabbed him in the chest – inflicting a near fatal wound because the tip of the blade had actually come to rest against the edge of his aorta.

I had a chance to read that speech in its entirety this past week – and what you may not know is what Dr. King went on to say after he spoke of being stabbed in the chest. Dr. King said:

It came out in the New York Times the next morning, that if I had merely sneezed, I would have died. Well, about four days later, they allowed me, after the operation, after my chest had been opened, and the blade had been taken out, to move around in the wheel chair in the hospital. They allowed me to read some of the mail that came in, and from all over the states and the world, kind letters came in. I read a few, but one of them I will never forget. I had received one from the President and the Vice-President. I've forgotten what those telegrams said. I'd received a visit and a letter from the Governor of New York, but I've forgotten what that letter said. But there was another letter that came from a little girl, a young girl who was a student at the White Plains High School. And I looked at that letter, and I'll never forget it. It said simply,

Dear Dr. King,

I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School." And she said, While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I'm a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I

read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze.

Today's gospel lesson suggests that the inauguration of kingdom time – kairos time – coincided with the moment when Jesus began his public ministry, declaring the time to be fulfilled and the kingdom of God to be at hand.

Today Jesus' still offers us the existential opportunity to live according to the possibilities that kingdom time makes available to us.

Sometimes it is as simple as letting someone know you are happy they didn't sneeze.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN

ⁱ As told by Scott Peck, The Different Drum, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987. pp. 13-15.