

In the Name of God who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

Did you noticed how short the lessons are this week? Gives me lots more time for a sermon! The lessons seem almost deliberately short, to match the nature of their content: thematically, they portray a need for urgency...there is no time to waste. Storm clouds are gathering, some great event horizon is approaching, and God's great alarm clock is ticking toward a pre-set inevitable, unavoidable, certainty. The prudent will neither languish in indecision, nor double-back for something they had forgotten, but will respond immediately to the crisis, or the opportunity, with single-mindedness of will.

When Jonah finally makes it to Nineveh, he ironically persuades the king and people of that city to repent from some unstated evil behaviors by simply warning that God (not their God, incidentally) intends to punish them with terrible calamity in 40 days. I say ironically, because they accept this proclamation right away while it has taken storms, shipwrecks, and 3 days in the fishes' belly just to convince Jonah to make the effort to warn them. And then, they even clothe their sheep and cows in sackcloth and ashes to ward off any judgment against them, too. Following our theme, the people of Nineveh are given a reason for urgency, a countdown to catastrophe, a motive for modification. In our first lesson, then, from the Old Testament book of Jonah, Holy Scripture has brought us an example of the urgency with which God's message ought to be regarded. When the Ninevites responded immediately and completely, God's mind was changed and the calamity avoided. The snooze button on God's great alarm clock was punched. But a close reading leaves us wondering if the message was really meant for the Ninevites or for Jonah himself.

Paul's letters, like the passage here from First Corinthians, are likewise full of a sense of urgency. These Epistles, you may remember, are the earliest Christian writings we have inherited, written just some twenty years or fewer after Jesus' death and resurrection, many years before the four Gospels that are included in the New Testament were written. Paul's letters display the earliest theological themes gleaned from Jesus' teachings, and describe how those themes were taught and practiced. The day of the Lord, it was believed, the second-coming of Christ, the final judgment and division of the sheep and the goats, was coming soon, and very soon. It was urgent that the good news of forgiveness and transformation as taught by Jesus, be spread as far and as wide as possible, that as many be converted and baptized as possible before the last days, as Christ commissioned the apostles to do. In our reading this morning, Paul tells the members of the Church he has planted in Corinth that the present form of this world is passing away, and that the time is short now. The urgency of the times is more crucial than family, more real than normal mourning and rejoicing, more significant than commerce, more important than anything else in the world. It would be a number of years before the error of that teaching was admitted. Either the second-coming had been delayed indefinitely, or the concept had been mis-understood. Perhaps the second-coming, the judgment, the transformation of being born again, and the ultimate reconciliation is to happen in each heart, not on some ominous calendar date. Not to say, though, that there isn't any urgency about that transformation.

Our Gospel lesson today is from Mark, and it adds to the narrative we heard last week from John about the calling of the disciples. Mark, it is agreed, was the first of the 4 canonical Gospels to be written, probably in the late '60s. And it has a character of being very terse; that is, without a lot of embellishment. By its syntax and vocabulary, it demonstrates a special sense of this theme of urgency. Our reading begins with "after John (the Baptist) was arrested", already showing a need for quick response...important things are happening quickly, we could lose control easily, or miss an opportunity with dire consequence. John was arrested, and the reader already knows, was beheaded, and we weren't prepared or positioned to do anything

about it. Jesus himself, the first time he is quoted in the Gospel of Mark, says: “the time is fulfilled...repent and believe in the good news.” He then calls fishermen Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John to be his disciples; not by conducting interviews and checking references, but by reaching out to them and their sense of mission, inviting them to follow and fish for people, *right now*, on behalf of the kingdom. Mark uses the word ‘immediately’ twice when he is describing the encounter, underscoring the lack of hesitation in both the call and the response: Jesus calls them immediately and they all leave immediately. They leave their nets, their father, the hired hands, and their lives behind when Jesus calls for all hands on deck.

There may well be an additional explanation for the urgency displayed in Mark’s Gospel: The late ‘60s were a time of increasing insurgency against the Roman occupation of Jerusalem. Well, the rebels were not exactly slipping IEDs under the Roman chariots, but there was a lot of noise and a lot of guerilla tactics meant to dislodge the Roman domination. One might ask; What were they thinking? And in the year 70 the city was destroyed, and a couple of years later the job was completed, including the destruction of the temple. Meanwhile, the Gospel of Mark was being written in Rome, where Peter and others had begun the organization of the church. Communications were probably sparse, and rumors more prevalent than hard news. But both were bad. The Gospel promotes Jesus’ strategy of non-violent reconciliation, and it must have seemed an urgent need at the time. But the apostles had escaped the violence of the rebellion, and were poised for building the Body of Christ internationally under the shadow of the Palestinian storm clouds, working as much as they could amid persecution and suspicion. The time was right for a deep sense of urgency.

While the Gospel of Mark is terse, ... you can read the whole thing in an hour...take your Bible with you to your next doctor appointment and read Mark instead of watching Netflix on your phone...while it is terse, it still, thanks be to God, works on different levels: There is, for example, the level of hyperbole. Jesus is often cast as saying things that seem to be exaggerated, an old rabbinical way of emphasizing a teaching point. It is hyperbole, for example, to think that today we could just ignore our responsibilities to family, profession, obligations, and drop every important thing we are doing to answer God’s call. Old man Zebedee and his hired hands must have looked on with jaws dropped wide open in amazement as James and John dropped everything and left without a word to follow Jesus, and don’t you just think that there must have been more to the story? But in Mark’s narrative, wasting no extra embellishment, these disciples are given credit for an exaggerated example of the ultimate response. They dropped their nets and followed Jesus...Immediately. God bless them.

But God bless us, too, even when our responses can’t be so severe. Our lives are full of callings and challenges, existing side-by-side each and every day. It’s a strange balancing game we play, listening for God to guide us. Is God sharing some solutions to my problems right now? Or, is God calling me to be uncharacteristically brave and take on a new thing, a new direction, a new path? We often call it ‘arranging our priorities’, and we’ve done a lot of that this year. But I, for one, have an increasing sense our God’s presence in my daily life, more awareness of God’s prompting in my decision-making, more confidence in God’s interest in how I spend my time. The virus has prompted me, for example, to begin each day with the question...“Well, God,...what is it you want me to do today?? I’m listening.” I’ve spent less time looking at my weekly planner, and more time keeping my ear to the ground. As we read in Psalm 62 this morning: ‘God has spoken once, twice have I heard it. That power belongs to God.’ God’s voice, no matter exactly how we are able to hear it, is a voice that not only reassures, but also teaches, instructing us about what is important and faithful in these days, in our years together. The curriculum, the lesson that voice shares with us can be a revelation, an unveiling, an epiphany, an answer to prayer, maybe even a challenge. Gracious God, may we hear your call clearly and be brave enough to faithfully respond. Amen.