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Ordinary 3 (Year B09)

I Corinthians 7: 29-31
Mark 1: 14-20

“Excuse Me, Do You Know What Time It Is?”

“Excuse me, do you know what time it is?” It was last Tuesday morning. We were in the waiting room at the pediatricians. We decided to take Andrew because he was congested, didn’t sleep well and we were concerned he might have developed an ear infection. We called first thing in the morning, and they squeezed us in around 10:30, but it was already almost 11. We were hoping to get back in time to see Obama be sworn in as President. I kept checking the time, watching it slip away. If nothing else, I was sure we could listen on the radio on the way home, but still, this is the kind of moment you want to see. *“Excuse me, do you know what time it is?”* a woman in the waiting room with us asked. It’s just about 11 o’clock, I said. Thanks, she said. She too was marking time, hoping to make it home in time to see the inauguration.

There are certain times and events in our lives that are special, that make us feel time differently, that make us pay more attention. Certainly, last Tuesday was one of them. It was a historic moment for our country and time will tell if it is a watershed one. But regardless of politics, or how one describes it, something special happened that in many ways transcended that moment and as has happened in our country before, once again we experienced the possibility of a new day.

“Excuse me, do you know what time it is?” In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus declares: “the time is fulfilled.” In other words, he is claiming that present moment as the perfect time for him to begin his ministry. Everything is in place. The moment is right. So he begins calling his disciples. We read John’s version of Jesus calling the first disciples last week. Today we read Mark’s version. Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, and seemingly the most urgent. Mark doesn’t drown us in detail. He just gives us the facts. We don’t know if Simon and Andrew cogitate over Jesus’ invitation or not. Mark just tells us the results. They follow. Mark also doesn’t leave time for transition. His favorite transition word is “immediately.”

But even in his urgency, Mark takes the time to choose his words carefully. Greek has two words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is your everyday time. It is the quantitative designation. Time marches on, one day to the next. It is used to talk about the passage of time. *Kairos*, on the other hand, is a special, qualitative designation. It is used to mark a special or opportune moment in time. When Jesus says the time is fulfilled in Mark, he says the *kairos* is fulfilled. Now is a special moment in time. The beginning of this ministry represents a special, God given, opportunity.

That is the thing about these *kairos* moments: they are not man made, but God given. You cannot create them or bring them about. You can only prepare yourself to recognize them and be ready to respond, to get up from what you are doing and follow, when that right time comes.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing about time running out: “the present form of this world is passing away.” As I have often noted, Paul, much like many early Christians, expected the day of the Lord imminently. This expectation shaped Paul’s ethic. Jesus is coming back for us shortly, therefore we should not waste time on things that do not matter in the long haul or will not last. They had to prepare themselves to be ready for the Lord’s return. Of course, now we know that Paul’s initial premise is flawed. So one of the things we learn from Paul is not to be too self-assured that we can ever pin down or understand God’s timing.

“*Excuse me, do you know what time it is?*” One theologian writes, “Eternity is not endless time or the opposite of time. It is the essence of time...As human beings we know time as a passing of unrepeatable events in the course of which everything passes away including ourselves. As human beings we also know occasions when we stand outside the passing of events and glimpse their meaning. Sometimes an event occurs in our lives (a birth, a death, a marriage—some event of unusual beauty, pain, joy) through which we can glimpse what our lives are all about and maybe even what life itself is all about.”¹

The Greeks had it right, I think. There are two distinct ways to look at time: *chronos* and *kairos*. We can look at our lives as nothing more than series of unrepeatable events or we can have faith that there are special moments in

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004) p.100.

our lives that point us to some greater meaning and purpose. The latter is certainly the biblical perspective and, as we learn from our scripture readings today, part of our job as people of faith is to be aware of what time it is. Knowing that we can neither create nor predict these special moments, we can be attentive for when they come our way. We can prepare ourselves to recognize these God given opportunities to respond, to get up and follow. This preparation consists in large part of discerning what is worthwhile and what is not and arranging our lives accordingly. Like Paul, our expectation of the future should shape our present behavior.

Our vision has a tendency to shrink though. Sometimes when we get stuck in a day to day routine our priorities can get flipped and what is ultimately not very important can seem to be of great significance. That is why we need, as human beings, to be committed to setting time apart to pray and engage with one another in theological reflection of our lives. Asking questions like, “In the light of eternity, how should we view our work, our finances, our commitments and our relationships?” and “If some new God-given opportunity to respond to God presented itself, would we recognize it and be willing to drop our nets and follow?”

*Let us pray: O gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***