“Dust of the Rabbi”
Psalm 62:5-12; Jonah 3:1-5, 10;
1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

By Rev. Dan Clark, Interim Associate Minister

January 25, 2015, Epiphany III

From the Pulpit
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A reading from the Gospel according to Mark, Chapter 1, verses 14-20.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

The Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.
Well... time’s up.

Those are the first words that we hear Jesus speak in the gospel of Mark. This account of his life and work is very different than the other 3 we have in Scripture. Matthew is very Jewish in perspective, giving us genealogies that reinforce Jesus’ heritage and presenting Jesus as a new Moses, a new lawgiver, a new freedom fighter. Luke is practical and precise, preferring to keep feet on the ground and reality in check. John is mystical, a poet and a lover. And Mark... Mark’s Gospel is about time. Or more precisely, time pressure. One scholar says “Mark begins like an alarm clock.” If I’m honest, that’s one reason it’s not my favorite gospel. I mean, who likes alarm clocks?!!? This gospel is persistent and hurried. There is a sense of urgency to everything said and done. In fact, the word immediately shows up 40 times in this shortest of the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ life. Eight of those 40 times are in this first chapter.


Reading this gospel makes me feel like I need to hold my breath and hang on for dear life. The Gospel of Mark takes off, without the beautiful infancy narratives. There is no
manger, no shepherds, no elderly prophets singing praise to God in the temple as they hold the newly born peace child in their arms. In Mark, we’ve hurried past the sweet and slow and songful beginning that Luke gives us. We’ve raced right to Jesus’ first words. Which are…

Time’s up.

That’s at least how Presbyterian pastor and author, Eugene Peterson, translates Jesus’ words.

Time’s up.

We are preoccupied with time. We are driven by it. We are captive to it. Time is the element that both haunts and inspires the world-famous physicist and devoted atheist, Stephen Hawking. His death-sentence disease and cosmological inquiry drives him to an obsession with time. We are obsessed with time, too.

We are either too busy or too bored.

Time is either going too fast or too slow.
There’s either not enough time in a day, or we find ourselves impatiently waiting.

We get to things later. But we want it right now!

It seems when it comes to time, the porridge is either too hot or too cold. We need the help of Goldilocks to make amends with the cruel master of time.

So here is my question for us today… In the midst of our busy lives, in the midst of our cosmic wrestling match with time… I wonder if we can please just take a minute to slowly catch our collective breath and hear Jesus say… time’s up?

Time’s up for what? What has expired? What is exhausted? What has ended?

Bad news.

The time for bad news is up. It’s time for good news. Many of us have had the experience of a street preacher who woke up on the wrong side of the bed harassing students on the Oval or passing out doom-and-gloom flyers to football fans on Lane Avenue. People like this sometimes don sandwich
boards that read “the end is near.” Those guys are wrong about a lot. And they’re wrong about that too.

Jesus came to say that time’s up for bad endings.

But the time is right, the time is here, the time is now for a new story. The end is not near. The beginning is near. The beginning of a realm and way that is filled to overflowing with the love and life of God. This is good news, or putting it biblically, this is gospel. Time is up for bad endings. The time is now for good beginnings, for good news.

But whose good news? There are numerous competitors and imitators when it comes to "good news." Consider this inscription found in modern-day Turkey from about 9 BC that describes Caesar Augustus: "The most divine Caesar…we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things… Whereas the Providence which has regulated our whole existence…has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us the emperor Augustus…who being sent to us as a Savior, has put an end to war… The birthday of the god Augustus has been for the whole world the beginning of good news." Good news, or euangelion in Greek, where we get the oft-hijacked word, evangelical.
Evangelical means “good news”. And we could use some. From Paris to Nigeria, from Ferguson to Staten Island, in classrooms and hospital rooms and break rooms and bedrooms, there is a lot of bad news.

There was bad news for the four fishermen Jesus encountered in Mark 1. They were in Capernaum, a fishing village of about 1,500 people on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Once upon a time, this was a nice place to live. But it’s not a quiet, peaceful, free, and flourishing fishing village anymore. It is occupied territory. The Romans had annexed Galilee to their ever-expanding empire about a century earlier. Now not only is the weight of military occupation suffocating in Capernaum, but the presence of Roman economic policy has laid waste to the fishing industry in this part of the world. Times were hard and it was the Romans fault. Yet still the message being communicated in the state-run media was that Caesar was Lord and that Rome brought peace and that the way of the empire was good news for the whole world.

Time’s up.

That’s what this first century wandering rabbi says to the empire. That’s what Jesus says to the way of the sword, the
way of violence. That’s what Jesus says to occupying and oppressing.

Time’s up.

That’s what Jesus says to James and John and Peter and Andrew as they work day in and day out under the thick black cloud of bad news.

Time’s up for the bad news. Now is the time for something new. This is the new beginning. The beginning of the good news. The beginning of living fully. The beginning of getting up and going. The beginning of listening and loving. The time is now.

We’ve heard Jesus’ first words in the gospel of Mark translated as ‘the time is fulfilled’ in the Scripture read this morning or as ‘time’s up’ in Peterson’s translation of the Bible called The Message. In the Greek, the words are kairos pleroo. I understand it to mean, “the moment is full”.

Interesting.

Jesus walked up to fishermen frustrated by the downward spiral their industry was suffering at the hands of the
occupiers and told them “time’s up”. Jesus walked up to fishermen with empty nets and told them the moment is full.

Empty nets. Full moments.

Perhaps these young men remembered the words of the prophet Habbakuk, who also spoke about a full moment, or in his ancient poem, ‘an appointed time.’

“Write the vision
   and make it plain on tablets
   so that a herald may run with it.
For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
   it speaks of the end
   and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
   It will certainly come
   and will not delay
See, the enemy is puffed up;
   he is arrogant and never at rest.
Because he is as greedy as the grave
   and like death is never satisfied,
he gathers to himself all the nations
   and takes captive all the peoples.
Woe to him who piles up stolen goods
and makes himself wealthy by extortion!"
How long must this go on?

How long will this go on? How long will bad news rule the
day? How long will greedy and arrogant people become rich
by cruelty and corruption? Jesus says, time’s up.

The rabbi’s words are rebellious and revolutionary: “your
nets are empty but your moment is full.”

We like living in a culture that emphasizes our choices and
independence, our ability to shape our lives and determine
our destinies. We can do whatever needs to be done; it's
within our power; we can fix and improve everything; we
can take hold of the future and make it what we want it to
be. We can mend our nets and buy our boats and sell our
catch. But what if we can’t? What if the system is broken?
What if the whole thing has gone to hell? That’s when we
need a miracle: to turn hell-on-earth into kingdom-come.
This is the miracle that this new rabbi named Jesus offered
to the fishermen that day. He created a full moment, a
_kairos pleroo_, where before there were only minutes and
commitments, tasks and to-do lists.
It might feel strange to talk this way when our society so values productivity and possessions, minutes and commitments. We manage our tasks with a surgeon’s precision. We spend time learning how to better manage time. We store our goods in bigger and bigger barns. But what if all that management suffocates the mystery out of life? What if sometimes we need to open our hands, drop what we’re holding on to so tightly, drop our tattered nets, and get a little dusty on the rabbi’s road?

Yes, dusty. And dirty. And muddy and messy. It turns out full moments can be messy moments. They often are. And if we are too worried about getting splashed or getting dusty, the moment may pass us by. So when an ordinary minute is transformed miraculously into a full moment, be ready to dive in, even if you might get a little dirty.

Yose ben Yozier said to his disciples, “cover yourself with the dust of your rabbi’s feet.” This idea of being covered in the dust of your rabbi came from something everyone had seen. A rabbi would come to town, and right behind him would be this group of students, doing their best to keep up with the rabbi as he went about teaching his way of life. By the end of a day of walking in the dirt directly behind their rabbi, the students would have the dust from his feet all over
them. When a rabbi chose a disciple, he would say not only to “learn what I know,” but also “be like I am, walk so close to me that our feet will share the same dust.”

Jesus said “time’s up.” Your empty nets are transformed into full moments. Follow me. And stick close. It might get messy, but we’ll be in this together. And you’ll find that the way of the oppressive empire that brings hell-on-earth is expiring and a new beginning of good news for everyone is here and now.

A few questions…

What are you holding onto? Do you need to drop it?

What are you avoiding? Do you need to be willing to get a little messy?

What are you listening to and talking about? Are you perpetuating a culture addicted to bad news? Or are you doing the most rebellious act of being a person who lives and breathes by good news?
Where are you going? And who or what are you following to get there? What map or philosophy or plan or person are you following? Do you need to follow more closely?

Jesus’s first words in the gospel of Mark are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." There was something about what he said that transformed the ordinary minute into a holy moment. And the fishermen handled it well.

The exiled Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Naht Hahn, said, “The present moment contains past and future. The secret of transformation is in the way we handle this very moment.”

We will each be faced with thousands of ordinary minutes this week. The question is whether one or some of them might be transformed by the miracle of a loving God into a full moment, a meaningful moment, even if it’s a messy moment. The question is whether we’re willing to drop nets to take hold of moments.

Amen.

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