

Good Morning! Let us pray... Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created And you shall renew the face of the earth. O God who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations, through Christ our Lord. May the words of my mouth & the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight...rock, redeemer & renewer of us all. Amen.

Epiphany 3 —“Now is the Time” Jonah: 3:1-5; Mark 1: 14-20

Friends, I am keenly aware of the state of our nation today... just as I was four years ago. Many are elated; many are sad. Four years ago, many were despondent just as many were dancing in hallways.

As I reflect on ‘these things’, the transition from one administration to another, the patterns of rhetoric, the political commentary, and the practices of ritual/routine/tradition observed or ignored, I am struck by the lectionary parallel we have in the scriptures read today.

Now is the time... shouts Jonah to the Ninevites; Now is the time... declares Jesus. Now **is** the time, dear friends! Change your hearts and lives...trust the good news...God’s kin-dom has come near!

The call to repent and to change hearts and lives spans across the ages and years of human interaction with God through prophetic voices. Early in human history is the story of God’s people disobeying God’s will & God’s way (Genesis 3) resulting in consequences of working for food and pain in childbirth. Yet the first humans were not abandoned by God, but supported with clothing and fertile land. God showed mercy from the very beginning.

Jonah, as we’ve heard several times today, is called to serve God as a prophet to bring a message to the people of Nineveh. ‘Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!’ In this prophetic book is a narrative that reveals God’s power and mercy in the interactions with Jonah, the reluctant prophet. Jonah knows God & hears God, flees from God, prays to God, obeys God, and even expresses anger with God when the Ninevites are saved.

Jonah sounds a lot like many people in these current days when wanting law and order (to stop harm, violence and destruction of people and property) yet are dissatisfied when a truce is made.

John Wesley speaks of the challenge of self-righteousness saying, '*How uncomfortable a condition [a person] must be in; who having fear but not the love of God, who serving God, but not with all the heart, has only the toils and not the joys of religion!*' (Sermon 29: Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, para 12 discourse 9, p 79)¹ The person always seeking God, but always running from God, too. We cannot serve the world and God. It is vital that our whole heart is dedicated to loving & serving God and Neighbor. We cannot be half-hearted or luke-warm. The full story of Jonah calls us to examine our hearts... now... at this time... in this very moment...this very day.

The announcement Jesus issues comes at a very difficult time in the life of the people of Israel. The messenger sent to prepare the way for the Lord, John the Baptist, the one who called for people to change hearts and lives and told of another to come stronger than himself, is arrested. Jesus' work begins proclaiming 'NOW is the time... Here comes God's kingdom! (God is with you)Change hearts & lives, trust this good news!'

A transition from one prophet to the ULTIMATE Prophet... the one who comes to **fulfill** the prophecy, as the light of the world, the word made flesh, God with us, savior of God's people, prince of peace, and lord of All creation.

There is much work to be done and Jesus is all about equipping others to do the **work with** him. No coercion, no force, just an invitation to 'Come, follow me and I'll show you how to fish for people.' The response is remarkable... dropping what they are doing- leaving tools of livelihood & leaving family – to respond to the invitation of something different- (to borrow from Nina Simone) 'a new start, a new life, a new day'- something bold, something that shatters the status quo (ritual/routine/tradition) and the

¹ The Essential Works of John Wesley. Barbour Publishing, 2011.

ways of the world so to bring good news to the last, the least, the lowly & downtrodden, or otherwise devalued by the leaders of the day.

Yet not all will work with Jesus; there will be resistance; evil made known through the actions of humans; fearful & stubborn people; resistance to seeing value in caring for all people; challenge to healing people and obstacles to changing political & religious structures that are harmful to the well-being of people. Though Jesus dies on a cross, the sign of Jonah (three days & nights in the belly of the great fish) will be seen as evil & death are overcome in Jesus being raised from the dead.

What is it about today (2021) that makes this particular moment the right time? There are three things that theologian David Lose² points out are worthy of our consideration, (... three C's) **crisis, confidence, and commitment**. These are at least three of the ingredients that make this the right time.

First, it's a time of **crisis**, in Jesus' day and in our nation. Israel has been living under the oppression of the Romans for some time. And it's not just an external threat, but also an internal one, as Herod and company vacillate between being complicit in, or at least profiting from, the Roman occupation and being so corrupt that they are ineffective to look after anyone's interest other than their own. And, of course, John the Baptist is arrested, which provides a transition for Jesus' ministry.

Second, Jesus has received God's blessing and his identity through his baptism just earlier in the narrative. So, **confident** that God is present, active, and with him, Jesus announces God's coming, even impending, kingdom and calls for the corresponding actions and response of believing the good news and repentance (a Greek word that is less about apologizing or confessing sin than it is about being paused/stopped in place and turning toward a new direction).

Third, Jesus finds an audience of folks willing to **commit to follow** him. We don't get the details of any extended conversation. What truly matters is that they hear the good news and believe it, not in the sense of mere

² In the Meantime: Epiphany 3B. Posted: 19 Jan 2021 08:26 AM PST

intellectual agreement, but rather within them is born a degree of trust and hope that moves them forward into active and **committed response**.

Certainly, we are living in a time of **crisis**: the recent months post-election and the weeks post-insurrection, not to mention the chaos of the past four years are signs of a national crisis. Add to that the areas of focus as outlined by the incoming President & Administration as managing a Pandemic and the profound loss that accompanies it, economic hardship and uncertainty, the brutal and deliberate stirring of long simmering differences into violence, radical and painful racial injustice, addressing stewardship of earth & climate, restoring collaborative relationships around the globe, as well as restoring working bipartisan relationships that will enable policy for the common good of all people.

As for **confidence**, I take heart that several folks of this faith community have said yes to participating in constructing meaningful worship and serving the community through making phone calls for our Vine & Branches phone ministry. Remember the words addressed to Jesus at his baptism – “you are my beloved; with you I am well pleased” – are also addressed to all of us, at our baptism as well.

Finally, what about **commitment**? I believe God is still at work, still proclaiming the good news, in me and many others. Through the proclamation and our shared congregational life, God is still calling us to follow Jesus. Yes, first it is a question: are you, are we, willing to drop so much of what passes for normal and expected in order to follow in the way of Jesus? But more than the question that demands a decision, it is an invitation undergirded by fact: God sees you/us as worthy of God’s attention, as capable of great things, as called and equipped to be Jesus’ disciples in this new and challenging year, 2021; a year that is still *anno domini* (AD), “the year of our Lord” 2021. It is an honor to be invited to do something, isn’t it?

We have celebrated the coming of Christ, the Light of the world, sent to reveal God’s love for all. In Jesus, remembering God loves us & claims us as children, we have a covenant and an invitation... to love as we are loved

and to serve as we have been served by the one who came to save. In the Spirit, we have an ever-present sustainer, to lead and equip us.

Now is the time, friends, to be engaged by the good news, turn in a new direction, and believe and trust that, truly, God is with us and for us.

May we be renewed in our confidence that God is working through us to care for and bless God's world and people. May we see and proclaim that the kingdom of God is still at hand.

Following Jesus is more than saying you are a believer. Following Jesus is letting the light and love of Jesus into your life, into your heart and shown through your hands and feet. It is a conscious choice to be different... to reflect the light and love of Jesus.

May the light of Christ shine upon us and shine forth from us so that we walk in the light of the Lord. AMEN.