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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Mark 1:14-15

IT'S ABOUT TIME: GOD'S CLOCK

My first call to ordained service was as an Associate Pastor at a church in Memphis, Tennessee. While serving there, I decided to go on a Presbyterian Peacemaking Program trip to the Holy Land to explore possibilities for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. My plan had been to go during the summer of 1990. But after signing up for the trip, the Senior Pastor, with whom I served, had a heart attack and was not able to be active in his service to the congregation for several months. So, to be of support to him and to my congregation, I readily put my overseas travel plans on hold. The following year, the way was clear for me to apply to go on a similar trip. As it turned out, on this trip, taken at a time I had not originally planned, I met someone from another part of the country named Nancy Lawrence. I was enriched by my experience of the Holy Land – I was and continue to be intrigued as to whether this was also an experience of the Holy Hand enabling me to get in synch with God's timing for meeting my future wife.

In this sermon series, we have been focused on how the gospel can shape our understanding of the God-given resource called time. Last Sunday, we focused on the gift of sabbath and how it can be holy in our embrace of it. There are many timely questions I've not addressed in this series of sermons, but the series runs out of time today, and I think it is important to focus today on what I am calling God's clock. Many of us have had an experience that left us thinking that God often works on a different schedule than we would like. Some of us have longed for and prayed for a particular closed door of opportunity to open, or for an experience of healing for ourselves or for someone else. We have asked for peace in the midst of war, at times to be left waiting and wondering. The Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt for many years before God delivered them. We don't know if Moses was the first one God tried to recruit to lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt or whether God tried to get an earlier leader for the liberation initiative. I heard recently about someone who when he was telling a story and was approaching the climax, instead

of saying, “And lo and behold,” he would say, “And holy befold.”¹ When and how does the holy unfold in our midst? How do we discern God’s timing? How can we tell what in heaven’s name, God is up to?

The first time I heard our Old Testament reading was probably on the radio when a song version of it became the number one pop hit. I think it must have been the popular song with the oldest lyrics ever, dating back to whenever Ecclesiastes was written. Biblical scholars refer to this book as wisdom literature and the poetic passage we heard speaks to the wide range of experiences under heaven that can happen or that sometimes we can initiate throughout the course of our lives. When Pete Seegar put these words from Ecclesiastes to music, he added six words that fit the times. After the statement, “a time for love, a time for hate, a time for peace,” he added, “I swear it’s not too late.”² I think Seegar was right that the biblical poetry is not purely a deterministic message. There are at times, even belated choices we can make about what kind of time a particular era is going to be.

We are used to thinking about time chronologically, which focuses on a particular measure of years, days, and hours. History books record when certain things happened using some generally agreed-upon title as to what to call a particular day, month, or year. In the original Greek language of the New Testament, the word ‘chronos’ would be used to refer to this kind of ‘time’. There is another definition of time that has to do with it being the right moment for a particular something to happen. The Greek uses the word ‘kairos’ for this expression. That’s the word used in Mark’s Gospel when Jesus begins his ministry saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near...” People of faith had awaited a messiah. John the Baptist had proclaimed that God was about to do something special. Soon after he baptized Jesus, John was arrested – was that part of the indicator to Jesus that there was such injustice going on that his public ministry needed to begin, even if it was a situation where the risks would be high? As we now would affirm, through Jesus, that special moment was one that opened the way for God’s goodness, kindness, mercy, and love to reshape the world, even to today.

At times, we seem to be chronically stuck in ‘chronos,’ wondering when a ‘kairos’ moment will ever arrive. At times, a special opportunity may be dangling before

us, but we're not sure whether or not to pursue it. I would not suggest that every coincidence is a God incident. I dare say few of us will have a burning bush experience that will spell out exactly what God is calling us to do at a particular time, but we can look for clues as to where God may be leading us to serve. One author has suggested that, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."³ That resonates with my experience of the various calls to serve now four different congregations over the course of my ordained ministry. However, God's calling comes to both laity and clergy. God wants to use the unique gifts each of us brings to address some need. God wants to use the capacity of this congregation to address particular current concerns. When we believe such things, we look for opportunities to serve that situations, including timing, perhaps God's timing, open to us. During the congregational meeting today, we will be talking about a search that will be beginning for the next full-time associate pastor for our congregation. I hope and believe that God's timing will be instrumental in the persons available who might serve in that capacity. It will be up to the associate pastor nominating committee to seek to discern who might be the best candidate to serve in this capacity. As any of us seek to interpret what is going on around us, we need to understand that there are times when a curious happenstance is nothing more than a fluke. However, sometimes it may be that a 'kairos' moment is occurring, that the time is fulfilled, and a doorway to God's good intent is being opened. We do well to test out the possibilities before we jump to either conclusion.

Some people believe God has a destiny for each one of us. Others tend to believe God opens certain opportunities from which we can make some choices. What does God intend for us? What does God want us to do? As we look for how our particular gifts might be used in God's service, we can try to be attuned to possibilities that God opens. However, we can be distracted by many things. Before we will be called to some future possibility, we are first called to live where God meets us, in the here and now. Let me share an ancient story:

"Where shall I look for enlightenment?" the disciple asked.

"Here," the wise one said.

“When will it happen?” the disciple asked.

“It is happening right now,” the wise one answered.

“Then why don’t I experience it?”

“Because you don’t look.”

“What should I look for?”

“Nothing. Just look.”

“Look at what?”

“At anything your eyes light on.”

“But must I look in a special way?”

“No, the ordinary way will do.”

“But don’t I always look the ordinary way?”

“No, you don’t.”

“But why ever not?”

“Because to look, you must be here. And you are mostly somewhere else.”⁴

It is a challenge to live in the here and now, while holding onto certain hurts and dreams, but God does meet us in the here and now. Much about God’s timing continues to be cloaked in mystery. I don’t ever expect to have a comprehensive understanding of the big picture until by God’s grace I step into a ‘kairos’ eternity. Ecclesiastes affirms, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven”... It is absolutely fine to pray that it is not too late to change the times, and then we should expect that God will provide some opportunity for us to be part of the change we are seeking. And it is always, always a good time for certain things: to trust God, to seek divine guidance, to search for God’s will, to explore what we can do to address urgent or important concerns, to be attentive to

possibilities, the ‘holy befold.’ With open hearts and minds, we might just step into a ‘kairos’ moment we never expected, finding that God’s clock is chiming for us in a way that might lead to God’s goodness, kindness, mercy, and love being rolled out anew even through us to reshape a part of God’s world. The time can be fulfilled. Amen.

¹ Gregory Boyle, Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017, p. 35.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn!_Turn!_Turn!

³ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, New York: HarperCollins, 1973, p. 95.

⁴ A story shared by Joan Chittister, There is a Season, Orbis Books, 1999