

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 25, 2013

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17;

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"Now is the Time!"

Our readings for today give us some interesting examples of the Spirit of God calling to individuals and way of their response.

In Jeremiah, we have this classic story of the calling of the prophet. Jeremiah tells the way that God spoke to him. *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* It is almost like Jeremiah is giving us his credentials for the position of Prophet, telling us that it was none other than God who appointed him, God who knew him before birth, God who had created him, ordained him for the work and life of a prophet even before he could speak a word, breathe a breath!

We don't know exactly when in his life that Jeremiah was aware of his call, but like many who are called by God, he at first was resistant. *"Ah, Lord God! We can see the horror in his face at the thought of having to speak before others, speak God's message in public. "Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!"* Like so many that God calls, he saw himself as unready, unable, afraid, to take on the role that was being set out before him.

But God is persistent. We don't know how long, how much later, a minute, a day, months or perhaps even years later when he was grown into adulthood, but Jeremiah hears God's command that God will send him out and he will speak whatever God commands him to speak. He need not be afraid. And he experiences what he describes as God reaching out and touching his mouth.

And it is then, however long it took to happen, whether it was just a moment in time, or years later, it was then that it happened. God says, *"**Now** I have put my words in your mouth. See, **today** I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."*

Despite Jeremiah's protests, despite his uneasiness, his unreadiness, his reluctance to be what God was calling him to be, in that time, when it was finally right, it happened. And he knew it.

In Luke's gospel, we have one of the many healing stories Luke tells us about. Here Jesus is in the synagogue, on the Sabbath, teaching. A woman comes in who is crippled. She has been crippled for 18 years. Jesus calls to her, says to her, *"Woman, you are set free from your ailment"* and he places his hands on her, an act of conveying the healing power of God to her, and she stands upright and is able to walk right. She immediately begins to praise God!

But one of the religious leaders there objects to this act. He is tired of Jesus performing these miracles on the day set aside for worship. *This is not the time!* he seems to be saying. *Can't you do these healings on other days? Do you have to do it when we are trying to have a service here? Don't you understand how much of a distraction this is?*

Jesus is incredulous! He scolds them for their hypocrisy! *"Don't each of you untie your animal and take it to water on the Sabbath? Yet you would keep this woman from being untied to the very evil that has held her for these 18 years?! How dare you! Get your priorities straight!"*

Jesus was given an opportunity. He knew the time was right. He knew the time was ripe! He knew there was no reason to wait any longer for this woman to be made whole. **Now** was the time! There could be no other. He had been moved by the Spirit of God to heal. And so he healed her.

We often find ourselves confronted with the question of whether to do something now or to wait until a later time. To act immediately or to put it off for a while. Quite often, the call of God comes to us and puts us in such a situation. In fact, I would suggest to you, that anytime you have to make a decision about whether to do something now or do it later, it is indeed the Spirit at work within you. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that the Spirit always wants you to act on whatever it is immediately. No, the Spirit may be simply preparing you to make the decision, engaging your mind and heart to ready you, like Jeremiah, to answer the call.

But this is a reality I am speaking of. I am not talking metaphorically. I am speaking spiritually. There is a reality, in this world, a real presence, a spiritual presence, that moves within and all around us, all the time, a thing that we in the church and in synagogues and mosques and in many places, call "God." And we need to learn to attend to it, to listen to it, and to answer it when it calls or seeks to move us to make a choice or a decision to do something.

At the Thursday morning Bible Study that I lead at Harbor Hill, we have been using a video named "*Peter and Paul*" and we are using it to help us understand the book of ACTS. There was a scene that I thought the movie portrayed very well. It is not actually a conversation that we get from scripture but it seems a believable conversation that could have taken place between Peter, the apostle who supports Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, and James the brother of Jesus who had been chosen after Jesus was gone, to lead the early church in Jerusalem, who opposed Paul's ministry. It goes something like this:

*James: **God** has a plan.*

Peter: He (Paul) is where we should be, and are not!

James: With the Gentiles?

Peter: You agree that salvation is for all men?

James: In time, Peter. In time! Our Jerusalem church is made up of Jews, not Gentiles.

Peter: You think Jesus meant salvation was only for the Jews?!

James: Jesus meant salvation for all men - in time, in time!

*Peter: The **time** is **now**! Paul is seeing to that!*

I don't know if you grasp from that the frustration of Peter who believes Paul is right in reaching out to the Gentiles and wishes that he too were so bold as Paul to go out and proclaim the gospel as he was. But the issue is one of time. Should they wait, as James suggests? It seemed to Peter that the Spirit of God was moving and acting in their world and they were being cowards not to get involved with it. The time was upon them and if they should wait, they might miss the opportunity to do what God was commanding.

In a few days, we will be celebrating a moment in time that caught the attention of our nation and eventually of the world. August 28 will be the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and that monumental speech given by Martin Luther King, Jr., known as the "I Have a Dream" speech. King, as well as others involved in the civil rights movement had been preparing for a long time.

The idea of a march on Washington had been in the mind of A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin as far back as 1941, when they threatened a protest march, causing President Roosevelt to issue an Executive Order establishing the Committee on Fair Employment Practice and banning discriminatory hiring in the defense industry. They continued to pursue the idea and the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom was held at the Lincoln Memorial on May 17, 1957.

By 1963, civil rights leaders, labor and religious organizations had teamed up to plan a march on Washington. It would be a march for "Jobs and Freedom." It would be a non-violent act of protest and unity and it would take place, appropriately, on the 100th anniversary year of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

There were many detractors, who argued it was not the right time or the right way to do it. President Kennedy and his administration and others in Washington tried to keep the march from happening, fearful it would become an uncontrolled riot, injuring any chances at passing civil rights legislation. But those planning the march were determined. They knew this was the time. And when all was said and done, some 200,000-300,000 people came together that day in Washington, D.C., marching, side by side, hand in hand, singing, carrying signs, protesting with non-violent action, demonstrating for their rights and their freedoms, all people's rights and freedoms in their country. A year later, congress passed the Civil Rights Act and in 1965, the Voting Rights Act.

We may not be in the midst of planning a great march or in trying to pass legislation for equal rights for all people - and then again, we may! Certainly, in our own time God is continuing to call us to make the world a better place, to bring freedom and liberty to those who have long been bound and oppressed. Even after all that has been accomplished, there is still so much for us to do now.

Now is the time to continue that fight against racial and ethnic prejudice which, even after all these years, still exists in our country and throughout the world.

Now is the time that we must fight for the rights of women who still in many places do not receive equal pay for equal work, who are still the victims of sexual harassment in the workplace and who still do not feel safe walking the streets in many of our communities.

Now is the time to continue to fight for the rights of workers in all facets of our society, for the rights to organize, to fight exploitation of immigrant peoples and put an end to the sweat factories in our own country and around the world, that use child labor and subject their employees to slave-like conditions. To fight for the homeless, the hungry, the many who struggle in poverty, the marginalized in our societies.

Now is the time to fight for equal rights for those of lesbian, gay, transgender and bi-sexual orientations, that they should be accepted and take their rightful place in society.

Now is the time to bring an end to the ways of violence that engulfs so many of our larger cities, time to end the domestic violence and cruelty that takes place in our rural homes, and to the ways of violence, terrorism and war used as a means of political change around our world.

We have yet so far a way to go! We must continue to answer the call of God who moves us with the power of the Spirit to not accept the words "wait" or "in time, in time" or to find excuses to deny that Spirit when it calls out to us.

We must be willing to find the courage, to ascertain the wisdom, to reach out and take hold of one another and to stand side by side, to march hand in hand, and to overcome whatever obstacles stand in the way of our God and God's will for all of us, our freedom, our liberty, for true justice and the compassion we are called to give to all, regardless of whatever differences we may possess. May we be willing and ready to answer the call of God, **NOW**, and whenever the Spirit moves us. Amen.