

## **No Time Like the Present**

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Church  
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### **Scripture Readings**

Jonah 3:1-5,10 (Psalm 65:5-12)

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

### **Sermon**

Suppose God wanted to say something to you or to me – or to all of us. *Would we recognize God's voice? Would we know how to respond to God's voice? Would we even be able to hear God's voice to begin with?* I asked those questions near the beginning of my sermon last Sunday. Important questions. But they're not the only ones.

That's why I asked some other questions near the end of the sermon. Suppose God did say something to us. Suppose God said something to you. *Would you be ready to answer? Would you be ready to drop whatever you're doing and answer?*

Would we recognize God's voice? And if we did, would we answer? And how would we answer? Those are the questions. But first, let's go to Nineveh, and then to Galilee.

**THE PEOPLE OF NINEVEH RECOGNIZED** God's voice. When Jonah showed up, he started walking through the city, announcing its impending doom. *Forty days*, Jonah said, *and Nineveh becomes a memory!* (cp. Jonah 3:4).

Jonah was talking, but the words were from God. And that's what the people heard. They didn't hear a foreign prophet speaking to them. No, they heard the voice of God, somehow.

The people of Nineveh did not believe in Israel's god. They had their own gods, plenty of them. Yet God still spoke to them. And they believed God. Not that they dropped their other gods in favor of the God of Israel. Just that they believed what they were hearing, that their days were numbered.

Then, without wasting a moment, the people of Nineveh answered God. They humbled themselves, fasting and putting on sackcloth. They didn't consult the authorities first. No, they just did it. The people did. Without hesitation. As far as they were concerned, when you hear from God, there's no time like the present.

Suppose we heard God's voice. Suppose we recognized God's voice. How would we answer? That's the question. Now let's go to Galilee.

**I'M NOT SURE IF THE DISCIPLES** recognized God's voice. When Jesus showed up, he started walking alongside the Sea of Galilee, calling fishermen to be his disciples. Those fishermen didn't know who Jesus was. But when he started talking to Simon and Andrew, it was the voice of God. Not that Simon and Andrew knew that. How could they?

*Come on,* Jesus said. *Follow me, and I'll have you fishing for people.* Jesus offered them a new job, a new job that made no sense. Fishing for people? What in the world was that about? And could you make a living at it? But never mind that.

What really made no sense was that the two of them actually left their nets and went off after Jesus. Just like that. No pause for reflection. No talking it over with family. No concern about who would take over the nets. No, they just dropped everything to follow Jesus. As far as they were concerned, there was no time like the present. It was time for them to act.

It was the same with James and John. Jesus saw them and he called them without a moment's hesitation. And they didn't hesitate either. As far as James and John were concerned, there was no time like the present. It was time for them to act.

Suppose we heard God's voice. Suppose we recognized God's voice. How would we answer? That's the question.

**THERE'S A STRIKING DIFFERENCE** between the people of Nineveh, on the one hand, and the first disciples, on the other. The people of Nineveh knew what was coming. Their world was about to be shaken down to its foundations. And the people of Nineveh knew what they were doing. They were taking immediate action with the idea of persuading God to rethink things.

But Simon and Andrew, James and John – they had no idea what was coming. They had no idea what they were signing up for. In time, they would learn about sacrifice and sorrow, about fear and failure. But for now, the only thing they knew for sure was what they were leaving behind.

That's the way it is in the kingdom of God. And make no mistake, when Jesus called those fishermen, he was calling them into the kingdom of God. Listen to how Mark's gospel captures the core of Jesus' message. Jesus says, *It's time. The kingdom of God is here. Drop everything and get on board!* (cp. Mark 1:15). That's exactly what Simon and Andrew and James and John did, for some reason. They heard the voice of God – maybe they didn't recognize it as the voice of God – but they heard the voice, and they answered. They answered by dropping everything and getting on board.

**LAST SUNDAY WE WERE WONDERING** about hearing the voice of God, wondering whether God is speaking to us today, wondering if we know how to listen. Toward the end of that sermon, I said that the real question is not so much whether God is speaking to us, but whether we are ready to answer.

That reminds me of Micah 6. The question there is this: *What can I bring to God? What can I offer to God?* It's a question looking for an answer, a question from someone who

wants to hear from God. But this is the answer: *The LORD has shown you what's good; the LORD has told you what's required* (cp. Micah 6:6-8).

I think more often than not, we already have the answers. It's just that we don't want to hear them. God has already spoken. It's just that we're not ready to answer God, we're not ready to drop everything and get on board.

Perhaps the biggest question we could ask of God is, *How do you want us to live for your kingdom? How do you want us to live for the coming world, while we're still living in this world?*

But do you notice what's going on here? What are we doing asking the questions? Who are we to question God? Isn't God the one who questions us? And doesn't God ask us, *How are you living for my kingdom? How are you living for the coming world, while you're still in this world?*

**THE DISCIPLES HEARD THE VOICE** of Jesus, calling them to a new life. Judging by their immediate response, they must have intuited that they were hearing the voice of God. We don't have Jesus walking among us. But we do have Holy Scripture. What do we hear, when we listen to Scripture? We want to hear from God. Do we hear the voice of God in Scripture? Do we hear God asking us how we're living for the kingdom?

Listen to 1 Corinthians again: *The time is short. From now on, let those who have wives be as if they do not have wives, and let those who weep be as if they do not weep, and let those who rejoice be as if they do not rejoice, and let those who buy be as if they do not own, and let those who use the world be as if they do not make use of it. Because the world as it is is passing away* (1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

Certainly those words deserve close reading and careful interpretation. Certainly we need to take into account the social and cultural distance between 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth and 21<sup>st</sup> century Columbus. But to begin with, do we hear the voice of God in those words? Do we hear God questioning us, asking whether we are wedded too tightly to this world and not tightly enough to his kingdom?

I'm not sure what to make of everything the apostle says. But there are some things that stand out. *Let those who have wives be as if they do not have wives.* That's not an endorsement of open marriage or serial monogamy. But it questions the tendency many of us Christians have to idolize marriage and the family. After all, marriage and family are not kingdom institutions (cp. Mark 12:25).

*Let those who buy be as if they do not own, and let those who use the world be as if they do not make use of it.* That's not a call to withdraw from the economy. But it questions where we find comfort and security. It questions our habit of deciding winners and losers according to who has the most stuff. Because in the kingdom, *life is not measured by how much you own* (Luke 12:15, *New Living Translation*).

If we dare to let it, this is what Scripture will do.

**WE TYPICALLY EXPECT THE BIBLE TO SUBMIT** to our examination and interrogation. But the Bible means to interrogate us, to examine us and our way of life in this world while we wait for the kingdom.

For its part, 1 Corinthians 7 asks what's different about our way of life when it comes to maintaining social and family relationships, when it comes to pursuing a career, when it comes to buying a house or saving for retirement, even when it comes to dealing with the ordinary joys and sorrows of life.

The Bible asks us, *How does your way of life, each one of you and all of you together, how does your way of life show that you have heard the voice of God, calling you to seek the kingdom? How does your way of life show that you have answered the call, that you've dropped everything and gotten on board with Jesus?*

Those are the questions we need to answer. And we don't get to answer with words. We answer those questions with our lives.

**THE PEOPLE OF NINEVEH HAD** a change of heart, and they changed their ways. That was their answer. Simon and Andrew left their nets, and they followed Jesus. That was their answer. James and John left their boat, their nets, their father, and the hired help. And they followed Jesus, with no idea where they would be going. That was their answer.

When God speaks, *the time is short*. When God asks, the time to answer is now. There's no time like the present.