Sermon 12-9-18

When the Time Is Right

Luke 3:1-6

**Sermon Starter**

Any of you here today history buffs? I find history fascinating. It can tell us a lot about those who came before us. At one time I was really into early American History, specifically the Revolutionary War. That was one of the reasons why Kelley and I went to Concord, MA, to see where it all started. **GRAPHIC: On this bridge (well, one like it) someone fired the shot heard around the world.”** Standing there, you can just imagine the British on one side, the colonists on the other, and then the shot.

Our gospel reading starts off like a history lesson. **GRAPHIC: We’re told the names of a couple of ancient Jewish high priests; some local princes and a regional governor who weren’t all that important in the grand sweep of things; and a Roman emperor**. It seems to be a rather mundane and, frankly, boring start for the grand message that John the Baptist is supposed to proclaim.

There’s a point though to that history and those markers of time. The Christian faith is centered on something that happened at a particular point in time. In one sense, of course, God’s plan for creation started to be worked out with the creation of the universe itself. But the main act began in “the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius,”as the Romans put it. The Jews reckoned it as “during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”We would refer to that as parts of the years A.D. 28 and 29.

**GRAPHIC: That abbreviation “A.D.” stands for the Latin *anno domini,*meaning “the year of our Lord.”** We can see the significance of the things the gospel tells us about in the fact that time has been calculated (approximately) from the birth of the one Christians believe to be the Lord, the one whose coming is being prepared for in our reading from Luke 3.

Today, in our world of many faiths and political correctness, the abbreviation “CE,” for “Common Era,” is often used instead of “A.D.,” but even so, the fact that the Common Era begins with Jesus’ birth is important. The events of the gospel have made an indelible mark on our history and our culture.

**The fullness of time**

Something happened at a particular time — at the *right* time. Paul would later call it the *fullness* of time: **GRAPHIC: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,**”[[1]](#endnote-1)he writes in Galatians.It was a time when promises were fulfilled, and hopes realized. One of the prophets of Israel had expressed those promises and pointed toward those hopes when he said, in words quoted in our gospel text, **GRAPHIC: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” A road is going to be cleared, with hills leveled and crooked parts straightened out. Everything that stands in the way will be removed.[[2]](#endnote-2)**

Those hopes were, first of all, just the quite-understandable longings of the downtrodden people of Israel: their return from exile, freedom from foreign oppressors, restoration of the kingdom of David, vindication of the nation of Israel and reestablishment of the covenant that God had made with them long ago.

But the promises of the prophet speak to the deepest hopes of *all* nations. There will be freedom and justice, and all people will have the necessities of life. Most important of all, the separation of people from God will be bridged. Sin will be forgiven and guilt, removed; death will no longer be something to fear, and humanity will become what it is meant to be in God’s sight. The prophet Isaiah had said that, and John the Baptist quotes him: **(Same slide)** **“And all flesh” —*all* flesh, everybody — “shall see the salvation of God.”**

But at the time Jesus came, there hadn’t been any prophets for centuries. Hopes languished and promises seemed to be only dreams. The very fact that reference had to be made to the reign of a Roman emperor was a reminder that Judea was now just a Roman province. But in the middle of that foreign occupation and oppression, something revolutionary happened: GRAPHIC: “The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” We call him John the Baptist.

**Whose time?**

Phraseslike “The word of God came to ...” are often found in the Hebrew Scriptures, followed by the name of one of the prophets. It’s how stories of the call of prophets and their messages begin, with the burning, irresistible weight of God’s communication grabbing hold of people like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. So when, in the time of Jesus, the word of God came to John, it meant that prophecy wasn’t obsolete! God’s word still came to Israel! And John prophesied. He was not the fulfillment himself, but he was the one preparing the way for the coming of the Word of God to our world, the eternal Word who was with God in the beginning. An old English poet imagined the prophet speaking to Jerusalem **GRAPHIC:**

***Now look around you, across the wide world***

***And above you, at oceans and the great hanging***

***Arch of the sky — see how Heaven’s***

***King comes to you, longing for His death.*[[3]](#endnote-3)**

 Christ came in the fullness of time, as the fulfillment of time. He was more than the Hebrew prophets expected and greater than the one John looked for to separate the righteous from the wicked. He is beyond what the philosophers and seers of the nations may have caught hints of. God comes in the flesh — *our* flesh — to take our sin and be our righteousness, to die our death and defeat our death and be our life. God came to save us at the right time.

But whose right time? **GRAPHIC: Einstein showed us that time is not absolute but relative, affected by speed and place.** There are different times for each observer, for each reference frame. Whose time was it that was fulfilled when John came to prepare the way in that fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar?

That was the common time of the world, measured by the reigns of kings and years of priests, the time we keep with our calendars. The time of the world was right. Perhaps that was because the scriptures of Israel had been translated into the Greek language that many people around the Mediterranean understood, so the scriptures were available to Gentiles.

Perhaps it was because of the peace the Romans imposed. As oppressive as the empire could be to some of its peoples, it did bring order and extended a network of roads from the borders of Arabia to the north of Britain, and that enabled the word of Christ’s coming to be spread rapidly. Perhaps those were reasons for the rightness of the time. But for whatever reasons there may have been in the wisdom of God, it was the right time for the world.

**Your time**

That was nearly 2,000 years ago. **GRAPHIC: But God comes at the right time for us as well.** It’s kind of like the way it is when you sit in the airport and hear boarding calls for different flights. Most of those announcements don’t matter to you. But when the call comes for your flight, it’s time for you to get on board.

When the time is fulfilled for you, at your proper time, the Word of God is living and active for you. That may have happened long ago when you were baptized, or perhaps later when the awareness of what that meant burst upon you. Perhaps it was a particular sermon you heard, a certain Bible text you read, or a time when, kneeling at the communion rail, you realized what “The body of Christ, given for you” really means.

Maybe — probably — the right time for you has happened more than once. It could be when hearing the old familiar Christmas story again later this month. By the grace of God, it is the right time as often as Christ comes in the power of the Spirit through word and sacrament and your mind and heart are opened to him. Then all that needs to be said is “Yes.”

**GRAPHIC: “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”**

In the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. Galatians 4:4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah 40:3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. From the Advent Lyrics in *Poems from the Old English*, tr. Burton Raffel (University of Nebraska, 1964), 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)