

January 24, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time/ "Word of God" Sunday

"Time" is something that's always on our minds, in one way or another. We're always mindful of what "time" I need to get up in the morning, and what "time" I have to (or if you're older like me, get to) go to bed at night; when will we eat our next meal; and maybe some here are wondering "how long will this Homily be"? In so many ways, our lives are controlled by "time"---how many seconds, minutes, hours in a day; how many days in a week; weeks in a month; years in our lifetime. We are very familiar with the "truisms": "Time marches on"; and "Time waits for no one", meaning that no matter what we do, how well we use time, or even how much we waste time, "Time" keeps moving forward----and each day, month and year keeps moving forward, whether we want it to or not.

That's exactly what St. Paul told the Corinthians in today's Second Reading with a sense of urgency, when he bluntly said: *"I tell you, brothers and sisters, the time is running out."*

Time is a measurable reality; and in a finite world, we understand that there will come a moment when there will be no more "time", ultimately for our world, and at some point, for each of our lives in this world. However, today's Readings are also about "time" in another way----not as a "measurable reality"---minutes, hours, days and years---but as an "opportunity", or as a season of possibility.

That's what we heard Jesus proclaiming at the beginning of His very first Sermon in today's Gospel passage. As St. Mark wrote: *"Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God, saying: 'This is the time of fulfillment'."* John the Baptist's mission was over; Jesus' mission has begun, and His message was that this was a "new time"---a time of possibility----a time for change----a time to see things differently----a time to believe in God's Kingdom---a time to change course, and to follow Him.

Today's Readings remind us that there are two different ways to understand time; we oftentimes refer to those two distinctions the way the ancient Greek philosophers did: "Chronos"---refers to time as a measurable resource (from which the word "chronology" comes); and "Kairos"---which means an "appointed time", an opportune moment, or a special season.

For example we could all stop and check our watches (or phones) and see that it's 11:50 a.m. on January 24, 2021. But we could also just as correctly say, that on this, the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, we are living in a time of great stress, suffering and death due to the worldwide COVID-19 Pandemic, and that we are living in a very turbulent time in our Society.

Today's Readings remind us of both those realities: "Time IS running out." But also, "This IS the Time of fulfillment." What our response to both those statements needs to be is the same: to do what the Ninevites did in today's First Reading when Jonah, the reluctant Prophet of God, warned them that they only had *"Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed."* And to do what at least some of the people did when Jesus announced that *"The Kingdom of God was at hand."* We need to *"Repent"* and then *"Believe in the Gospel"*.

We're all very familiar with the Prophet Jonah in the Old Testament. It's one of the shortest Books in the Bible, and Jonah is one of the most uncooperative, reluctant, and downright unwilling "prophets" ever. Jonah hated the Ninevites and was quite upset that God wanted to save them from destruction; he was especially angry that God was asking him to be God's agent in delivering the message. So, even though Jonah went to great lengths to run away from God and that mission (including the whole episode about taking a ship going the other direction, being thrown into the sea, swallowed by a whale, and then being spewed onto the shore of Nineveh), and even though Jonah only half-heartedly delivered God's warning, the people of Nineveh not only said they were sorry, but completely changed their ways, as we heard in the last part of today's Reading: *When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil ways, He did not carry out what He had threatened to do to them."*

Similarly in today's Gospel, we hear Jesus also announcing a "time" of fulfillment---which was another way to say what Jonah was told to say: "your time is limited, and it's time for you to consider your lives, how you're living, and what you might need to do differently." The message that Jesus delivered is actually a summary of the entire Gospel: *"The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and Believe."* But then, to those who did "repent" and "believe", came the most important part: *"Follow Me, and I will make you into Fishers of Men."*

John the Baptist had been preparing the way for Jesus---he was the forerunner. But now, all that John the Baptist had foretold, was here---in Jesus, and Jesus was telling the world that right there in the midst of that particular

chronological time of the Jewish people, under the crushing oppression of the Roman Empire, “*the Kingdom of God is at hand*”----a new, spiritual, Kingdom was available to them. And that message is true for all chronological time, including our own time. Right here and now, in 2021, in the midst of this time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and in the midst of these challenging times of social unrest and political divisions, “*the Kingdom of God is at hand*”.

And what those first followers of Jesus were asked to do, and what we, as Jesus’ followers here in the 21st century are asked to do, is the same: “*Repent.....Believe in the Gospel.....and, then--- Follow Jesus.*”

What does “Repent” mean? It means so much more than to “be sorry for our sins”, or to “feel badly for something we have done”. “Repent” comes from a powerful Greek word, “*metanoia*”, and it means to change one’s heart---to change directions----to turn around and go in a different direction. It means doing what the Ninevites did----not just to say “I’m sorry”, but to demonstrate by their actions that they were sorry; that they would change their ways; that they would forgive one another, live with each other with love and respect, and to show mercy to others as God had shown them His mercy. When Jesus invites us to “Repent”, He’s really calling us to believe that God can, and will, do something completely new within us, if we open our hearts to that possibility. The repentance that Jesus asks of us goes well beyond saying I’m sorry for what I’ve done, which focuses on our past. If we keep committing the same sins, and tell God we’re sorry for them, but continue to keep committing those same sins over and over again, there doesn’t appear to be true repentance at work. What Jesus means by asking us to “Repent”----“*metanoia*”---is for us to turn our attention to the future----Jesus fills us with Hope, and gives us a new vision of life.

To say that “the Kingdom of God is at hand” means that God’s “future” breaks into our chronological “present”, and invites us to live our present with His vision for what is possible if/when we live according to His Word. When we turn away from the sins of our past, and allow God’s vision for our present to guide us into the future, we’re then following Jesus’ second invitation---to “*believe in the Gospel*”.

And that leads to the 3rd and final part of Jesus’ message. After delivering His message, Jesus saw two sets of brothers----Simon and Andrew, and then James and John. Jesus simply extended the invitation: “*Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.*” St. Mark is really short on details here. We would assume that

Jesus would have had to have said much more than that for them to drop everything, right then and there, and follow Jesus; to leave their homes, their father, their livelihood, everything in their lives up to that point, and begin to follow after Someone they just met?! Whatever it was that Jesus said, it stimulated and invigorated them; it caused their hearts to start beating harder and their adrenalin to flow faster. It certainly touched their hearts and souls at the very core.

The exciting thing about our spiritual life is that God always wants to help us to become our better selves. Jesus says the same thing to us as He did to those first four Apostles: "Come after Me, and I will make you into something more." Those fishermen were probably pretty skilled at fishing---maybe some of the best in Galilee. Who knows----had they stayed there, perhaps they could have been voted "Best Fishermen of all time". But because they followed Jesus, they have become four of the most famous and revered names in Christianity. Jesus saw the potential within them; and because they responded to Jesus' invitation, they were able to realize that potential.

Jesus says the same thing to all of us. To the young people among us who are still trying to decide what to do with their lives, Jesus extends that same invitation: No matter what career, or vocation, you're considering----first and foremost: "*Repent.....Believe in the Gospel.....Follow after Me.*" But similarly, to those of us who have already made our life choices and are following career paths; those of us who are established in our life vocations as married people, single people, people ordained for service to the Church; to those who are in the prime of life, and to those of us who are in the later stages of our lives---to all of us, Jesus continues to invite us: "*Repent.....Believe in the Gospel....Follow after Me*", and I will make you into something more than you are.

This IS the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God IS here. Jesus asks us to "repent" and allow God's future to break into our present, so that our lives can be filled with Hope, and that we have a clear vision of the future.

God wants each of us to come to Him, just as surely as He wanted the Ninevites to turn away from their sinful way of life; just as surely as St. Paul wanted the Corinthians to realize they were running out of time to change their ways. God loves each of us, just as surely as Jesus loved Simon and Andrew, James and John, and all the other Apostles, Disciples, and Followers of Jesus down thru these past 21 centuries, and asks us to find our true selves in Him.

How sad it is that so often, we human beings think of God as Someone only concerned with punishing us for our sins, or checking up on us/watching us to see if we get out of line. But all the Readings we've heard today, and the message of the entire Bible, is exactly the opposite---that our God loves us unconditionally, that His Word constantly calls us to return to Him, that in the fullness of time, His Word was spoken with such intensity that His Word became Flesh in Jesus---God with us---Who gave His life to save us from our sins. Our God wants us to live with Him forever in Heaven.

And all we need to do is open our hearts to His Word, respond in Love to Jesus' invitation, be willing to open ourselves to this, the "time of fulfillment" by "repenting....believing in the Gospel.....and following Jesus, Who sees our potential for holiness, and will lead us into Eternal Life with Him---if we allow Him to do so. And in this case, any "time" is the right "time"---and there's no "time" like the present!

God bless you, now and always!