

"GOOD NEWS: IT'S ABOUT TIME"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

I want to begin this sermon by telling you about two dreams that I had back in the early Fall. I do this with some trepidation for fear that you'll think it's finally happened - Clarke has checked out!

TWO REASONS

I share them for two reasons. First, because I believe there's something universal about them. Secondly, because I hope they will help to illumine the meaning of this passage from the Gospel of Mark, which is our text for this morning.

"The time of waiting is over, the Kingdom of God is here. Repent, and believe this good news."

I confess that it was a tough Fall for me - unusually demanding and very frustrating for me. Maybe that was the reason. Or, maybe it's just been a culmination of a time in which I've tried unsuccessfully to make my world be the way I want it to be. I haven't been able to do that. And during such times I think we all come up against the hard fact of the reality of the world and of our limitations as human beings.

During the day, during waking hours, I can pretend to handle things coolly and rationally, but when sleep comes, it opens the attic door and I see the anxieties and fears of my life. It doesn't happen very often, but when it does, it prompts me to take notice and conduct a bit of auto-analysis. Which I did, in the early morning hours sometime back and which I share with you now, with the full knowledge that there may be in the congregation a psychiatrist who might hand me his card after the service with an invitation to stop by.

FIRST DREAM

The first dream I had I've never had before. I call it my "Clark Kent Dream". Yes, I dreamt I could fly and it was a wonderful feeling, quite exhilarating. I didn't just see myself flying in this dream, I experienced flying....lifting myself off the ground and travelling over great distance. I call that my "Clark Kent Dream" because nobody else knew I had this supernatural power. They thought I was a mild-mannered, somewhat ineffectual Methodist minister. "He doesn't even swing, so how could he possibly fly?" That's what they were thinking. So they don't know. They don't know the powers that I have. It was wonderful, that dream of flying.

I actually felt weightless. I think it must have been similar to the experience that Lindberg described in his book about flying across the Atlantic in the Spirit of St. Louis - crammed into that cockpit for all those hours, deprived of sleep....he felt his spirit disengaged from his body, as if he could look down upon himself. It must have been something like that which I felt. I know when I woke up at 2 in the morning that I wasn't weightless at all. In fact, I felt heavy, my body rigid, being pressed down, as it were, by a heavy weight into the mattress.

I'm sure there's some physiological explanation for this sensation that I experienced, maybe like having your foot fall asleep. But what is important is the way my unconscious used this sensation, no matter the cause, to say something to me about myself.

perhaps it's no accident that after a hard week, with feelings of occasional weariness and frustration here at work reminding me that I'm no longer the kid I was when I first came here to the Big Apple and this Church, plus a telephone call from someone telling me that my pension isn't going to be that great and another call from a daughter in college asking for more spending money, that I should dream that I possess a kind of immortality, a freedom from human limitations. I who let myself be weighed down with the burdens that I feel I have to carry around, like an old workhorse, dream that I can soar, be free, like an eagle.

SECOND DREAM

Well, that's my analysis of the Clark Kent dream. In a short time I fell asleep and saw the other part of this double feature, the other dream. It wasn't as pleasant as the first one...I'll tell you that. I call this one my "Franz Kafka Dream", because it's somewhat similar to the novels and short stories that Franz Kafka wrote, stories about people in the modern world confronted with the impersonal, menacing bureaucracies that control our lives and from which we have no escape. We feel we're trapped, and that our destinies are being controlled by powers beyond ourselves, powers that are faceless and uncaring.

The second dream was like that. Call it "Kafka-esque". I was on a trip in a foreign land, actually on a tour with other people. I'm sure my summer travels were at work in my sub-conscious. We arrived at a place that looked like an American compound in a foreign land. We were greeted there by several attractive young people, the kind that you see at Disney World who work as hosts; and hostesses. It was a good feeling...I felt at home, comfortable...

But then I began to recognize these people. There was something about them that made me wonder if they were terrorists. I had seen them before. And then it came back to me. This was not some friendly oasis at all, but this was a dangerous and hostile airport we were in. And the workers who were helping our party get settled and through customs were really agents of a power that is seeking to do harm and cause havoc. I knew this and sought to warn the others, but every time I approached somebody in our party they were with one of these hosts or hostesses who saw me and began to lead them away.

So I had only one hope and that was to find our leader, our tour guide. But of course he couldn't be found. I knew what had happened. They had separated him from the rest of us. He must be in the main terminal. So I made for that terminal and there he was, talking on the phone. My hopes increased. I thought, thank God, he's discovered the trap and is calling for help. But as I moved toward him, out of the shadows came the face of one I recognized as the enemy, the one who had already tried to enslave me. I turned to our tour guide, our leader, and saw a vacant expression on his face, as if he had been drugged, and noticed that he was feebly trying to dial a number he could no longer remember. And then as that menacing figure in the shadows moved to take this man away, I grabbed his arm to stop him. And he turned and came toward me, and I swung with my fist and hit him squarely in the face. He kept coming, coming toward me.

Now that's when I woke up. It was about five am and rather than risk seeing the end of that dream, I decided I'd stay awake the rest of the night, turn on the TV (which I did) and contemplate quietly the theological implications of all this that had happened. These are my conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

I concluded that the first dream illustrated the frustration of living with human limitations - my human limitations, the way I am. And the second dream expressed my anxiety about the world that you and I have to live in and work in. Is it trustworthy? Am I going to succeed? I have to trust that world as you do. Do my honest and sincere efforts find results? Can it be trusted? My fear is that there is some malicious, devilish design beneath the surface of things that you can't see, and no matter how hard you try or how sincere you are, you might be betrayed.

In one lousy night's sleep, I had revealed to me the two temptations of human life - the inability to accept ourselves as we are, and the inability to trust the world as it is. And it's to these two temptations that Mark addresses his Gospel:

"The time of waiting is over. The Kingdom of God is here.
God's reign has begun. Repent, and trust this Good News".

MARK'S GOSPEL

This is Mark's summary of what Jesus taught. It serves as a preface to his Gospel, and it's followed by the record of incidents in the life of Jesus that illustrate when it means to announce that "The time of waiting is over. The Kingdom of God is here". And most of these incidents, these stories are stories about Jesus doing battle with the demons that haunt us. Those powers that hinder us.

As I read Mark's Gospel, I'm always astounded at the number of battles that Jesus has with the powers that enslave us, those powers that we recognize only in our dreams now. And when you read Mark, you'll also notice that whereas all the people including the disciples do not know who He really is, two forces in this life do: the demons who control our inner world, they know who He is and they flee from Him. And the political powers that control the outer world. They recognize Him, too. And from the beginning, they plot to destroy Him.

You get the impression as you read Mark's Gospel that Jesus has come to take charge of this world. And whatever it is, therefore, that holds you back from the kind of life that God has created you to live, He has come to set you free. And maybe that's why so many of the stories in Mark resemble scenarios of dreams, beginning with the Temptation Story in the first chapter, continuing right on through all the encounters with demons that paralyze people, or make them pitiful creatures that have to live on the periphery of society and told that their condition is some sort of curse upon their life that they just have to endure. Maybe Mark tells the story of Jesus encountering this world in that way because so often what holds us back is what is inside us, that is to say, our fears and our anxieties about life and about ourselves. That's what we call them today - fears and anxieties. In Jesus' day they called them demons and He came to cast them out!

And to the bureaucracies and systems - secular and religious, that oppress people in the name of saving them, He comes as a seditionist - a fact about the Bible that those of us in the white middle class have difficulty at times seeing. But oppressed people in every age have seen it. They see that His confrontation with the powers of this world is a way of announcing that God has come to set them free from all that holds them in bondage. And when God acts to see us free - no power on earth can stop Him. Not Rome. Not death

itself. That's why Mark begins the story of Jesus with the announcement that "The time of waiting is over. The reign of God is here. Repent and trust this Good News."

TIME / ECCLESIASTES

You may have noticed we had an Old Testament reading this morning as well as a New Testament passage. You may have recognized it as that famous passage from Ecclesiastes and about time because it is the way that most of us probably look at time - our time. Here it again:

"For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to love and a time to hate."

To me this is a somewhat fatalistic view of life. It says life brings sorrow and pain, joy and dancing, times we can enjoy and times that we can only endure and those times just "come upon us", and there is nothing that we did to cause them and there's nothing we can do to get rid of them. All we can do is endure those times. That's a fatalistic vision.

I tend to feel at times that Ecclesiastes was "bootlegged" into the Bible. It doesn't really belong there. Everywhere else in the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments there are only two kinds of time. There's the time of waiting, and there is the time of decision. Here in Ecclesiastes you're invited to accept passively all the seasons that life gives you. But in the rest of the Bible you are called to make a choice about the life that God has promised you. That's what repentance means as it is used here in this context. It means "choose" the life that God has promised you. "Repent and trust this Good News".

A WORD ABOUT REPENTANCE

A few words then about repentance. It's probably not one of your favorite words. For most it has taken on across the years a negative, moralistic tone. For most, it means feeling sorry for, somehow even paying for doing bad things. It's come to mean something like penance.

Repentance means to choose the life that God has promised you. The time of waiting for that life to come is over. The reign of God is here. Repentance means rejecting the idea that there are forces outside of you that are determining the quality of your life, that you are captive to all the times under heaven. To repent means to see that there are only two times in this world - the time before God acts and the time after. The time of waiting. The time of choosing. The Gospel has announced to us that God has acted supremely in Christ, and says that the time of waiting is over, the new age is here. Get on board. Now life is in your own hands. How are you going to live it. Are you going to live it as if Jesus has come, or as He hasn't come.

Note that this passage also includes the calling of the Disciples, and it says that Jesus came up to them where they worked and said, "Follow Me". They had to choose. Were they going to leave the old age behind and follow Him into a new age? And they are there for us - those disciples - to show us that it's not going to be any different with us. Jesus will say the same thing to us.

"Follow Me". And then we will have to decide. You must decide what time it is, for you. Is it the time of waiting, when you continue in your misery, or is it the time when you start living the life that God has promised you through Jesus Christ? It's up to you, in a very real sense. Because while you were trying to make up your mind about God, God made up His mind about you. That's the heart of the Gospel. Before you chose Him, He has chosen you. And He's there for you, whether you're ready for Him or not.

CLOSING And friends in Christ, I cling to that. I need that. I - who have the nightmares. Because they reveal to me that I am still tempted to see life the way Ecclesiastes described it, to accept the image that I have of myself or that others give me, instead of trusting who God says I am. Or, to see the world outside of me, and the future that's ahead of me as a threat rather than as a promise.

So repentance, for me, is not just a one-time occasion. It's a recurring confirmation of my faith, because I still have seasons of mourning, weariness, self-pity and self-doubt. I still have seasons of hate and times when things are in danger of coming apart and breaking down. And when they come, my temptation (and it may be the same with you) is to think that this is what life is like. This is the way I have to live my life...this hole I've dug is to be my permanent home, so I might as well be comfortable and wait until someone or something happens to change the time.

And that's why I need the Church, because the Church won't let me live that way. The Church keeps proclaiming: the time of waiting is over, the time of deciding how you're going to live is here. Repent and trust this good news.

THE END You may have come here this morning unready to hear that. You may still be in your private season of mourning or weeping or tearing down. But when you are ready to dance, and to laugh, and to make peace, and put the stones back together, I want you to know, you can do it! Because, praise God,

"The time of waiting is over. The Kingdom is here. Repent and trust this Good News that has come to us."