

Jonah 3: 1-10
I Corinthians 7: 29-31
Mark 1: 14-20

Urgency
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Alarm bells and ring-tones: some of us structure our lives with these helpers. From the simple timer on your oven to let you know the cookies are done, to the smoke alarm in your house letting you know that the cookies have burned, to the interesting sounds coming out of your smartphone letting you know that you have a text or a message, we are *so* tuned in...at least to certain sounds.

Dr. Paul Atchley, a cognitive psychologist at Kansas University studies all this. “We’re inherently social organisms,” he says. There’s almost nothing more compelling than social information, which activates part of your brain’s reward system. Your brain is also hardwired to respond to new sights or sounds. For most of human history, a sudden noise might have signaled the presence of a predator. I think that why we often react so strongly to the sound of a crying infant – it really jangles our nerves. And something like a buzz or beep or flashing light is tapping into that threat detection system, Atchley explains. Combine that sudden beep with the implicit promise of new social information, and you have a near-perfect, un-ignorable stimulus that will pull your focus away from whatever task your brain is working on at that moment. You might say, OK just turn your phone off for an hour. But Dr. Atchley also says “There’s something called ‘phantom text syndrome.’ You think you hear a text or alert, but there isn’t one.” The convenience of modern communication makes everything seem urgent, so how can we separate out an essential message from the trivial?

The prophet, or preacher, Jonah had some important, life or death communication to give to the people of Nineveh, and he manages to do it in a very concise manner: much shorter than a tweet, for instance. One sentence – in the Hebrew it is five words: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” That one sentence makes the entire city, 120,000 people, believe God, repent, start fasting and praying...and they change God’s mind. Jonah: a hero, the most successful communicator ever!

Our story from the Hebrew Scriptures is full of exaggeration and hyperbole, full of irony. It seems that Jonah is also the most reluctant communicator ever. He is also the most mean-spirited, angry when the Ninevites listen to him and are forgiven. He has conversations with God that makes us smile. He took his own preaching so seriously, he believed so enthusiastically in that 40 day window of time, that he couldn’t handle it when people actually responded to his message right away. This is an odd story about the reluctance and bad will of a prophet, and the immediate and enthusiastic good will of those bad foreigners, those sinners, those Ninevites. And God’s timing is a little off: it is supposed to take three days to walk across the city (I think that it would make it 50 miles in diameter), but the whole city responds after one day of preaching. It is supposed to take 40 days for God’s judgment to arrive, but it is deflected right away. Clearly, the numbers in the story, the timing, the human measurements of God’s grace, are inadequate.

Speaking of numbers, I read an article recently about a survey taken of churchgoing Americans. Here are some statistics: 46 percent said that their lives have not changed a bit due to their time in the pews. On the other hand, two thirds said that they felt a “real and personal connection” with God while attending church. Among those who attend every week, 44 percent said that they felt God’s presence every week and 18 percent said that they had that experience once a month. Here’s a good one for my humility: three out of five church attenders said that they could not recall an important new religious insight from their last church visit. Don’t you love surveys?

This year, the lectionary gives us many readings from the Gospel of Mark. It is the shortest Gospel, and sometimes the writer seems to be in a hurry. In today’s reading, we hear the word “immediately” twice: “and immediately they left their nets and followed him” and “immediately he called them” – James and John. This connecting phrase, “and immediately,” is the most common phrase in Mark’s Gospel: he uses it 33 times in 16 chapters. Jesus’ ministry is almost frenetic: he seems to be moving so quickly, proclaiming so insistently, going from town to town until he runs headlong to disaster in Jerusalem. There is an urgency to this story that pulls us along, scooping us up with those first disciples. They didn’t even know what they were getting into: all they had was that brief 3 part introduction – hardly longer than Jonah’s 5 words: The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news. So we might ask ourselves, what was the hurry? What time was fulfilled? How did those fishermen see themselves as fitting onto this heavenly timeline?

Jesus was not talking about clock time or alarm time or chronological time when he called those disciples. He was talking about *kairos*, which means the right moment or the opportune moment. It can also mean weather, so it makes us think of seasons and change. Jesus seems to be saying that the decisive moment has arrived: God’s time is now. It is your moment for deciding and responding. Then Jesus starts talking about the Kingdom and Good News. We might not have noticed, but he starts getting political.

The Kingdom of God poses a threat to other kingdoms. The Good News of God poses a threat to any other news. God’s timeline poses a threat to our human schemes and schedules. Good news is also known as Gospel, or evangelion. This is a word that was already in use by the Roman Empire. For them, a gospel was essentially Roman propaganda: news of a military victory or the crowning of a new emperor or a reason to worship the emperor. This “Good News” was actually a way of taming conquered people, a sign of control. When Jesus appropriates this word, it is a signal that he speaks for another power. An alternate reality has broken in, another ruler will claim citizens, a new way of living is possible.

Two other words in his proclamation need explaining. Jesus, like John the Baptist before him, asks people to **repent**: to turn towards God and live into the new reality. This is not condemnation: it is a call to freedom. ‘Repent’ is an action verb, not an introspective state. He comes upon people at work and calls them to another kind of work. He will show them the work by doing it. They will follow by imitating. Then he asks them to **believe** the Good News. He does not ask them to recite a creed or pass a test of dogma. He is asking them to take actions that display a radical trust of God’s Good News. Jesus first radical act was to start forming a new community. This is the place good news happens; this is the place where time is fulfilled and redeemed; this is the place where God’s Kingdom draws very near.

This new community would be a repenting community – in the sense that they would turn and seek transformation. They would turn from existing political and social structures and timing. They would find new identities and new names, not bound by economic level or inheritance or status within the Empire, but by response to and trust in divine mercy and compassion, as demonstrated by Jesus. Why wait to be part of that? This is urgent! Fishing on the Sea of Galilee could wait while the formation of the new community began.

The kairos moment is not about how many days we have left, or how many e-mails we answer, but how each day can be spent doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God. The kairos moment is radical trust in God's movement through human community. In the last couple of weeks I have heard many quotes of Martin Luther King, Jr. One quote comes back to me now: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." How is that for a piece of Good News? The arc of the moral universe: we cannot know where we are on that arc of time. But we can bend in that direction, starting right now.

Follow me, asks the rabbi from Nazareth. Follow me into this newly arrived kingdom. Drop your nets. When we are called to follow, we might have to drop some things too, some prized possessions: like our understanding of who's in charge, what power is, what wisdom is, what good uses of time are, who's in and who's out, what God's judgment and mercy look like. That's a first step. Simon and Andrew, James and John found out that fishing nets were just the first things they would have to drop in order to follow this good news. As they kept following, they dropped prejudices about foreigners and women. They dropped ideas about the worldly success of the Messiah. Eventually, they dropped fear itself as they became courageous leaders themselves. Continual learning, with times of resistance and questioning. Kind of like us. The kairos moment presented itself again and again. They kept hearing more Good News. They kept learning to lean with the moral arc of the universe.

I started with some thoughts about alarms and sound signals. Then we heard about the preaching of Jonah and the Gospel according to Mark. Here's another question: what is the Gospel, the Good News, according to us? What is the Good News according to the Norwich Congregational Church? If we knew what it was that inspired us with radical trust, if we knew what it was that helped us lean into the future, bending towards justice, I think we'd want to act on it now. I think we'd want to share it. Now.

Before Albert Schweitzer became a medical missionary in Africa, he was a theologian. The closing paragraph of his most famous book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, goes like this: He comes to us as One unknown. Without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

In fellowship with each other and the One who calls, in toil and conflict and suffering and joy, we can discover – and share - the Good News. We can leave the pews and know that our time will be well spent on that road.