

The Opportune Moment

sermon digest

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Matthew 16:1-3

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In her last years, Carolyn's mother had a clock for the visually impaired that announced every hour and half-hour in an audible voice and provided in the same digital voice the exact time with the push of a button. It was a slight advance over the Westminster Chime on our wall clock at home, but it was still just a machine that left time-based decisions to the discretion of the person in the room. The determination that it was time to go, to take medication, to watch a TV program, or to retire for the evening was a matter of personal decision, not a mechanical choice.

Do you know what time it is? The question causes eyes to start searching for a clock or watch, and we quickly post the answer, "eleven o'clock." In the time it takes to find the clock, register the numbers in our heads and convert them to words on our lips, we have already moved beyond the moment the question was asked. In the scientific world that measures time in nanoseconds, the question is concerned with a precise mark on the abstract scale of time. Even if our clocks were perfect, and they are not, we never get an exact answer to our question; and we are seldom involved in the question behind the question that calls for a personal decision or human action, the primary concern of Judeo-Christian faith.

Theologian Paul Tillich observed the distinction in the New Testament between two Greek words for time. *Chronos* was a word for the *mechanics* of time, measuring a point on the scale of history. Chronological time was typical of the Greek mind concerned with an abstract measure superimposed on the movement of history. Like modern science, the Greek mind viewed time in one-dimension with little concern about the depth of meaning or purpose.

On the other hand, *Kairos* was concerned with the *meaning* of time, a question that could not be answered with mere numbers. *Kairos* reflected the Hebrew idea that God is involved in the progression of history, that the timing of events ought to be concerned with the purpose of God for the creation. *Kairos* weighed the meaning of time in light of the purpose of God and the decision and action that the present moment requires of us. The poetic meditation on time in Ecclesiastes is a classic example of the Jewish mind: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." The question, "What time is it?" posed alternatives, not numbers: time for birth or death, seedtime or harvest, killing or healing, destruction or construction, weeping or laughter, mourning or dancing. The Jewish God of history is a God of action. Time concerns concrete events in which God is involved, and the question of time responds to the will of God with a corresponding human action. Even when the New Testament uses *chronos*, it is often qualified by the Jewish idea of the meaning of events. When Paul spoke of the birth of Jesus in Galatians 4:4, *chronos* was the moment of fulfillment in time: "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son."

The gospel of Christ identifies the central *kairos* in history with the life and ministry of Jesus. He came preaching: "The time [*kairos*] is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) The *kairos* of the Christ looks to the final *kairos* of history, the crisis of judgment: "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time [*kairos*], before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart." (1 Cor. 4:5)

When Jesus was under scrutiny by people who were demanding miraculous demonstrations of his connection to God, signs from heaven, his response was suitable for the scientific mind of our age. Signs, miraculous demonstration demanded of Jesus, are compared with the power of observation to predict the weather. In fact, the simple observation of the color of the sky to predict the weather now includes atmospheric pressure and satellite observation that would astound the inquisitors of the first century. Jesus turned attention to the weightier matter of the "signs of the times." The word is *kairos*. What is the meaning of this moment? What is the call to action that emerges from events? What is God doing in our history that calls for decision and action from God's people?

Kairos comes with crisis. A year ago, I was visiting family in Houston and got into a conversation with my niece's husband about the crazy upward spiral of the stock market. With retirement approaching, Gary said that he decided to move his 401-K out of the market. Either he was just lucky,

or he had a better understanding of the *kairos* of Wall Street than I had. Now that we are in the worst recession since the 1930's we keep hearing reports from economists who knew all along that we were headed for the wall. I wonder where they were when I needed them. Whether we are talking about Wall Street or Las Vegas, timing and decision are more critical than just the time of day.

The right moment of the coming of Christ is an oft-repeated observation of New Testament students. Rome was a killing field, corrupt to the core by a Christian standard of justice. John Dominic Crossan is among the scholars who has observed the polarity of Christ and Empire. The Christian faith stood against the cruel injustice and empty promise of Roman materialism. Christian interpreters have also noted positive elements in the rule of Rome: the unification of the Mediterranean world, the absence of any significant war, excellent roads and transportation by sea to carry the Christian gospel to the European continent, a common language *Koine* Greek understood throughout the Empire. It seems that Christ came at the *kairos* moment in history for maximum impact on the world.

Like the poem of Ecclesiastes, the *kairos* moment of opportunity is a time for decision and commitment to a new direction in life. The word crisis, from the Greek word *krisis*-judgment, is a turning point in time based on decisive action. From 1948 to 1994 the official relationship of the majority native Africans and the white Dutch settlers in South Africa was a despicable social rule called "apartheid," racial segregation. In concert, apartheid had theological support from the white Afrikaner Church and the white minority rule of the State. In 1985 a group of South African theologians gathered to produce a statement to the world called "The *Kairos* Document." It has been compared to the Barmen Declaration of confessional Christians opposed to Hitler in the 1930's.

We as a group of theologians have been trying to understand the theological significance of this moment in our history. It is serious, very serious. For very many Christians in South Africa this is the KAIROS, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action. It is a dangerous time because, if this opportunity is missed, and allowed to pass by, the loss for the Church, for the Gospel and for all the people of South Africa will be immeasurable. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He wept over the tragedy of the destruction of the city and the massacre of the people that was imminent, "and all because you did not recognize your opportunity (KAIROS) when God offered it" (Lk 19: 44).

A crisis is a judgment that brings out the best in some people and the worst in others. A crisis is a moment of truth that shows us up for what we really are. There will be no place to hide and no way of pretending to be what we are not in fact. At this moment in South Africa the Church is about to be shown up for what it really is and no cover-up will be possible.

The *kairos* moment for South Africa has proven to be an opportunity for Christians to repent and believe the gospel. Given the violence of both the government and the revolutionaries, South Africa could have been like many of the other African bloody revolutions in our time. I like to think that "The *Kairos* Document" had enough impact on people with Christian roots to guide that nation into a time of transition rather than bloodshed.

South Africa serves as an illustration of the gospel. As Jesus reminded the critics of his day, we do not need a miraculous sign to open the door of understanding of what God is about in the world. All we need to do is open our eyes to evidences all around us that the time has come for an end to institutionally supported injustice, too often the official stand of both the State and the Church. No stretch of the imagination can justify the distance between the haves and have-nots in our world. While we wait for God, like the world of Jesus looked to the heavens for the Son of Man to fall from the sky and to right all wrongs, God waits for the people of covenant to live by the promises we have made to God and to one another.