

“The Time has come!”

Sermon on Sunday, February 18, 2024

Dear church,

“The time has come,” – this phrase from the gospel reading caught my ear this week. It’s an expression that people in today’s world sometimes use when a person reaches the natural end of life. “Her time has come!” It so happens that this Sunday marks the anniversary of Martin Luther’s homecoming. The Reformer died surrounded by friends and supporters in his hometown Eisleben on February 18, 1546. His time had come, suddenly, but not unexpectedly. He died in peace. He had lived a full life.

In the gospels the same expression marks the exact opposite: a beginning, a new era, a God-inspired time of imminent grace, demonstrated in wondrous acts of healing and power. It is estimated that Jesus’ active ministry may have lasted only three years, perhaps even less. Packed into that time frame, shorter than the average college education of today, shorter than most pastor’s tenures in a church, was a curriculum of faith. Not a theoretical curriculum, but practical, applied faith in action. No dogmas and books to be read but new ways to look at the world, recognizing the image of God in all kinds of people: women, children, foreigners, officers, people with a reputation, simple folks, fancy folks, old and young. The time had come to see in all those people the DNA of God. And above all, these words reign supreme in the gospel, and we must hear them today, “Repent, and believe the good news.”

Well, what does repentance mean? The season of Lent is associated with this highly charged religious word: repentance. I’m not sure that the younger people in our community have even heard this word or can tell us what it means. What I associate with it are people showing remorse, people re-thinking their lives, people going to the confession booth, people kneeling before God asking for the strength to do the right thing. Literally, the Greek word “metanoia” used in the gospel of Mark means “change of thinking”. But the way Jesus uses the word is special and unlike most traditional associations with sin. Most Christians would expect Jesus to say, “Repent and sin no more...” In other words, “Clean up your act!” “Straighten up!” But Jesus says, “Repent and believe the good news.” In a nutshell, this statement reveals the core of the gospel and how it differs from most traditional religions. The good news is... what we assume is missing (in our lives, in our world) is already here if only we can see it with the eyes of faith!!!

To understand more deeply what he means let us look at another highly charged word in the vocabulary of religion: sin. People have all kinds of thoughts about sin and what it means. It has been associated with things we do wrong. And we often end up applying it to silly things such as eating too much chocolate or driving a sinfully expensive car, or juicy things, such as “living in sin,” code for an affair. Those things grab people’s attention, especially the last one. Juicy stories sell newspapers. But here, Jesus reminds us of what most teachers of the church have always taught. What we commonly associate with sin are just symptoms of an underlying root cause, which is lack of faith and lack of love. When we lack faith and love, we will seek all kinds of other ways to fill the holes inside of us. But when we are filled with love and faith, the

Kingdom of God is coming to us; yes, when we have that mindset, it has already come. Jesus invited his followers to have this mindset: the kingdom of God is here!

I must say, it is a little bit hard for me to believe in good news right now. Last Friday, one of my heroes died in a Russian prison where he was locked up above the arctic circle in Siberia, a place that reminded everyone who knows something about the Stalin era of the Gulag system. In fact, the prison where he died was not far from one of the worst Gulag prisoner camps of former Russian dark times. And yet, in the face of torture, Alexey Navalny had so much courage, so much fortitude, so much grit, so much humor even, and also, when you listen to his last message: so much faith. He defied the totalitarian forces in his country to the end and he paid for it with his life. He was like a modern John the Baptist, reminding everyone what his country could be and should be. In the gospels, after John the Baptist was thrown into prison by King Herod because he spoke uncomfortable truth to power, Jesus' time came. "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God."

These days, we are flooded with bad news, and it's not all hyped up bad news, it's real and scary. Quite easily it can lead people to lose hope, lose faith, lose a healthy sense of responsibility. Yet, according to Jesus, repentance, the changing of our minds and habits, is connected at the core to our faith and ability to believe in the Kingdom of God. We are invited to be part of the yeast that permeates the entire dough of this world to make it palatable.

"The time has come," Jesus proclaimed. When is our time? Is it now? Of course, it is. After the dreadful pandemic and after years of church decline, after we have managed to create a world full of anxiety, after the deterioration of democracy and the institutions that we were once proud of in the Western world, institutions that have become dysfunctional before our eyes, has not the time come for a serious renewal of church and society? And who will respond to God's call? Where are the leaders in church and society who are responding to God's call? I want to listen and pay attention during these forty days of Lent and open my heart to the spirit. And I invite you to do the same as you kneel and pray and light your candle. If nothing else, it is time to wake up to the Kingdom of God - among us. Amen.