

“It’s Time”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

What happens to this moment when it has already passed? This question intrigues me, when I have time to ponder ideas that have no productive value. *If* we could pause time, we might be able to explore the contours of a moment, and perhaps we could even see how God is pushing at the edges of the moment to try to coax it into shape.

God, who transcends time and space, tries to speak to us through these scriptures, written by the faithful to capture moments of vision and testimony to how God is at work in the world. Paul knew the importance of a moment. He knew we needed to be ready, for whatever the moment might bring... and as for Paul, he believed that Jesus would return at any moment; he was certain Jesus’ return would come in his lifetime, and for that reason Paul never married. He urged others not to marry, unless they burn so hard with desire that they must. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul urged people to not be entangled with earthly attachments, so that they might be ready at any moment to follow God’s lead: let those who have wives be as if they had none; those who mourn be as if they were not mourning; those who rejoice as if they are not rejoicing; those who buy as if they have no possessions; and those who deal with the world as if they have no dealings with it.

There was something about the fishers who became Jesus’ first disciples that helped them be free enough to drop their nets, and ready to respond to return their oars, in that moment, when Jesus invited them, “Follow me.”

I have been to the Sea of Galilee, on a visit to the Holy Land years ago. I tried to feel the Christ-infused moment as I smelled the water, felt the rock of a boat, gazed at the sun that shown back on Jesus 2,000 years ago. After staying on a kibbutz, we headed to the shores where the boat awaited us. We climbed onto the wooden vessel and found seats, as the gentle waves lapped around us. As it turns out, the water in the Sea of Galilee is fresh, not salty, and although it is called a Sea, it is actually a lake, nestled within the rolling hills to the west and south, and the higher mountains of the Golan Heights to the north and east. Riding in that boat, I tried to imagine the many times Jesus headed into-- or even onto-- those very same waters: calming the storm; to get away from the crowds; walking on water; telling the disciples to try casting their nets on the other side of the boat, where they brought in a haul of fish after spending hours catching nothing. I tried to imagine Jesus meeting Simon and Andrew, James and John, fishers by trade, and calling them to leave their boat, leave their nets, and follow him, to become fishers of people.

At the time I was ending my senior year in college, and was feeling a call to seminary. But was the moment right? I was trying to decide my next step: would I go on to seminary, or get to full time work for a few years, and then consider seminary?

As for these fishermen Jesus called, he summoned them from their *trade*-- not straight from rabbinical training, nor from the prophet's platform. In fact, Jesus' close friend and cousin, John, who had baptised Jesus and many others, *had* been a prophet, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A man of the wilderness, without many earthly attachments: prophecy was John's vocation.

But John had been captured and arrested. Soon after, Herod Antipas would have him killed, his head served on a platter. So, maybe Jesus decided he needed followers who actually wouldn't make waves, so to speak. Or, maybe Jesus was so devastated to lose his friend and cousin, that he could not risk losing someone like that again. Maybe he watched James and John mending nets, and thought of his own broken heart at losing his friend to captivity. Seeing that, I wonder if Jesus wanted among him people who could look at torn people and weathered ideas not as brokenness that must be discarded, but as simply unfinished¹.

I wonder if Jesus went to other occupations first. Maybe he went to the tax collectors, and said, "Come, and I will make you collect people." Or he went to physicians, and asked "Come, I will make you healers of souls." Maybe he got turned down a couple times before he reached the fishermen. If Jesus were to show up at a gathering of you and your colleagues, I wonder what kind of invitation he might offer. I wonder how you might respond.

As for me, I don't know much about fishing. And so, yesterday, I was drawn to call someone who does love to fish: Eric Hwang from our congregation. Eric has pivoted from the work he'd been doing for many years to start a company and develop a product-- a fishing pole and tackle set meant for children. As Eric describes it, "One of my most precious memories as a father is waking up early and walking down to the lake to fish with my daughter. I launched DaddyGoFish so I can share this feeling with other families."

I asked Eric what it is about fishing that might have prepared Simon and Andrew, James and John, for the life of discipleship. He had some helpful thoughts to offer.

Eric said that fishing is quiet work. It begins early, before the sun rises. Eric prefers 5, or 5:30 am. Spending that time so quietly on the water gives you the chance to think about yourself and your life. It is a chance to forget about the entanglements of the world that cause great anxiety. At the end of your time fishing, often the problems on your mind when you come to the water are not the same when you leave the water. Eric said, in some ways, that release from anxiety is the salvation so many of us seek when we turn to Jesus.

¹ I use words from Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb" here.

But, Eric noted, the fishermen in the gospels did not just fish as a hobby. It was their livelihood. And it must have been very hard work. They did not have a lot of tools. They did not have a fancy or fast boat. The work of setting sail and casting nets and pulling in fish exhausts the body. On top of that, they encountered the natural elements directly: the sun and the wind, the swells of a gathering storm, the heat and the cold. And so, they knew what it was like to be vulnerable to God's creation, as much as they relied on it. Perhaps Jesus needed people who were so connected to the rhythms of creation to help bring forth a new creation.

Sometimes for fishers, Eric told me, at the end of the day, you just don't bring in any fish. For a trade fisher, that could be disastrous. It might mean you can't feed your family. It has to take a lot of faith, hope, and trust to keep coming back to waters that may --or may not --provide. Someone who has been close to that vulnerability would know the power of bringing loaves and fishes to the hungry masses. As Jesus made ordinary food into sacramental connection, it made sense that he would have people among his disciples who knew about bringing food to table.

We have a few fishers in our church; along with Eric, I know that Ammal and Trish enjoy fishing, and I am sure there are more. But none are pros. Instead, theirs and other occupations and vocations within our church have quite a range:

Actors and attorneys, firefighters and Uber drivers; professors and poets, caregivers, grocery workers, nurses and musicians, and quite a number of teachers-- just to name a few. We have volunteers, whether they are grandparents who take care of grandkids, or, as I heard this week, we have one volunteer who is helping to staff the COVID vaccine clinic we hope to see up and running quite soon in Leonia.

It occurs to me that Jesus did not need a crew of prophets or rabbis to follow him. He needed people who worked with their hands, who knew and needed the value of a day's wage, and who knew the grace of resting after hard work. They could help bring the gospel story to life in ways that Jesus could not share just on his own. In our church, each one of us has a uniquely important way, based in our gifts and personality, our vocation and our voice, to share the story of our faith. No one can tell it quite like you can, and God needs your words and witness to help complete the story and to tell it well.

We are caught in a moment. The poet Amanda Gorman, a 22 year old, black woman, spoke of the moment that finds us in her poem at the inauguration last Wednesday. She wrote,

*For while we have our eyes on the future
history has its eyes on us
This is the era of just redemption
We feared at its inception
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs
of such a terrifying hour*

*but within it we found the power
to author a new chapter
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves
So while once we asked,
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?
Now we assert
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?
We will not march back to what was
but move to what shall be.*

Paul died before seeing Jesus return again, but that didn't mean he was unable to fill his moments with holiness as he shared the story, good news of our faith across land and seas and time. It is a story that shaped history.

We are caught in a moment, and we have the chance to look at what we are doing in and with that moment, but also see where God is at work, shaping this moment, and shaping us. It's time to take part in the story.

I have a visual liturgy to share with you. It is called "Praise Song for a Pandemic," and it's a testimony of how people of many different walks of life share their gifts in discipleship, to this particularly challenging moment of our story together.