

**WHEN *CHRONOS* MEETS *KAIROS*:
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY 2015**

I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on January 18, 2015]

I

There were tornado warnings and torrential rains the night of April 3, 1968.

And so only about 2000 people showed up for the rally at the Mason Temple in Memphis.

Three weeks earlier, in that same venue, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to 14,000 supporters.

King had come to Memphis to support the striking sanitation workers.

He did not plan to speak that night—he asked Ralph Abernathy to take his place.

But about 9:30 p.m. King rose to address the faithful few.

He reminisced about how he had nearly died in 1958 when a deranged woman stabbed him at a Harlem book store.

He related how on his flight from Atlanta to Memphis that morning a bomb scare had caused the pilot to announce to the passengers that a threat to King's life necessitated a special guard on the plane.

Then he continued:

“And then I got into Memphis and some began to say the threats—or talk about the threats—that were out, what would happen to me from some of our white sick brothers. Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now, because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place.

But I'm not concerned about that now; I just want to do God's will....So I'm happy tonight! I'm not worried about anything! I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

The next day at 6:01 p.m., James Earl Ray assassinated King as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. He was 39 years old.

Four days later more than 300,000 people gathered in Atlanta for his funeral.

II

Thursday was Dr. King's birthday, when he would have been 86 years old, and tomorrow is the day when we honor him with a national holiday.

At this juncture in our nation's history, it is important that we, as people of faith, remind ourselves of the impact the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had on our nation and our world and of what it means for us to carry on his legacy.

Part of King's genius was his recognition that *chronos*, mere clock time—the passage of days, weeks, months, and years—is no match for *kairos*—the unique moment of God's visitation.

You plot *chronos* on your calendar:
 your doctor's appointment at 10:00 on Monday...
 your hair appointment at 2:00 on Friday...
 the kids soccer game at 9:00 on Saturday.

With *chronos* you might procrastinate, but with minimal consequences.

You might yawn at *chronos* and be late meeting your friend for coffee, or not remember whether it is Thursday or Friday.

Kairos is different.

Kairos denotes a unique opportunity.

A *kairos* moment presents one with an urgent choice.

A decision must be made,
 a new pathway must be taken,
 a change of direction must be followed.

Chronos is how most of us live our lives day to day.

But kairos is that special moment of divine visitation,
 when we are faced with the choice of answering God's call.

Dr. Paul Farmer responded to the conviction that health is a human right and that all human beings deserve medical care.

Together with four other doctors he founded Partners in Health, and in the process is transforming the lives of the poorest of the poor in Haiti, Peru, and Rwanda and many other countries.

Dr. Muhammad Yunus responded to an inner conviction that poor women should have the opportunity to start small businesses and improve the lives of their families and their communities.

He founded the Grameen Bank in order to provide low interest loans to mostly poor women, and now the practice of microcredit and microfinance is flourishing throughout the world.

Bishop Desmond Tutu heard the call of God, which filled him with the unshakable conviction that all human beings, regardless of the color of their skin, are created in the image of God.

That conviction led him to work with Nelson Mandela, to bring an end to the evil system of apartheid in South Africa.

James Russell Lowell spoke of the kairos moment in his great hymn:

*Once to every man and nation,
 Comes the moment to decide;
 In the strife of truth with falsehood,
 For the good or evil side;
 Some great cause, some great decision,
 Offering each the bloom or blight,
 And the choice goes by forever*

'Twixt that darkness and that light.

When the kairos moment comes,
you can no longer sit on the sidelines.

A decision must be made:

embrace the moment of transformation,
and move into the new future God lays before you,
or stay back and continue to live the same old life
in the same old ways...
with the same old problems that you've always had.

III

In today's Gospel lesson, Mark begins his story of Jesus with a stunning announcement:

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (1:14-15)

There is an immediacy here, a sense of urgency that propels the message.

Cold chills run up and down the spine when the Son of God pronounces the word "time"—

kairos in the Greek, the special time of God's in-breaking.

Later at a crucial moment in Mark's gospel Jesus will declare:

"My time (*kairos*) has not yet come."

He is always aware of where he is in God's *kairos*.

I like how Eugene Peterson phrases verse 15 in *The Message*:

"Times up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe."

As reported by Mark, Jesus calls two sets of brothers.

First he invites Simon Peter and his brother Andrew to embrace the God moment—

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

Their response is instantaneous and unambiguous—

“And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

And if that does not sufficiently punctuate his point, Mark then adds that “when they had gone a little farther,” Jesus calls a second set of brothers, James and John, who were at work in their boat mending the nets.

They too left everything—

their father,

the hired help,

the boat and their nets—

to follow Jesus.

I can't help but wonder: Were these four men aware of God's time?

Is this why they responded so quickly?

I wonder if most of us would have responded a little more deliberately.

Maybe we would think it over for a couple of days?

Maybe we would go home and talk it over with our families?

Will our friends and neighbors think we are crazy?

There seems to be no question in the minds of Peter, Andrew, James, and John that this is God's call to them through this young, vibrant Jesus.

He will become the focus of their existence from that moment on, even though most of the time they don't understand him.

By such obedience to God's call, the world is transformed.

What was true for the four fishermen is also true for us.

The *kairos* has come...

the kingdom of God is at hand...

repent and believe the good news!

Rosa Parks understood the fleeting nature of *chronos*, and the limited opportunities of choosing risk over regret
and urgency over complacency.

She later explained her motivation that December evening:

“I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

Her solitary act launched the Montgomery bus boycott, which propelled 26-year-old M. L. King, Jr. into the forefront of the civil rights movement.

It was an iconic moment of *kairos* in American history.

V

Sisters and Brothers, at some moment in your life,
perhaps when you least expect it,
the *chronos* of minutes, hours, days, and years
will meet the *kairos* of God’s unique moment.

And you will have to decide—
answer the call,
or stay on the sidelines.

Martin Luther King, Jr. answered the call of the *kairos* moment.

As a result of his efforts and countless others over many years of struggle,
our nation was transformed from a land of Jim Crow laws and
segregated restaurants and movie theaters,
to a nation that six years ago inaugurated our first African-
American president.

We have come a long way from our racist, slave-holding past,
but we have to admit that we still have a long way to go.

I was tempted to impress you (or maybe depress you) with a bunch of statistics about the economic divide between whites and blacks in this country.

But such information is readily available on the internet.

If the events of Ferguson, Missouri last summer and elsewhere have taught us anything, it is that the racial divide in this nation is still great and there is still much work to be done before Dr. King's dream of a nation that would live out the full meaning of its creed that "all men (and women) are created equal" is at last fulfilled.

It is important that we, as white Americans, recognize that we cannot know what it is like to be a black person in America.

None of us have had the experience of being discriminated against because of our skin color...

being treated as a threat just because of our presence,
or being subject to the various small insensitivities and
indignities that all African Americans are familiar with.

Until you have walked a mile in another person's shoes,
you cannot know what that person's life is like.

So yes, America still has the challenge of dealing with both personal and systemic racism in our society.

But this can only happen if we are willing to listen to the truth of each other's stories and honor the human struggle of each individual.

We can answer the call of God's kairos moment...

to step away from a past marred by slavery and racism,
to step back from a world caught in the grip of violence and suffering,
to labor together across racial, ethnic, and economic barriers to build a
world of equality, justice and peace,
a world that will be the Beloved Community,
the Peaceable Kingdom,
that Jesus announced
and that Dr. King preached.

Jesus calls his followers to work for reconciliation among all people—

blacks and whites,
 rich and poor,
 gay and straight,
 all nationalities and all faiths.

Jesus was always reaching out to the people no one else wanted.

He was always breaking down the barriers that divided people from one another and kept them from enjoying the abundance of life.

He calls us to do the same...
 to join him in the work of the kingdom...
 to answer his call to strive toward a community of acceptance
 and grace.

No...we won't all be Nobel laureates
 or serve in high office
 or have influence beyond our own immediate circle of friends
 and acquaintances.

But we can answer the kairos call wherever we are.

We can make a difference in the lives of the people around us.

We can build goodwill,
 understanding,
 compassion,
 justice,
 and love.

One of the enduring lessons of Dr. King's life is that God has a mission for each of us.

Sometimes it will be a mission that is difficult to bear,
 but God will always give us the strength to endure.

Dr. King put it better than I could when he said,

"I pray that recognizing the necessity of suffering we will make of it a virtue.... To suffer in a righteous cause is to grow to our humanity's

full stature. If only to save ourselves, we need the vision to see the ordeals of this generation as the opportunity to transform ourselves and American society....

We have ... a responsibility to set out to discover what we are called to do. And after we discover that, we should set out to do it with all of the strength and all of the power that we can muster.... One knows deep down that there is something in the very structure of the cosmos that will ultimately bring about fulfillment and the triumph of that which is right. And this is the only thing that can keep one going in difficult periods."

VI

In the kairos moments,
 let us resolve to carry on Dr. King's legacy,
 that as one people we might march hand in hand into the future,
 to create the Beloved Community
 that Jesus inaugurated
 and that Dr. King gave his life for.

Amen.

Sources:

Dan Clendenin, "The Time Has Come, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2009," Journey with Jesus, retrieved from <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20090119JJ.shtml>.

Dan Clendenin, "When Chronos Meets Kairos, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2006," Journey with Jesus, retrieved from <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060116JJ.shtml>.