

EPIPHANY 3B (January 21, 2018)

The Time is NOW

(Mark 1:14-20)

With the Winter Olympics rapidly approaching next month, *Showtime* has recently been broadcasting “Miracle,” the 2004 movie which chronicled the U.S. Hockey Team’s improbable Gold Medal victory at the 1980 Lake Placid Games. If you’re old enough to remember, or if you’ve seen the film, back then the hockey team of the Soviet Union was considered to be the very best in the world – hands down. They were a veteran team that had been playing together for many years. And having won four straight Olympic gold medals, dating back to 1964, they were again the odds-on favorites in 1980 to win their fifth straight.

In sharp contrast, the U.S. team, on the other hand, was made up of a bunch of college players (average age: 21), all from different schools – talented, but not necessarily the *most* talented players in the country. Moreover, they had only been playing together since the previous summer. And, unlike their Soviet counterparts, only one of the American players was returning from the 1976 U.S. team.

However, Herb Brooks, the U.S. coach, challenged these young men to dig deep down, and to play above and beyond everyone’s expectations – including their own! He taught them an entirely new style of play, worked relentlessly on their conditioning, and, by the time the Olympics rolled around, had convinced them that they could *overcome* their youth and inexperience.

Most of all, he reminded them that they could not and would not win on talent alone. “You think you can win on talent alone? Gentlemen, you don’t *have enough talent* to win on talent alone!”

And then, in the climactic locker-room scene just prior to their matchup with that heavily-favored Soviet team, the film portrayed Brooks saying this:

*Great moments... are born from great opportunity.
And that's what you have here, tonight, boys...
One game. If we played 'em ten times, they might win nine.
But not this game, not tonight. Tonight we skate with them.
Tonight we stay with them... and we shut them down...
You were born to be hockey players. Every one of you!
And you were meant to be here tonight.
This is YOUR time.
Their time is done. It's over. I'm sick and tired
of hearing about what a great hockey team the Soviets have.
Screw 'em.
This is YOUR TIME!
Now go out there and take it!*

And, again, if you're old enough to remember, or if you've seen the film, that's *exactly* what they went out and did! Improbable as it was, inconceivable as it must have certainly seemed at the time to literally everyone who witnessed it, those young and inexperienced Americans went toe-to-toe with the greatest hockey team on the face of the planet – maybe the greatest hockey team ever assembled – and they *won!* They defeated the Soviets 4-3, and then went on to secure the gold medal with a victory over Finland a couple of days later...

In this morning's gospel, we have a very similar kind of moment, I believe. Literally out of nowhere, this heretofore unknown carpenter now turned rabbi, named Jesus, comes to Galilee and begins proclaiming (what Mark tells us) is the “good news of God.”

Up until this very moment in time, you see, the world, and all those who dwelled in it, had been hopelessly dominated by the powers of sin, death, and evil. It wasn't even close. But now, suddenly, someone comes along who tells them that it doesn't have to be that way any longer.

“The time is fulfilled,” said Jesus. In other words, “The time is NOW.” Just like Herb Brooks of Team USA, Jesus is signaling that the past is the past, and a *new* reality has presented itself. Sin, death, and evil may have had their way up until now. But no more. Their time is done. It's over. This is *God's* time. This is *your* time. “The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

And again, just like Herb Brooks, Jesus seems to be impressing upon his listeners here that great moments are indeed born from great opportunity. He is actually telling them, in fact, that this is one of those moments; one of those opportunities. The Greek word for time that Mark uses here is *Kairos* as opposed to *chronos*. I guess you'd say that *chronos* is sort of the generic word for time. But *Kairos*, on the other hand, means the "right" time, or the "opportune" time.

In other words, this isn't just any old moment in time, says Jesus. This is the "right" time, the "opportune" time. Again, great moments are born from great opportunity! And this is precisely that kind of time, that kind of moment, that kind of opportunity. The old ways, and the old world, dominated as they were by the powers of sin, death, and evil, may have had their way. But now a *new day* is dawning. God's kingdom, God's rule, *God's power* is now being unleashed in the world! The past is done. It's over.

Even more than that, God's kingdom, God's rule, is not just some distant time in the future. Nor is it some otherworldly place either. As Charles Robertson describes it: "The kingdom of God is not a place separate from *this* place. It is God's reign – God's presence and power and peace – and is quite near indeed, closer to us than our very breath. Eternity walks side by side with time," says Robertson. Then he goes on, "This is what Jesus tells us at the start of his ministry. You don't have to wait until you die to experience a whole different kind of life. Now is the time. Not someday, not just at our death, but *now*."

And so this is what I want you to do, says Jesus. First: REPENT. In Greek, the word literally means to "change one's mind." So it's more than just saying, "I'm sorry." It means changing your mind *and*... therefore, changing your *behavior* as well.

In those classic *Peanuts* comic strips, you may recall, one of the recurring situations had Lucy holding a football for Charlie Brown to kick. Unfortunately, however, and invariably, just as Charlie Brown would approach the ball to kick it, Lucy would yank it away at the last second and Charlie would end up falling flat on his back.

In one such strip, Lucy again was holding the ball, but Charlie Brown was refusing to kick it. “Please?” said Lucy. “No!” said Charlie Brown. “Every time I try to kick it, you pull it away and I fall on my back.” So, they end up arguing about it for a while. Finally, Lucy says, “Charlie Brown, I have treated you so badly over the years. But I’ve seen the error of my ways! I was wrong. Won’t you please give me another chance?”

Well Charlie Brown is moved by her words, and he says, “Of course, I’ll give you another chance.” So he steps back. And then he runs toward the ball. But at the last second, Lucy once again picks up the ball and Charlie Brown, of course, falls flat on his back. At which point Lucy walks over to him and says, “Recognizing your faults, and actually *changing you ways* are two different things, Charlie Brown!”

Repentance means more than just recognizing your faults, doesn’t it? It also means changing your ways as well. And while we’re talking about it, repentance *also* assumes that you actually *recognize* that you have faults in the first place.

A number of years ago, the famed psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, wrote a book entitled “Whatever Became of Sin?” It’s because we live in a time, of course, when many of us – including some who sit in the highest seats of power – do not actually believe that they ever *have* sinned; that they’ve ever done anything *worth* repenting or, heaven forbid, requiring forgiveness.

But if “sin” is simply anything and everything we do that separates us from God and from each other, then we are *all* sinners. None of us is immune. None of us has not failed, at some point and in some fashion, sometimes dramatically. In other words, none of us has ever managed to live in perfect harmony with the world around us, and – most importantly – in perfect harmony with God.

So, given that unavoidable reality, says Jesus, *repent*. Change your minds. And change your corresponding behaviors as well.

Repent, therefore, and what’s more: BELIEVE IN THE GOOD NEWS, said Jesus. Now Martin Luther had it exactly right when he said that faith is “trust.” *What, or in whom, do you trust?*

John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides islands of the South Pacific. One day he was attempting to translate into the local language the expression to “believe in,” or to “trust in.” However, the problem was that these islanders that he was working with had absolutely no *word* for faith or trust; apparently nobody trusted *anybody* in their culture.

Then a thought came to him. Summoning the young local man who was helping him with his translation, he asked his assistant, “What am I doing?” The young man replied, “You’re sitting at your desk.” Paton then raised both feet off the floor and sat back on his chair. “What am I doing now?” And the young man responded with a verb which means “to lean your whole weight upon.” So that’s the word Paton then used to translate the words “faith,” and “trust.” To lean you whole weight upon.

Change your minds and your actions, said Jesus, and lean your whole *weight* upon the good news.

And it’s at this point in Mark’s story, of course, that Jesus – as he’s passing along the Sea of Galilee – just happens to encounter Simon and his brother Andrew who are casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. By all accounts, they were ordinary men. Nothing particularly special or noteworthy about them. And yet they were destined to become his very first disciples; these were the very first individuals Jesus was selecting for *his* team, in a sense. Not unlike the situation, I would argue, back in 1980, when Herb Brooks was choosing the players for the U.S. Olympic hockey team that year.

At one point in the movie “Miracle,” Brooks, says to the assistant coach, Craig Patrick, “Take a look at this.” Patrick responds, “What’s this?” And Brooks answers, “Twenty-six names... The tough part will be getting it down to 20 before the opening ceremonies.”

Patrick is shocked. “This is the final roster? You’re kidding me, right? This is our first day, Herb. We’ve got a week of this... You’re missing some of the best players.” And Brooks responds without hesitation, “I’m not looking for the *best* players, Craig. I’m looking for the *right* ones.”

Apparently, this was the case for Jesus as well. He wasn’t looking for the “best” prospects to be his first disciples. He wasn’t looking for the most talented, or the most

educated, or the most famous, or the most accomplished. Not at all. Jesus was simply looking for the *right* ones; the ones who would, in effect, drop everything to follow him. Which, of course, is exactly what Simon and Andrew did *immediately*.

As did James and John, another set of brothers who were also fishermen that Jesus encountered a little farther along the Sea of Galilee. He finds *them* in their boat mending the nets. And immediately, Jesus calls them. And, just like Simon and Andrew, immediately they drop what they're doing and follow him.

Immediately... There's a sense of urgency in that word, isn't there? Just as there was a sense of urgency in Herb Brooks' words to his players right before they played that crack Soviet team: "Great moments are born from great opportunity," he said. "And that's what you *have here*, tonight, boys..."

This is it, he seems to be saying, the perfect opportunity. You may never have another chance like it.

Now notice what Jesus had to say. Jesus didn't say, "Just keep doing what you're doing, boys. The kingdom is still a ways off yet. No hurry. No worries"

Nor did he say, "Repent and believe in the good news and *someday*... some day in the far off distant future, long after you're dead and gone, you will get to experience the kingdom of God."

No... He says "The time is fulfilled..." In other words, "The time is NOW!" And the kingdom of God has COME NEAR. It's at hand, right here and now. Not some time way off in the future. But *now*. And, therefore, you don't have to wait any longer. You can experience the grace and blessings of God's rule right here, right now – in the *present*. You don't have to wait for it. It's yours to enjoy *immediately*.

And so here's what I'm thinking. Maybe it's precisely *because* Jesus spoke with such a sense of urgency that Simon and Andrew, and James and John, then responded as they did – immediately. Just as those young American hockey players back in 1980 responded as *they did*. With a sense of urgency...

The question, however, is: Do we in the church today still *have* that sense of urgency that those first disciples had? Are we just as motivated to seize the opportunity set before *us* to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to a world so badly in need of what the gospel offers?

Two shoe salesmen were once sent to Africa. One immediately sent home a telegram that said, “Get me home, nobody here wears shoes.” The other salesman’s telegram said, “Send me all of the shoes you can... nobody here wears shoes!”

Have we lost that sense of excitement, that sense of urgency? Someone once said that Martin Luther’s preaching roused the church from a thousand year’s slumber during the Dark Ages. How did he do it? Luther himself said, “I preach as though Christ was crucified *yesterday*, rose again from the dead *today*, and is coming back to earth *tomorrow*.”

The message for those very first followers of Jesus was this: “The Time is NOW.” But that wasn’t just true for them. You see, it’s the same for each and every generation! For us as well. This is **OUR** time. This is our life, the only one we’ve got, and we have *also* been called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

You see, you and I were *born* to be Christ followers. Every one of us. We were named and claimed by God in our baptism. And we were meant to be here in this place, at this time.

Sin, death, and evil have *had* their day. Their time is done. It’s over.

Because of Jesus Christ – because of his suffering, death, and resurrection – we need not fear sin, death, or evil ever again! Because of Jesus, they have lost their power over us. Be my followers, says Jesus. This is **YOUR TIME**. Now go out there and take it!

Amen.