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Esther 4:10-17

Mark 1:14-15

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A VIBRANT FAITH: KAIROS

Here's the situation: the wellbeing of a significant group of people is at risk. A diabolical figure intends to do them harm. Someone is found to be in a position to help those at risk, but it will require that one to do something well beyond an established comfort zone. You might think I was talking about the plot to a superhero movie. But this time, it is a drama involving someone who has no superpowers. She just happens to be in the right place at the right time to possibly make a clear difference.

You heard just a portion of the story told in the book of Esther in our reading. There were a significant number of Jews living in Susa, the capital of Persia. One of them gets chosen by the king to be his wife. The king, attracted to the woman by her beauty, does not know that Esther is Jewish. A political advisor to the king, a man named Haman had risen in power and self-appointed prestige to the point that he ordered all of the king's servants to bow down to him. Esther's cousin, a man named Mordecai, refused to do so. Living out his spite, Haman gets the king to make a law that would not only kill Mordecai, but all of the Jews who were living in the Persian empire. That's when Mordecai gets word to Queen Esther urging her to appeal to the king to change the law. There is a problem, however. The king was far from the practices of an enlightened marriage. No one could go to the king unbidden, including the queen, or there was the threat of death. Esther had not seen nor spoken to the king in a month. Mordecai sends her a message: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." The story of Esther asks when it might be time to step out in faith to take action.

Our reading from the Gospel of Mark also has to do with determining what the times call for. Mark's telling of the story of Jesus begins with an account of the ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah. Jesus goes out to John and is baptized. A voice from heaven then identifies Jesus as God's beloved

son. After that, we hear that Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness – it is a time where he faces the challenge of how he was to go about serving God. Our scripture reading today comes in at that point: “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.’” The very first words that Jesus says in Mark’s telling is, “The time is fulfilled.”

In the Greek language in which the New Testament was originally written, there are a couple of words that get translated into English as ‘time.’ ‘Chronos’ is a word that describes a specific time, like ten o’clock on a Sunday morning. What chronos is it is a question that calls for someone to check the clock or the calendar. The other word that gets translated ‘time’ is the word ‘kairos.’ What kairos is it is a question that calls for someone to check the conditions. When there is a storm, it may be kairos, it may be time to seek shelter or it may be kairos to go find someone who is caught in the storm and help them find shelter.

Jesus’ very first words in Mark’s gospel account are, “The kairos is fulfilled.” He says that right after John the Baptist gets arrested. One might interpret the conditions Jesus was looking at as indicating that it was not a good time to announce the beginning of his ministry. John the Baptist’s public ministry had been arrested by his arrest, and soon, John would be executed. But Jesus seems to interpret the conditions as being the appropriate time for him to move forward. John is no longer there to provide needed religious leadership, and at a time when people calling for urgent change are getting met harshly by authorities, then guided by the Spirit, the conditions call for him to proclaim that God’s reign was more important than Caesar’s or Herod’s reign. In that kairos moment, God was at work, and Jesus would deliver an invitation to recognize and join in that good news.

During this sermon series on a vibrant faith, we have explored four words from the original New Testament Greek language. A vibrant faith is open and receptive to the logos, the word that God sends through scripture and the coming of Jesus. A faith is alive when there is zelos, a zeal that leads to an energetic living out of that faith. More than other influences, a lively faith shapes our ethos, our character, to meet the challenges of the day. And finally, today, a vibrant faith responds to the

conditions of the kairos time in which we are living.

We don't face the exact same conditions that Esther and Jesus faced. Esther would find the courage and a clever means to speak truth to power which led to the deliverance of the Jewish people who were about to be killed. Jesus would find all kinds of ways to show what God's reign was all about with good news ramifications that resound two thousand years later. How then do we interpret the conditions that surround us at this very challenging time, and how might we live out a faith longing to be vibrant in response? Certainly, during this pandemic, there are people who are so isolated from what had been their community of support. Many of them have lost loved ones or livelihoods, along with what had been normal ways to express grief or to meet their basic needs. There are people in southern Louisiana seeking to recover from a hurricane and people in Beirut, Lebanon trying to rebuild after a massive explosion. A recent Gallup poll indicates that black people and white people in our country view the state of race relations between them to be in the most negative shape in decades.¹ We are seeing conditions where those who are more conservative and those who are more liberal are having trouble finding common ground and a way to treat one another with dignity. In a society that is stuck in many illusions, how do we live out what is true? When fear and despair have great power over so many, how do we live out hope?

I'm not urging any one of us to try to address all of those challenges with some superhero ability. But I do urge you to look for what conditions you see that call for faith put into redemptive action through compassion and care. Then find some way small or large, working by yourself or with others to meet this moment led by the ways of our God who reigns in our lives. As you do so, by God's grace, you might not only find the conditions beginning to improve, you might find your faith feeling more vibrant. Coming from above, there is good news to be lived and shared that can meet this kairos moment. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/318851/perceptions-white-black-relations-sink-new-low.aspx>