

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
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Sunday, February 5, 2012

**A TICK IN TIME**  
Mark 1:14-15

“Now after John was arrested ...”

The beginning of our story is terse. “Now after John was arrested ...” Now after John’s star had faded; now after the once popular desert preacher had lost his crowds; after his voice had been silenced; now after his warning and accusations no longer rang out in the desert wastes – now after.

After the thrill of a New Year has begun to fade; after the income tax statements have arrived; after the debates have begun to all sound the same; after the hype of today’s Super Bowl has begun to bore – is any time, any after ever after, any different? Now after you were laid off, the house foreclosed, after you heard the doctor say, “We’ve done all we can;” now after we have spent our time killing time, saving time, making time, marking time, we hear the ancient cynic remind us there is:

a time to be born, a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
...  
A time to love, and a time to hate ...

And on and on – all is vanity. “Vanity of vanities,” or so it seems when our time is swallowed up in the scheme of things beyond our control – and beyond our hope. “Now after John was arrested ...” Terse. Tense. Terrible. Timely?

Quickly, suddenly there is a change in the tone and the time of the story: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee ... saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near ...’” Vanities of vanities, no more! “Dust in the wind,” no more, for Jesus came into Galilee and Charlotte, walked boldly right up Trade Street and into your homes and mine, saying, “the time is ripe, it is packed with possibilities and running over with hope.”

The waiting is over. Terse, tense, and terrible times have become therapeutic times of thriving because the “kingdom of God” – God’s personal reign and influence – is at hand; that close, right at the end of your fingertips. This is the ripe time, the right time, and the critical time for us.

Jesus’ proclamation, his short announcement causes a crisis. That is what the word in Greek means: crisis-time. Crisis-time is a deciding, decision, and make up your mind kind of time. Change isn’t welcome if you and I benefit from the status quo. Look at Syria. Look at America. And if you and I have to change to be a part of the changing times, we may lose of sense of balance. For instance, tomorrow’s newspapers, TV news reports, the internet and emails, our smartphones – all announce: “Due to the Federal deficit, income tax returns are due this February 15, 2012 rather than April 15.” Suddenly, there is no time left. Now is the time. Right now. You have to change. “The times – they are not a ‘changing! They have changed!”

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Charlotte preaching the good news and saying, ‘The time is ripe and the ruling reign of God is with us right now; therefore repent and believe the good news.’”

“Repent.” It means about face, turn around, and face the future when God’s reign and influence are busting out all over. Do not let your past capture you; don’t let your past mistakes, successes, failures or achievements hold you back or stymie you from changing and embracing of your future. Think of yourself as a beloved child of God capable of walking with Jesus into the future with all God’s children.

The knights of the Legendary Days of King Arthur were said to need, when they were fully dressed in their armor, a strong and large horse to bear the weight of the fully armored knight. When hunting, the knight used a small horse swift of foot. And when parading through the village in full and colorful regalia, he was on a high horse. The mighty knight looked down on the lowly peasant forced to travel on the ground or in a rickety cart while the knight rode on high and mighty. Thus the expression, “Get off your high horse.”

That is what repent means: dismount, get off your high horse. Or as St. Paul put it, “Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to think (Romans 12:3). “Get off your high horse, First Presbyterian Church! You have a fine history with a lot of wonderful achievements behind you. But what have you done for God or Charlotte lately? What have we taken the lead in with our presbytery? Where have we joined with other churches in providing critical leadership within this city? You have a fine past. But is that all you have? Repent. Turn around and move boldly into God’s future in Charlotte.

I have some news for you. Some of you think the squeeze and the stress and the difficulties will be over when the new pastor is called and arrives. No! It won’t. It will just be getting started then! It will take more openness, more trust, and more commitment than ever before then. It will take a more realistic approach to stewardship, more awareness to strangers and visitors, a more intentional way to welcome members into roles of servant leadership. If you are under the impression that there has been change during the interim period, just wait until the new pastor arrives! You ain’t seen anything yet.

“After John was arrested, Jesus came into Charlotte and said, ‘The time is ripe, the time is right, what other time are you waiting for?’”

I have been talking about “A Tick in Time.” I should come clean, I suppose. I have not been talking about a “tick” as in “Tic Toc Toe” or in the “Tick Tock” of “Hickory, Dickory, Dock.” Rather, the “tick” I have in mind is the common “cattle tick” which is a small, flat-bodied blood-sucking arachnid. It emerges from the egg not yet fully developed, lacking a pair of legs and sex organs. In this state it is still capable of attacking cold-blooded animals such as frogs and lizards which it does. And after shedding its skin several times, it acquires its missing organ, mates, and is then prepared to attack warm-blooded animals.

“The female cattle tick is eyeless and it is directed to the tip of a twig on a bush by her photosensitive skin, and there she stays through darkness and light, through fair weather and foul, waiting for the moment that will fulfill her existence. In the Zoological Institute, at Rostock...ticks were kept on the ends of twigs, waiting for this moment for a period of eighteen years” (John N. Bleibtreu, *The Parable of the Beast*, p. 3). Eighteen years! On the end of a twig, waiting for the right time to arrive!

For eighteen years nothing happens. The tick waits for the scent of butyric acid, a substance in the sweat of all mammals. Nothing happens for eighteen years. It is the wrong time. But then one day something happens: you walk by the twig! And time for the tick has meaning for the first time. She hurls herself in your direction, buries herself in your flesh. And she does what she is meant to do.

Then she dies. But she dies in your skin. And – scratch, scratch, scratch – the memory lingers on. And the future is different because “a tick in time” responded to the new time that dawned; literally, the only time she has. And this is now your time. The only time you have.

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Charlotte, preaching the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time has finally arrived, the waiting is over, for the presence of God is present right now in your midst; therefore get off your high horse, jump off the end of the twig you’re stuck on, and make a difference for the future now!’”

Scratch, Scratch, Scratch!

Amen.