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St Luke's Episcopal Church
Prescott, AZ

January 24, 2021
3rd Sunday after Epiphany

"May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer."

It took me a while to realize that time is elastic. Some minutes or seconds feel like they lasted for ever, when hours, months, or even years go by so fast. It depends on what we do and what we feel. And as I age time is now flying faster and faster. Gone are the days when a school semester looked like an eternity, and the Summer break as something that would never happen because it was way too far in time for me to comprehend. As a kid I lived fully the day ahead of me, it was enough and simple. I could dream about what I would do when I would become a grown-up, but my focus was on the present, and maybe the end of the school week. But now I live in a world where time is passing so fast! I have, we have to follow a calendar, and some events are planned far in advance. At Church when Advent began, we were ready for Christmas, and already thinking to prepare for Lent and Easter. We are living busy lives, in a busy world, always thinking about the future, forgetting that the future does not belong to us, and that we have to live fully in the present, the only time where we can experience God's love and God's presence.

This is a common thread in all our readings today. They are about time, not the past, not the future, but the present. Today is the time to listen to the word of God. This is precisely the last verse of Psalm 95 used at the beginning of the service of Morning Prayer: *Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice!*

The People of Nineveh, even if the prophet gave them 40 days to repent, repented as soon as they heard the message. Jesus told the people of Galilee, and to us today, "The time is fulfilled." Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "the time has grown short," or in other versions that the time is short. Actually, it seems that another way to translate the Greek would be "the time has folded its sails" a metaphor to say that, the time has stopped! And it is a good way to interpret Paul's words. Paul's message is part of a larger section where he is answering questions from the Corinthians, and gives his own opinion. Paul was certain that the end of times was almost there. He was certain that the Lord would come very soon. So, the Christian communities were not supposed to last. Nothing was supposed to last. That explains his message: behave as if you were not married, behave as if you were not mourning, etc. Behave "as if not", because that does not matter anymore, in a few moments the world as we know it is going to disappear, and Christ will take us with him.

We could think that Paul's message is not relevant for us, because we do not live in the same context anymore. The Church has been present for more than 2000 years; we are not expecting the end of times anytime soon. Our problem, maybe, is rather the opposite. After 2000 years we have the tendency to think that nothing special is going to happen tomorrow, or in a close future.

We might also have some problems understanding Jesus' message too. "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near." Really? The Kingdom has come near? Where are the peace and happiness Christians have been expected? Where is the Kingdom? Why so many people are suffering, and dying if the Kingdom is here? 2000 years later it seems that our world is a much more dangerous place than it was in the past. We are living in a difficult time. As someone pointed out to me once, we can see the evil walking in our world. But Jesus did not preach the Good News of God in a peaceful world either. Jesus preached in a violent world, in an occupied country. So, we have the choice to be too realistic and overwhelmed by the evil of this world, or to be open to God's grace, to God's dream, to God's power, and to choose to answer to the evil of this world by acts of kindness, love, and justice today. I choose to believe in God's power, in God's love. Evil may seem to prevail, but I know that God will have the last word, I know that God, in Jesus' death and resurrection has already won; the Kingdom of God is at hand, the Kingdom has come near.

Like the message of Jonah, Jesus' message was simple: *Repent, and believe in the Good News*. But repent now, not tomorrow, not in the future. Not when you will be ready to do so. Not when you will have weighed all the options. No, repent now. Now, in this broken world, we are invited once again to change our hearts, to change our minds, to change our lives and to listen to the loving voice of Jesus calling us to follow Him and to be His witnesses. When we do so, we are able to experience God's Kingdom in this imperfect world.

Repentance is not about being sorry for the things we have done or left undone. No, deeper than that, repentance comes from a deep desire to change our hearts in order to conform our lives to Jesus' way of love, now. When we repent, we change the direction of our lives to follow Christ and Christ's teachings. When we repent and turn our hearts to God we receive courage and strength to pursue Christ's mission of peace, reconciliation, and salvation, today.

Not only are our readings about the time in which we live and the choices we need to make, they also are about vocation, about calling. Come and follow me! The great difference between Jonah's calling and the four first disciples, is that the disciples answered right away and abandoned their old lives in order to follow an unknown itinerant preacher. We miss the first part of Jonah's story. God called Jonah a first time to go and to preach repentance to the big city of Nineveh. But Jonah ran away, as far as he could. Before to be swallowed by a big fish, and saved by God. I don't know for you, but when I looked at my own spiritual calling, I found that I was more like Jonah than the disciples. As I shared with you more than once, it took me 14 years to say yes to my priestly vocation. And I can assure you that I tried everything in my power to run away. But the truth is whatever our vocation is, and we all have been called to do something, we have to say yes again and again. Each day is a new day with new possibilities, new challenges, and the Lord is calling us to follow Him each day.

Jesus is calling us today, as he called the first disciples. Jesus is calling us today, without giving us any clear indication of what we are supposed to do. We only know that following him is demanding, but rewarding! We are not necessarily called to leave our families, and works, and homes to follow Jesus. But somehow, to follow Jesus means that we have to change our priorities, and we have to be coherent with our choices, coherent with the ways we live our lives. Because our lives can be a powerful testimony to Jesus' Good news when we live according to His teaching to love one another as He loves us.

We don't live in the same context as Paul, however we are still called to turn our hearts to God each day as if it was the last. Today Jesus is calling you, are you going to listen to his voice? Amen!