

God's Time is Breaking into Our Time
February 10, 2013
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD - SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2013

SERMON: GOD'S TIME IS BREAKING INTO OUR TIME

WHAT TIME IS IT? NOW, THAT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU'D THINK A PREACHER WOULD WANT TO ASK THE CONGREGATION AT THE START OF A SERMON. IT MIGHT GET EVERYONE LOOKING AT THEIR WATCHES AND WONDERING WHEN YOUR SERMON'S GOING TO END—BEFORE YOU EVEN GET STARTED!

IT SEEMS SIMPLE ENOUGH ON THE SURFACE, BUT NO ONE CAN SAY EXACTLY WHAT TIME IS. IN FACT, TIME IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S DEEPEST MYSTERIES. MY WATCH SAYS IT'S ABOUT ELEVEN-THIRTY IN THE MORNING HERE IN CHARLOTTE. BUT, IN SAN FRANCISCO, IT'S ABOUT EIGHT-THIRTY IN THE MORNING. IN JOHANNESBURGH, SOUTH AFRICA, IT'S SIX-THIRTY IN THE AFTERNOON. AND RIGHT NOW IT IS ONE-THIRTY IN THE MORNING...MONDAY MORNING...IN TOKYO JAPAN.

FOR THIS, WE CAN THANK AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE THAT MET IN 1884 AND DIVIDED THE WORLD INTO

24 TIME ZONES. SINCE THEN, LOCAL TIME AROUND THE GLOBE HAS BEEN DETERMINED BY HOW FAR EAST OR WEST EACH TIME ZONE IS FROM WHAT'S CALLED THE PRIME MERIDIAN WHICH RUNS THROUGH THE GREENWICH OBSERVATORY NEAR LONDON, ENGLAND.

WE HUMAN BEINGS SEEM TO HAVE AN INBORN NEED TO MARK AND MEASURE TIME. LONG BEFORE THERE WERE MECHANICAL CLOCKS, PEOPLE USED SUNDIALS, HOURGLASSES, AND EVEN CLOCKS POWERED BY RUNNING WATER, TO MEASURE THE PASSAGE OF TIME.

TIME IS WHAT MAKES OUR WAY OF LIFE POSSIBLE. WE DIVIDE IT INTO UNITS--SECONDS, MINUTES, HOURS--WITH WHICH TO MEASURE THE DURATION OF OUR LIVES. WE HAVE CALENDARS TO MARK THE DAYS, WEEKS, MONTHS, AND YEARS. NOW, PERSONALLY, I HAVE FINALLY GOTTEN TO THE STAGE OF LIFE WHERE I PREFER TO MEASURE MY OWN AGE IN DOG YEARS. I'M ONLY NINE IN DOG YEARS!

WE ALSO GIVE LABELS TO TIME. BESIDES CHRONOLOGICAL TIME, WE TALK ABOUT BIOLOGICAL TIME AND GEOLOGICAL TIME. AND VERY EARLY IN ITS HISTORY, THE CHRISTIAN

CHURCH ESTABLISHED LITURGICAL TIME: A WAY OF MARKING EACH YEAR WITH REFERENCE TO THE LIFE AND WORK OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. THE CHRISTIAN YEAR HAS REGULAR SEASONS AND SPECIAL DAYS, WHICH PROVIDE A RHYTHM FOR THE WORSHIP OF CHRISTIANS GATHERED TOGETHER IN CONGREGATIONS LIKE OURS.

AND EACH YEAR, ON THE SUNDAY BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF LENT, WE CELEBRATE THE ‘TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD’. IT IS ONE OF THE KEY EVENTS IN LITURGICAL TIME-- MARKING THE END OF THE PERIOD OF EPIPHANY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE EASTER CYCLE.

AS YOU LOOK AROUND THIS MORNING, YOU WILL NOTICE THAT THE SANCTUARY IS DECORATED IN WHITE, INCLUDING THE PARAMENTS HANGING FROM THE PULPIT AND THE LECTERN. LAST SUNDAY, THESE ADORNMENTS WERE GREEN; AND NEXT SUNDAY THEY WILL BE PURPLE. YOU SEE, COLOR IS ONE OF THE WAYS THAT WE PRESBYTERIANS ACKNOWLEDGE AND CELEBRATE LITURGICAL TIME.

THE THINKING BEHIND THIS—THE THEOLOGY, IF YOU WILL—IS BASED ON THE LINK BETWEEN STORY...AND TIME. BY

CONTINUALLY HEARING THE STORIES OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS TOWARD US IN THE PAST; AND GOD'S PROMISES TO US IN THE FUTURE, WE COME TO SEE THAT WE ARE PART OF GOD'S ONGOING STORY.

THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR POINTS US TOWARD THE REDEEMING WORK OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST. IT GIVES US A GLIMPSE OF THE WAY THAT GOD'S TIME BREAKS INTO OUR TIME.

OUR NEW TESTAMENT TEXT THIS MORNING TELLS THE DRAMATIC STORY OF HOW GOD TOOK THE INITIATIVE AND BROKE INTO HUMAN HISTORY--HUMAN TIME--ON A MOUNTAIN NORTH OF THE SEA OF GALILEE MANY CENTURIES AGO. IT IS A VERY STRANGE STORY...THE KIND OF THING THAT, AT FIRST GLANCE, WE'D SAY DOESN'T HAPPEN IN OUR DAY...TO US...IN OUR TIME.

IN REV. CLEGHORN'S SERMON LAST SUNDAY, WE HEARD THE STORY FROM LUKE CHAPTER 4, WHERE JESUS STANDS UP AND READS FROM THE SCROLL OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH IN THE SYNAGOGUE OF HIS OWN HOMETOWN OF NAZARETH--TELLING HIS LISTENERS THAT THE SCRIPTURES ARE BEING FULFILLED IN

THEIR OWN HEARING. THAT WAS WELCOME NEWS. UNTIL HE TOLD THEM ABOUT THE RADICAL INCLUSIVENESS OF GOD'S LOVE—THAT IT WAS FOR ALL PEOPLE, AND NOT JUST FOR THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL. THAT ANGERED HIS AUDIENCE, WHICH TURNED INTO A MOB THAT WAS PREPARED TO TAKE HIS LIFE BY THROWING HIM OFF A CLIFF.

BUT JESUS PASSED THROUGH THE MOB, AND CONTINUED TO MINISTER IN THAT SAME REGION: TEACHING, HEALING, MIRACULOUSLY FEEDING A CROWD OF FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE WITH FIVE LOAVES OF BREAD AND TWO FISH. IT WAS THERE, NEAR BETHSAIDA ON THE SEA OF GALILEE, THAT JESUS SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES: "ALL THESE CROWDS OF PEOPLE THAT FOLLOW ME AROUND--WHO DO THEY SAY THAT I AM?"

NOW, SOME PEOPLE THOUGHT JESUS WAS A REINCARNATION OF THE HEBREW PROPHET ELIJAH. OTHERS THOUGHT HE MIGHT EVEN BE JOHN THE BAPTIST, COME BACK FROM THE DEAD. BUT WHEN JESUS ASKED THE DISCIPLES, "WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?", IT WAS PETER WHO SPOKE UP AND SAID: YOU ARE THE MESSIAH OF GOD. THE CHRIST—GOD'S ANNOINTED RULER.

AND THAT'S WHERE THIS MORNING'S TEXT BEGINS--WITH A SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO TIME. LUKE 9, VERSE 28 SAYS THAT "ABOUT EIGHT DAYS AFTER THESE WORDS, JESUS TOOK THREE OF THE DISCIPLES—PETER, JAMES AND JOHN—AND WENT UP ON A MOUNTAIN TO PRAY."

THE SEA OF GALILEE IS LOCATED AT THE SOUTHERN END OF WHAT WE NOW CALL THE GOLAN HEIGHTS, AN AREA OF ROLLING HILLS THAT ARE SIMILIAR TO THE ONES AROUND ASHEVILLE HERE IN NORTH CAROLINA. IN OUR DAY AND TIME, YOU CAN DRIVE UP INTO THE MOUNTAINS OF THE GOLAN. BUT WHEN JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES WERE THERE, THE ONLY WAY TO GO UP A MOUNTAIN--WAS TO WALK.

VERSE 29 SAYS THAT, WHILE JESUS WAS PRAYING ON THE MOUNTAIN, THE APPEARANCE OF HIS FACE AND HIS CLOTHING BECAME DAZZLING WHITE. AND SUDDENLY PETER, JAMES AND JOHN SAW JESUS TALKING WITH TWO OTHER MEN WHO ALSO APPEARED IN GLORY. THOSE TWO OTHER MEN WERE MOSES AND ELIJAH, TWO OF THE GREATEST FIGURES IN THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL. AND THEY WERE TALKING WITH JESUS ABOUT HIS

DEPARTURE—HIS DEATH—WHICH HE WAS ABOUT TO ACCOMPLISH IN JERUSALEM.

NOW, THE LAST TIME WE SAW MOSES WAS IN CHAPTER 34 OF DEUTERONOMY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT...HUNDREDS OF YEARS BEFORE...A FAR DIFFERENT TIME. BACK THEN, GOD HAD TAKEN MOSES TO THE TOP OF ANOTHER MOUNTAIN, MT. NEBO, SO THAT MOSES COULD SEE THE PROMISED LAND BEFORE HE DIED. AND THE LAST TIME WE SAW ELIJAH, IN CHAPTER TWO OF SECOND KINGS, HE WAS BEING CARRIED UP INTO HEAVEN ON A CHARIOT OF FIRE.

THIS ALL SOUNDS STRANGE TO US. BUT, IF YOU WERE A JEWISH CHRISTIAN LISTENING TO THIS STORY IN THE FIRST CENTURY, YOU WOULD HAVE INSTANTLY RECOGNIZED MOSES AND ELIJAH AS REPRESENTING THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS—TWO OF THE MAIN SECTIONS OF THE HEBREW SACRED SCRIPTURES.

SO THERE WAS THE SALVATION STORY OF GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE. ALL SUMMED UP IN ONE MOMENT OF TIME: MOSES, ELIJAH AND JESUS--STANDING ON A MOUNTAIN OVERLOOKING THE ANCIENT NATION OF ISRAEL.

VERSE 32 SAYS THAT THE DISCIPLES HAD BEEN WEIGHTED DOWN WITH SLEEP, BUT NOW THEY WERE WIDE AWAKE. AND PETER—NOT KNOWING WHAT HE WAS SAYING—TELLS JESUS: “MASTER, IT IS GOOD FOR US TO BE HERE; LET'S MAKE THREE DWELLINGS, ONE FOR YOU, ONE FOR MOSES, AND ONE FOR ELIJAH. WHY ON EARTH WOULD PETER SAY THAT? WELL, THE NEXT VERSE HELPS EXPLAINS WHY.

PETER DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE WAS SAYING BECAUSE HE AND JAMES AND JOHN WERE TERRIFIED. WHENEVER HUMAN BEINGS FIND THEMSELVES IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD OR AN ANGEL OF GOD, THE BIBLE USUALLY TELLS US THAT THEY ARE AFRAID.

AND WHILE THEY WERE TALKING, VERSE 34 SAYS, A CLOUD CAME AND OVERSHADOWED THEM. AND A VOICE CAME FROM THE CLOUD SAYING, “THIS IS MY SON, MY CHOSEN ONE; LISTEN TO HIM!”

THE VOICE OF GOD. BREAKING INTO TIME---HUMAN TIME. PETER'S TIME. RECONFIRMING THE WORDS THAT GOD HAD SPOKEN TO JESUS WHEN HE WAS BAPTIZED BY JOHN IN THE

RIVER JORDAN: "YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON, AND WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED."

NOW, IF I WERE WRITING THIS STORY, THIS WOULD BE JUST THE BEGINNING. I'D WANT TO HEAR FROM MOSES AND ELIJAH-- AND FROM PETER, JAMES AND JOHN. AND MAYBE FIND OUT WHAT THE OTHER NINE DISCIPLES WERE DOING AT THE BOTTOM OF THE MOUNTAIN.

BUT THIS IS WHERE THE TRANSFIGURATION ENDS IN LUKE'S GOSPEL. HE WRITES THAT JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES FOUND THEMSELVES ALONE AGAIN. THEY CAME BACK DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN. AND THE NEXT DAY, JESUS CONTINUED TO TEACH AND HEAL IN THE REGION OF GALILEE.

SO WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF ALL THIS?

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH HAS HISTORICALLY VIEWED THE TRANSFIGURATION AS ASSURANCE THAT JESUS IS THE HOPE OF THE AGES--WHO FULFILLS THE LAW OF MOSES BY HIS OBEDIENCE TO THE FATHER. THAT JESUS IS THE MESSIAH DREAMED OF BY THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS LIKE ELIJAH.

BUT IS GOD STILL BREAKING INTO TIME? OUR TIME? AND, IF SO, WHERE WOULD WE LOOK FOR THE EVIDENCE?

BACK IN SEPTEMBER OF LAST YEAR, WHEN I FIRST ARRIVED HERE AS AN INTERN, YOU COULD SEE THE BARE WOOD AROUND OUR WINDOWS OUTSIDE--AND ON THE LOUVERS OF OUR BELL TOWERS. AND HERE INSIDE THE SANCTUARY, THE PLASTER WAS PEELING OFF THE WALLS. BUT WE WERE ABLE TO FIND WAYS TO ADDRESS THOSE PROBLEMS, AND TODAY WE WORSHIP IN A FRESHLY-PAINTED BUILDING. IS THAT A SIGN OF GOD'S TIME BREAKING INTO OUR TIME?

THE LAST TIME I PREACHED, BACK IN DECEMBER, YOU MAY REMEMBER THAT I SPOKE ABOUT HOW CALDWELL HOUSE WAS ONLY THREE MONTHS AWAY FROM SHUTTING DOWN. BUT THE SALVATION ARMY WAS ABLE TO WORK AROUND THEIR FINANCIAL ISSUES. AND NOW THE DOORS WILL STAY OPEN TO SHELTER HOMELESS WOMEN AT LEAST THROUGH THE END OF THIS YEAR. IS THIS A SIGN OF GOD'S TIME BREAKING INTO OUR TIME?

THE CORRIDORS OF THE PRICE BUILDING AND THE PLAYGROUND OUT BACK ARE FILLED WITH THE LAUGHTER OF CHILDREN AGAIN. BECAUSE TWO WEEKS AGO, THE CHARLOTTE BILINGUAL PRESCHOOL WAS ABLE TO RE-OPEN THANKS IN PART

TO THE GENEROSITY OF AN UNNAMED DONOR. A SIGN OF GOD'S TIME BREAKING INTO OUR TIME?

HOLY SCRIPTURE AND THE HISTORIC CONFESSIONS OF THE REFORMED FAITH REMIND US THAT WE WORSHIP A SOVEREIGN LIVING GOD WHO, AT THIS VERY MOMENT IS WORKING TO ACHIEVE GOD'S HOLY PURPOSES IN AND FOR THIS WORLD.

FEW PEOPLE HAVE EVER UNDERSTOOD AND EXPRESSED THIS MORE CLEARLY, AND WITH MORE CONFIDENCE, THAN THE REVEREND DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING. IN A SERMON FROM HIS BOOK, STRENGTH TO LOVE, DR. KING WRITES THESE WORDS:

“THE RINGING TESTIMONY OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS THAT GOD IS ABLE. GOD IS ABLE TO SUSTAIN THE VAST SCOPE OF THE UNIVERSE. GOD IS ABLE TO SUBDUE ALL THE POWERS OF EVIL. GOD IS ABLE TO GIVE US INTERIOR RESOURCES TO CONFRONT THE TRIALS AND DIFFICULTIES OF LIFE. GOD IS ABLE TO MAKE A WAY OUT OF NO WAY. AND TRANSFORM DARK YESTERDAYS INTO BRIGHT TOMORROWS.” THIS IS OUR MANDATE AS CHRISTIANS FOR SEEKING TO MAKE A BETTER WORLD, DR. KING SAYS. THAT GOD IS ABLE.

GOD CAME DOWN UPON A MOUNTAIN AND SPOKE IN A WAY THAT ORDINARY HUMAN BEINGS LIKE PETER, JAMES AND JOHN COULD HEAR, GIVING THEM--AND US--A COMMAND, A PROMISE AND AN INVITATION.

THE COMMAND GIVEN TO THE DISCIPLES IS THE SAME ONE GIVEN TO US TODAY: LISTEN! THIS IS MY SON JESUS, THE CHRIST, LISTEN TO HIM.

THE PROMISE, THEN AND NOW, IS THAT GOD WILL BE PRESENT WITH US THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT AS WE LIVE OUR LIVES.

AND THE INVITATION GOD MAKES IS FOR US IS TO LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. TO PARTICIPATE WITH GOD IN THE WORK THAT GOD CONTINUES TO DO IN THE WORLD, IN OUR TIME.

THE TRANSFIGURATION WAS NOT JUST ANOTHER EVENT IN THE EARTHLY LIFE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS. IT WAS A TURNING POINT. BECAUSE, JUST A SHORT TIME AFTER IT HAPPENED, LUKE SAYS, JESUS SET HIS FACE TO GO TO JERUSALEM...TO LEAVE GALILEE AND EMBARK ON THE JOURNEY THAT WOULD BRING HIM TO THE CROSS.

AND IN THREE DAYS, ON ASH WEDNESDAY, WE BEGIN OUR OWN LENTEN JOURNEY OF REMEMBRANCE TO THE CROSS AND EASTER. WE DO THIS EACH YEAR TO REMIND OURSELVES OF OUR BROKEN HUMAN CONDITION AND TO OPEN OURSELVES MORE FULLY TO THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF GOD IN OUR LIVES.

TODAY IS 'TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD' IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH. A HINGE SUNDAY IN LITURGICAL TIME.

WE OBSERVE THE MYSTERY OF THIS DAY--AND TELL THE OLD, OLD STORY--BECAUSE IT REMINDS US TO LISTEN. AND TO OPEN OUR MINDS AND HEARTS.

THAT WE MIGHT BE GIVEN, JUST A GLIMPSE OF THE WAY THAT GOD'S TIME IS STILL BREAKING INTO OUR TIME.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

AMEN.