

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – January 21, 2018
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As I may have mentioned before, I am not the most technologically savvy person in the world – probably less savvy than the average fifth grader these days. I have a cell phone – which I occasionally use . . . as a phone – and sometimes as a means of text messaging people. And I use email – and from the volume of unread mail that lands in my inbox each day, well, so do many other people. Now I read and send email – and I’ve even mastered attaching documents – but I never attempt to categorize my email. Some programs, I have discovered, enable you not only to send email but also to alert the recipient to its importance. So each day, I receive a few emails with little red exclamation points – and the message, “This email is marked urgent.” I usually read those last. It is not that I resent being told what is urgent – well, maybe I do resent it just a little – but I read those emails last because I have found that what the sender thinks of as urgent and what I think of as urgent are often two very different things. For example, there are some folks who think that their every random thought or forwarded cute YouTube video link is urgent. When I hear the word urgent, there had better be a hospital or an ambulance or blood or at least a broken bone involved. So, for example, I don’t think the words paperwork and urgent belong in the same sentence. Just because you’ve waited to contact me until two hours before your deadline – a deadline set weeks or months ago – well, that’s not really my problem, is it? I’ll review your thirty page document when I have time. To me, that’s not urgent.

In today’s readings, we hear Jonah and Jesus each proclaiming urgent messages. “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,” Jonah exclaimed. And, much to his surprise, the people of Nineveh believed him. They repented, turning back to the Lord God, proclaiming a fast, putting on sackcloth. Maybe they realized for some time that the path they had been following was not leading them toward God – or maybe the prospect of destruction in forty days woke them up. In any event, Jonah’s message was urgent and the Ninevites took it that way.

Jesus is similarly urgent in his message. Now these are the first words we hear from Jesus’ lips in the Gospel of Mark: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” That’s a sort of Reader’s Digest version of his message, isn’t it? All that you have hoped for, longed for, waited for is now here. The words of the prophets have been fulfilled. The kingdom of God – the time of the Messiah is right now. Turn away from your sin and believe in this Good News. There’s not a moment’s hesitation in Jesus’ message. He doesn’t say – the time of fulfillment will come some day. The kingdom of God

will come to pass through me some many centuries from now. At some point, you should leave your sin behind – but don't rush, whenever you get around to it is fine. Like all of Mark's gospel, Jesus' message in this passage is short, concise, and to the point. His words are urgent, just as urgent as those of Jonah. And at least four people understood that urgency.

When Jesus passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two fishing boats. If no one else heard the urgency in Jesus' voice, we know that the crews of those boats did. Simon and his brother Andrew abandoned their nets – their livelihoods to follow Jesus. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, left their father with the hired hands and followed Jesus. So important, so urgent was his message, that these four fishermen left behind all that was familiar in order to follow Jesus. Now I suppose that if everyone in Galilee had dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus, Mark might have reported it. After all, the author of the book of Jonah is quick to let his readers know that all of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. So we might presume that not all of Galilee repented at the words of Jesus. Yes, he won over four who chose to follow, but how many more heard the young preacher's message but did not fall in line? How many more listened and thought to themselves – well, he's sort of interesting. Maybe I'll hear him out one day, but not today. His message just isn't what I would consider urgent. It isn't important enough to me to persuade me to change my life.

The message that Jesus proclaimed centuries ago in Galilee is just as important, just as urgent today. This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel. But just as many of those who heard our Lord in Galilee walked away unconvinced – either by the message or by its urgency, so many in our time, many of us walk away as well. Oh, we'll repent, we tell ourselves, when the time is right, when I've accomplished everything I need to accomplish. I have plenty of time. I've got my nets to take care of, this catch of fish to haul ashore. I don't care how many little red exclamation points are on that email. I'll decide for myself when to look at it. The kingdom of God can wait.

But the kingdom of God cannot wait. If we truly hear the message Jesus is proclaiming – if we truly greet the news as good, then everything else pales in comparison, everything else in this world is just meant to be a preparation for the true kingdom that is both coming and is already in our midst. We need to greet this news as did Simon and Andrew, James and John. We need to hop out of the boat and leave the nets behind and follow! Jesus is the most important person, his is the most important message we will ever hear. Until we understand and believe that, then the kingdom of God will never be at hand, and our time of fulfillment will never come.