

## “The Time is Fulfilled”

The Rev. Eric Ledermann

### First Reading: [Jonah 3.1-5, 10](#)

<sup>1</sup>The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ <sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’

walk across. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

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### Gospel Reading: [Mark 1.14-20](#)

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

<sup>16</sup>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ <sup>18</sup>And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little

farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup>Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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Regardless of one’s politics, regardless of whom one voted for, we all have to admit that a good majority of America has been riding on a bit of a high this past week, since last Tuesday when a new president was sworn in to office. It was a day of grand proportions as millions crammed into the mall in the heart of Washington, D.C., with some having walked more than 8 miles to be there, and countless numbers of people who couldn’t even get into the mall because it was so crowded. Leading up to Barack Obama taking the oath to protect and serve this country, there was pomp and circumstance, incredible music, speeches, and more speeches, and then even more speeches. There were

prayers and all sorts of revelry. But something eerily beautiful happened a little after 12 noon. Suddenly more than 1.5 million people gathered went stone silent as two men spoke: Chief Justice John Roberts and the then President-elect Barack Obama (actually, he became president at 12 noon regardless of being sworn in to office). But, again I say, regardless of your politics, it is always a momentous day when a new president takes the reigns of the country, casting a new vision, a new way of operating, a new way of being.

But, as some of us may be quick to point out, it was not all celebration. Evidently it is not uncommon for the stock market to take a dive on inauguration day. There are always fears about how the country and world will react to changes in policy, vision and purpose. But I listened to commentator after commentator speak of the unusually deep dive the stock market took this past Tuesday. According to CNBC, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and countless others, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 332 points—an inauguration day record. Evidently, not everyone is thrilled with what President Obama represents. But, that must be tempered with the reality that lately 332 points is a typical day on Wall Street—a lot of records have been set in the past 6 or so months.

Yes, Obama was the underdog—a virtual unknown in the world of

Washington, a black man, a young man by presidential standards. Everything in history told us that he cannot win. Yet, somehow, his words struck something in the hearts of most Americans. Many are saying that America has not seen this kind of excitement around the presidency, especially among the younger set, since John F. Kennedy took office. Something in Obama's vision pulled at the tired and frustrated hearts of not only most Americans, but many across the world. Something in his words or his tone of voice or his demeanor has given a message of hope in the midst of seemingly insurmountable challenges that span the globe.

Even before the election, both Obama and his challenger, Senator John McCain, admitted that whoever wins the election is going to face steep challenges to rebuilding the economy, mending foreign relations, and even renewing the trust level of Americans toward their own government. Everyone has said that, no matter what plan is developed, it is going to require significant changes in perspective, immeasurable imagination, and a whole lot of working together to get over the mountain ahead of us. It is going to require a "total reorientation of our lives", as one author put it. Our religious tradition has a word for that: "repentance.". The challenges that lay ahead are going to require significant sacrifice on the part of those who have, trust and voice on the part of those who have not; and the fear of these things is

probably what caused so many on Wall Street to retreat from their investments causing the market to fall so sharply.

For too long we have sat comfortably by as the economic bubble grew with infusions of uncontrollable demand coupled with poorly thought out debt. That's the problem with debt—eventually, someone gets stuck with the bill—someone has to pay it off! For too long we have watched as the disparity between rich and poor in our own country, let alone across the globe, increased—the rich continued to get rich and poor got poorer. For too long compassion took a back seat to greed built on an economy of debt. Friends, this is not the fault of our previous President, though some take great joy in blaming him. At some point we have to take responsibility for ourselves. We have to take responsibility for what we left unsaid or undone, we have to take responsibility for our own debt-ridden attitudes, and narrow self-centeredness. We have to take responsibility for the fact that we did not heed the words of Psalm 62, a part of which we read as our Call to Worship this morning: "**God alone** is our rock and our salvation, our fortress. . . . Trust in God at all times, O people."

In the gospel of Mark, the story moves quickly: Jesus is baptized (marked by God's Spirit for the challenges that lay ahead), then tempted to leave his calling from God, successfully resisting the temptation to give up his silly cause for all the riches of the

world, and, then with a renewed spirit and sense of purpose, begins his ministry just as his counterpart, John the Baptist, is being silenced by the authorities (a foreshadowing of Jesus' own fate for speaking truth in love).

In the first few verses of today's Gospel text, Jesus proclaims across the Galilean countryside: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; **repent**, and believe in the good news." I can't imagine too many people, suffering in those days under the oppressive stronghold of the Roman Empire, were able to see very much "good news" around them.

Jesus then goes and begins his ministry of hope and salvation in the midst of despair, but he is not to do it alone. Partnering with God, he gathers a cohort of people to walk with him, learn from him, and then lead by his example. Their call is an example of the kind of repentance Jesus is proclaiming: immediately they drop what they are doing and go to be in partnership with God, challenging the greedy and destructive powers of those in leadership, loving the unlovable, and giving hope to the hopeless.

It is clear that Jesus' message was not founded on large stockpiles of money in order to win a campaign, or the building of large monuments dedicated to memorializing himself for generations to come, or evidenced by sharp increases in the

stock market, but on the simple fact that God is present, active, and inviting all people to participate in the work of salvation through grace. The invitation that Jesus offers is to a different way of life that doesn't build wealth on the backs of the poor, but lifts the poor up, encourages them and gives them the opportunity to declare their self worth through the scales of God's love, which is infinitely steadfast, radically inclusive, and profoundly compassionate.

Please do not misunderstand me; Barack Obama is not the return of Christ. Barack Obama is a self-admittedly flawed person, like all the rest of us. Like any politician, I am sure he has had to either change or at least temper his ideals in order to connect with a broad and, at times, diametrically opposed electorate—in other words, like most politicians, I am sure he had to “given in” in order to get elected—a human flaw. But, he has been clear from the beginning, that in order to get out of the messes we're in, we're going to have to work together, and be not afraid to share our perspectives so long as we respect those of others. I wonder if he got all that out of the same playbook Jesus was using. But, Jesus added, based on our scripture and on the ongoing work of God among us, that we must also, and fundamentally, trust in the goodness of God.

We are being offered an invitation here to do some good, to seek

a better future not only for ourselves, but for our children, our children's children, and for the entire world. It is not Barack Obama's invitation. It is an invitation that we have had since the beginning of time, an invitation to be in partnership with God to correct the wrongs of the past and build a new future founded on God's promises alone. One of our jobs will be to make sure that our new President, and all of our leaders, are hearing and heeding that same invitation, regardless of how their image of God is similar or different from ours. It is our job to call our leaders into question when we feel they are veering off course, or to encourage them when we feel they are right on. And at the same time, holding in delicate balance against our responsibility to speak up, we are also called upon to honor the decisions of our leaders even when we see things differently, taking solace in the fact that we made our voices heard, and then trust in the goodness of God.

Jonah was not willing to participate in God's grace. He did not see the Ninevites the way God saw them. He hated them and believed they deserved destruction. But, as always, God saw potential for change, for repentance. All they needed was a spark—God chose the most reluctant Jonah to be that spark.

God did not give up on Jonah, God did not give up on the Ninevites, God did not give up on the ragtag band of fishermen

and outcasts that Jesus gathered, God did not give up on the Israelites, many of whom had settled into the belief that God had abandoned them, and nor will God give up on us.

We are not in the business of building ourselves up. We are not in the business of amassing wealth or looking good. We are not in the business, even, of First Presbyterian Church. We are in the business of sharing the love of God—the work of hope, love and compassion that leads to the salvific truth of God’s grace for all people and all creation.

Jesus called his disciples, and today calls us, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, show compassion for the poor and oppressed, be the voice of the silenced, and work for genuine change so that all may have opportunities to better themselves and come to know that they are loved, appreciated, and worthy of God’s grace. It is up to us, as with Jonah, the Ninevites, and Jesus’ disciples, to accept God’s invitation, repent of our selfish and destructive ways, and immediately go to take care of business—God’s business; the business of truth with love, justice with compassion, and hope through Jesus the Christ.

We live out this call, should we choose to accept it, by showing compassion for those who hurt us, making clear what they did wrong but still staying strong in a position of compassion;

listening to one another, especially one another's grievances, seeking genuine reconciliation; making choices in our daily lives that affect positive influence on God's children and God's creation; and ultimately sharing the love of God for all humanity, all creation. This is the example given to us by God through Jesus. This is the work of the Lord. This is our calling, for the time is fulfilled—God's truth has come, and we have heard!

May God guide us in our endeavors, encouraging us in right directions and correcting us when we veer off course. Amen.