

Mark 1:1-8

The theory of Evolution (I say “theory” even though it is taught as “fact” in school textbooks) needs time, and a lot of it, in order to gain approval. Those who teach it do not speak in terms of decades, centuries, or even millennia. They speak of millions and even billions of years. ‘Given enough time,’ they claim, ‘anything could happen.’ We in the church know better, for we believe the Scriptural account of the Six-Day Creation. But even church people can make time into sort of a god. A classic example of this is the spouse or parent whose loved one has fallen away from the church and has, therefore, stopped walking with Christ. “Just give him, or her, more time,” is their response, “they’ll come around eventually.”

Yet if time is all that is needed to bring people to their knees in repentance, then there was no need for God to send John the Baptist. Four hundred years had elapsed. The last time God spoke through a prophet was when Malachi was walking the streets of Jerusalem. That was four hundred years before John and Jesus were born. If time is what is needed for sinners to repent, then God should have waited. Not four hundred, but eight hundred years, or two thousand years, or more. “Just give Your people more time, God, they’ll come around eventually.”

But the pattern throughout history is the exact opposite. The more time people have, the more stubborn they become. In the days before the Flood people lived a long time. If you died at the age of four hundred you had a premature death. It was common to live past seven hundred, eight hundred, even nine hundred. With all that time, did people repent and turn back to God? Just the opposite. By the time the Flood came only Noah and his family--eight people in all--were walking with the Lord.

Time can bring no one back to the Lord; only the Word of God can do that. And so after four hundred years--all that time without a word from God being spoken--“John appeared.” It was time for people to repent. It was time, therefore, for people to hear the Word of the Lord. And look at what happened. “All the country of Judea, and all Jerusalem were going out to (John)...confessing their sins.”

If John was here today, what would be his words to us? Would he say, “Take your time...there’s no hurry?” Would he say, “There is no need to repent...others are far worse than you?” Would it be his goal to be your friend and be well-liked by you and by all the community? From what the Bible tells us, all these statements are utter nonsense. John would put as his highest priority this one thing: “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” He would not care what you and I would think of him. He wore camel’s hair clothing for goodness sake! And he ate grasshoppers! Do you think he cared how he looked, or that his bad breath could knock you out at ten paces? John had not come to be the people’s buddy. He was there for one reason...to be the Voice--the voice of God calling sinners to repentance before the coming of the Lord Jesus.

It’s very clear to us that God was merciful in sending His Son, Jesus. It should also be clear that God sent John the Baptist out of mercy. Without John, there is no Jesus. Without the preaching of the Law, there is no Gospel. Without repentance, there is no forgiveness. John must come before Jesus.

When I posed the question, “If John was here today, what would be his words to us?” I confess that it was kind of a trick question. Because John is here. You’re looking at him. For as God sent John to be His voice two thousand years ago, so He calls His pastors today to speak His Word to His people. Perhaps it should be a requirement in our seminaries that pastors-in-training learn to eat locusts and

how to dress in camel's hair clothing. Then, when they graduate, their congregations would have a clearer picture that John is truly in their midst. Of course, then again, it is highly likely that few pastors could find a wife to marry.

God sent John to preach long ago because time does not heal all wounds; only His proclaimed Word does that. And that is also why John is here with you today. Because God is merciful, to you. He desires not the death of the sinner, but He wants all to repent, including you and me. The world will not repent because all they have is time on their hands, but you have John. You have the voice of God speaking His Word into your ears. You have Baptism. You have Holy Communion. You have the word of forgiveness given to you.

You have, not just John preaching repentance, you have John pointing to Christ. You have Jesus coming to you with grace and mercy. You see, John comes before Jesus. He came in Advent prior to Christmas. And John comes to you today, and since John is here, this means Jesus is coming. Here on the altar, Christ is here for you for the remission of your sins. Here today through God's message of peace, and hope, and forgiveness, Christ is here for you. Here today God draws you back to your baptism where you are in Christ, and Christ is in you.

One thing you may not have is time. Our time is in God's hands. He knows the number of our days. He knows when we will take our last breath. And so why do we live as though all we have is time, and plenty of it? We have no sense of urgency about us. We put off urging our friends and loved ones to repent. We put off our own repentance, living for ourselves day after day, acting as though we can always repent tomorrow. But tomorrow may not come for some of us. And if Christ returns tonight, it will not come for all of us.

And so listen to John...God wants us to repent now. To turn away from our pride, and selfishness, and stubbornness. To stop living in sexual sin. To stop using foul language. To turn away from all the wrong in our lives--not so God will turn toward us in love, but because He is already turned toward you with a face of mercy. God has already placed the cross before His eyes so that He sees you through the blood of His son who died for you. God does not look at you in anger. He has compassion in His heart toward you.

And so today even as John is in your midst, Jesus comes to you. He comes forgiving your sins. He comes to set you free from the curse of the Law. He comes with pardon, not punishment. He comes to give you comfort. He ends the war between God and you. The war is not over because something changed within you, or in your life. The war is over because Jesus declared it to be over. "It is finished!" He cried from the cross. God is at peace with you for Jesus' sake. God forgives you because of Jesus. This mercy, this peace, this comfort is yours. It is also for everyone out there. For those who have time, but no time to repent. No time for Jesus. And so may God use us to bring them to where God's voice is heard; where His mercy is given.

But for you, whether your time here is coming to an end, or whether God will give you much more time yet, He gives you something even better than time. He gives you John, so that He can also give you Jesus. He draws you here to His House in Advent so that Christmas will have real meaning for you. He gives you the gift of repentance so that His forgiveness you will desire. He leads you to confess your sins so that Jesus, who comes to you now, comes with mercy and pardon. He comes with forgiveness for you--not at some time in the future, but right now, at this very time in your life, Jesus is here for you. Amen.