

SERMON TITLE: "The Time Has Come"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:21-40 (also read Galatians 4:4-7)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 31, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday morning, I noticed that my watch had stopped. So, later that day, I took it to a repair shop and got a new battery installed. While they were replacing the battery, they cleaned my watchband and shined it up. So now, my favorite timepiece is all ready to count down the minutes to the New Year.

That's what we'll all be doing tonight, right? Those of us who can stay awake that late, at least! We'll be watching the clock to see the time of one year passing into the next. If we're watching TV in the hours before the big ball drops in Times Square, we'll likely hear and see all kinds of reviews of 2017. If it's a typical New Year's Eve, time will seem to flash before our eyes as we hear about people and events that were significant in the past 12 months. Then, I suspect, we'll also be given a preview of 2018, as various pundits, scholars, musicians, philosophers, politicians, scientists, sports commentators, and pop culture gurus all make their predictions of what will come in the time ahead.

Even though we who are alive on this final day of 2017 are probably more obsessed with time than any humans who ever lived, concern about time isn't unique to us. Just look at the Bible. What did our reading from Galatians 4 say? "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son." Even God was concerned with time. And our Gospel reading from Luke 2 tells about two important times for the newborn baby Jesus. This morning I'd like to look at those times which had come back then, and also at the time which has come to us today.

1—TIME TO PRESENT OURSELVES TO THE LORD

Luke 2:21 tells us that eight days after Jesus was born, the time came to circumcise and name the child. I'm sure this religious ritual was very sacred to Mary and Joseph, as they presented their newborn baby to God in the tradition and custom of their Jewish people for more than a thousand years. Then, about

a month later, another important time came. According to Jewish law, the mother of a male child was impure for 40 days after her son's birth. When that time was up, Mary was to go to the temple and offer a sacrifice for cleansing. She and Joseph took baby Jesus with them, for the time of his presentation to the Lord.

This time of presentation which had come for baby Jesus and his family was a time ripe with spiritual meaning. They weren't doing rituals just to be doing rituals. They weren't following the letter of the law in a cold and formal way. Nor were they going through motions because everybody else was doing them. No, Mary and Joseph were doing what they believed to be right because they truly wanted to be faithful to God, and they wanted their son to grow up loving God also. They knew Jesus was a special gift from the Lord, and so, in a sense, they returned him back to God. Jesus' family participated in these rituals as a means to align themselves with God's holiness and purpose.

This presentation time which had come for Jesus is a beautiful example of how we might deal with the time which has come to us. Obviously, this text has much to say to parents who are considering baptism for a baby or thinking about how they will relate their children to God. But this story of time is also relevant for the rest of us, as we consider the role of rituals in our lives.

In this New Year, which is fast upon us, will we approach spiritual rituals and traditions—like attending worship—as something which we begrudgingly have to follow? Or will we rejoice in the opportunity to align ourselves with God's holiness and purpose? Will we seek out patterns of devotion—like prayer and scripture reading—so that our lives can be dedicated to God? Will we see that our entire life is a special gift from the Lord, for which we can thank God through our service? According to Luke, the time has come for us to present ourselves to the Lord.

Even when the rituals and repetitive events of our lives aren't so "religious" in nature, we can still turn them into sacred time. When we find ourselves loading the washing machine with one more pile of dirty laundry, we can present ourselves and our labors to the Lord, and suddenly what was just a

burdensome chore becomes a labor of love to God. The same goes for shoveling snow, vacuuming the floor, or going to work. Most of our time is made up of things that we have to do, over and over again. We may not have much choice about what those things are, but we do have the opportunity to choose how we'll perceive those tasks. We can look upon our daily actions as time-consuming bothers, or we can present them to the Lord, as time dedicated to God's service.

2—TIME TO SEE GOD'S SALVATION

In the story of the presentation of baby Jesus to the Lord, we see that another time had come. It was time for Simeon and Anna to see and witness to the salvation of God. Both of them were quite elderly, and neither would have held out much longer. Fortunately, Simeon was guided by the Spirit of God to go to the temple at just the right time to see baby Jesus. And because of all the time that Anna had spent worshipping at the temple, fasting and praying, she was already there to witness God's child who would bring about the redemption of her people. When these two holy elders of Jerusalem saw Jesus, they knew their prayers had been answered. They instantly recognized the salvation that this baby would bring.

With the New Year on our doorstep, the time has come for us to see God's salvation also. Once again baby Jesus has been born and has been brought into God's house for dedication. Through these past weeks of the youth Christmas play; the children's pageant; the Chancel Choir's cantata; and the Christmas Eve service of scripture, carols, and candlelight; baby Jesus has come among us. And, once again, God's holy people have been drawn here by God's Spirit and by our timely practice of worship. We're here. Jesus is here. It's time now for us to recognize that Jesus is no ordinary baby. He's God-in-the-flesh. He's the love of God in our very midst. He's the divine presence within the realm of human life. He's the wonder and power of God bundled into a form that we can experience. Jesus is the redemption and inspiration which makes our own divine-human connections possible.

Do you see him? Do you see the salvation he brings? On this New Year's Eve, wouldn't it be great if every one of us here would resolve to see the salvation of Jesus at work transforming our own hearts and lives?

You remember that 2017 has been the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. We talked a lot about this, leading up to October 31, the day in 1517 when Martin Luther posted his *95 Theses* on the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenberg, Germany. In a recent article by the United Methodist General Secretary on Archives and History, Rev. Fred Day wrote that, a couple hundred years after Luther, our own Methodist leaders, John and Charles Wesley, offered another dose of reform to the church and Christian theology. They "stirred a new generation of understanding and enthusiastic witness that once God's amazing grace is experienced, a person can't help but be transformed. They believed that experiencing divine love changes people and . . . causes a chain reaction" in which "the healed become the healers and the redeemed in turn become redeemers."* In other words, when we see the salvation of Jesus Christ, it changes our lives so that we behave differently, so that we are able to see the salvation of Jesus in our own selves, and others are able to see and experience it too.

Of course, this kind of witness to the salvation of Jesus is exactly what Simeon and Anna were doing. Luke says that Anna "began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Likewise, Simeon took young Jesus in his arms and praised God, exclaiming for all to hear. Simeon's joy could not be contained, as he was sure that Jesus would be the salvation of God for Jews and Gentiles alike. This opportunity for salvation wasn't a secret for just a small group of chosen ones. The time had come for the light of God to shine on the Gentiles and the entire world.

If we see salvation the way that Simeon and Anna did, we'll realize that we have no reason to be shy or unenthused. We have no reason to be ambivalent or cautious. We have no reason to hold back what is happening. Quite the opposite. We can be profoundly motivated to praise God and let everyone know this good news. The savior of the world has been born and presented to the Lord right here in front of us. What

are we waiting for? Like Simeon and Anna, none of us is getting any younger. The time has come for us now to see this salvation, to allow it to take hold in our own lives, and to witness to it in ways that the rest of the world can also see and hear.

CONCLUSION

Gary Phillis isn't here today. He and Barbara went to Salt Lake City to visit a friend who's been in the hospital. But Gary told me it would be OK to repeat to you a true and funny story from his life that connects with the time that had come for baby Jesus.

In his usual self-deprecating style, Gary said that, when he was 18 years old and living in Wyoming, he and a friend both got dates and went to the county fair. At first, all four of them were hanging out together. Then the two couples decided to go their separate ways for a while. But, before they parted company, they agreed to meet back in that same spot at 8:30 p.m., and Gary had one more idea. In those days long before everyone had access to the precise atomic clock on their cell phones, Gary suspected that their watches might not be at the same minute and might need to be adjusted. Grasping for the vocabulary word to describe this alignment of timepieces, Gary suggested that they should "circumcise" their watches. As soon as the word left his mouth, Gary knew he'd said the wrong thing. "Synchronize" was what he meant. But it was too late. Gary's misspoken word would go down in infamy. After all this time, his old friends still remind him of it and have a good laugh.

Well, Gary might not have been too polished in his presentation back in those days. But the Gospel of Luke tells us that the presentation of baby Jesus for his circumcision and dedication went very well. The time had come for those things to happen. And, with the New Year dawning tomorrow morning, the time has come for us too. The time has come for us to dedicate ourselves to the Lord and to see and witness to the salvation that is possible in our own lives and the lives of others. The old days are gone. Are you ready to embrace the future God has in store for you? I hope so, for the time has come.

*<http://gcah.org/resources/a-sixth-sola>