

SERMON TITLE: “The Time Has Come”

SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:21-40

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: December 31, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday this week, I got a phone call from a woman who wanted to get married right away—today, in fact. She didn’t care what time of day, and she wasn’t interested in having a big ceremony with lots of people. She and the man in her life had been in a relationship for a long time, and he had finally said, “Yes.” So now it was just a matter of getting the ceremony lined up quickly.

“Why the urgency?” I asked. Now that they had finally made the decision, she said, they really liked the idea of getting married on December 31, 2023, because, when written in numbers, 12/31/23 can also be thought of as 1-2-3, 1-2-3. How can you go wrong with a marriage that begins with such basics as that? In their minds, the perfect time had come.

While the rest of us won’t be getting married today, we certainly are mindful of time. If we’re able to stay awake tonight, most of us will be counting down the hours and minutes until this year passes into the next. Even though we who are alive on this final day of 2023 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. Galatians 4:4 tells us, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son.” Our call to worship today was based on the famous Ecclesiastes 3, in which there seems to be a time for every purpose under heaven. And our Gospel reading from Luke 2 tells about two important times for the newborn baby Jesus. Let’s look this morning at those times which had come in Jesus’ life, 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 everyone 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 of grace and as a way 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 relate to the time that has come to us. Obviously, this text has much relevance for parents who are considering baptism of a baby and how they will connect their children to God. But this story of time is also meaningful for the rest of us, as we consider the role of rituals in our lives.

In this New Year, will we approach spiritual rituals and traditions—like attending worship—as something which we do begrudgingly? 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. Then, what was just a burdensome chore becomes a labor of love to God. The same goes for vacuuming the floor, brushing our teeth, or taking out the trash. Most of our time is made up of things 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 routines 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 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 worshiping 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, also, to see God's salvation. Once again baby Jesus has been born and has been brought into God's house for dedication. Through these past weeks of Advent preparations, carol singing, and Christmas Eve 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 understand. Jesus is the redemption and inspiration which makes our own divine-human connections possible.

Do you see him? Do you see the salvation Jesus brings? At this time of New Year's Eve, wouldn't it be great if every one of us here would resolve to see the redemption of Jesus at work transforming our own hearts and the lives of others too? Our Wesleyan theology teaches that when we experience God's gracious salvation, it "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 in such a way that *others are also* able to see and experience the salvation of God.

Anna told about Jesus and his redemption for her people. And Simeon offered praise for the expansive mercy of God which would be not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles. Simeon knew this would be a controversial revelation, but he believed the time had come for God's people to see and witness to the breadth of God's love. As 2024 begins, may we also believe that the time has come for God's salvation to shine like a light for every type of people everywhere.

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

One of our members, Gary Phillis, gave me permission to tell 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 told me 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.

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, not “circumcise.” But it was too late. Gary’s misspoken word would go down in infamy. After all this time, Gary’s old friends still remind him of it and have a good laugh.

Well, Gary might not have been very polished in his presentation at that young time of his life. 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 sacred rituals to happen. And, with the New Year’s ball about to drop, the time has come for us too. The time has come for us to present ourselves in dedication 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? I hope so, for the time has come!

*Rev. Fred Day was UM General Secretary of Archives and History when he wrote this in 2017. It was posted then (not now) at <http://gcah.org/resources/a-sixth-sola>.