

SUCH A TIME!
GALATIANS 4:4-7
DECEMBER 27, 1987

Page 1

A twelve-year old boy attended a symphony concert with his parents. You can imagine how excited he was to go to a concert, but he became interested, in spite of himself. Especially interesting was the guy in the back of the orchestra who wielded two mammoth cymbals strapped to his wrists. Since "boys will be noise," the boy waited anxiously for the moments when the man would stand and slam the cymbals together, producing a resounding noise. After the concert the boy located the percussion player and, pointing to the cymbals, asked, "What do you have to know to play those?" The cymbals player responded thoughtfully, "Nothing...except when!"

When a parachutist jumps from an airplane, it is of critical importance to know when the ripcord should be pulled to open the chute. If pulled too soon, the chute can get fouled with the plane. If pulled too late, well, you get the picture. In the early days of parachuting, the jumpers would say "Geronimo" and then yank on the ripcord. Now, we are told, parachutists are instructed to say, "Not now but NOW!" By the time that phrase is said, maybe a second and a half, the parachutist is safely free of the plane.

We consider parachute jumping not because 1988 is going to be a "leap year," but because it's a good time to think about time, and timing. The principle of time is so important to life that the New Testament uses two Greek words to describe the basic categories of time. One is "chronos"--measurable time--the kind of time recorded by clocks and calendars. Our word "chronology" comes from "chronos." The other time word is "kairos," which means roughly the "right time," the proper time for an event to take place.

In the gospel lesson this morning, Luke wrote in 2:22, "The time came for Joseph and Mary to perform the ceremony of purification, as the Law of Moses commanded. So they took the child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord." There was a "right time"--a kairos--for this important event. In the Epistle lesson this morning, Paul wrote of the right timing for the coming of Jesus into this world. Galatians 4:4, "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." According to Mark, Jesus began his ministry by preaching, (Mark 1:15) "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."

Scholars have listed many reasons why the time was right for God to come into the world in the person of Jesus. The Jews were restless under Roman rule. They were longing for freedom, looking for a Messiah to lead them in battle against the Romans and set them free. The climate was right for God to come, even though Jesus was not quite the kind of Messiah they were looking for, and he ended up on a cross. The Roman occupation provided the right time for the coming of Jesus. Because the Romans occupied most of the known world at that time, travel was easy. It was relatively easy for the first missionaries, particularly Paul because he was a Roman citizen, to travel and spread the word. The religious climate was right for Christianity. There was a vacuum in Greek and Roman religion. Vain emperors tried to fill it with emperor worship, but the life, teachings and sacrifice of Jesus were much more appealing and satisfying.

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Page 2

The time was right for Jesus to come. The kairos was right. There is a "fullness of time." Events, revolutions, major social changes, all seem to have their time. Perhaps each of us has an internal clock, not for chronos (days and years), but for kairos ("the right time").

Sometimes the timing is off. Glendon Harris gives us a fascinating example of wrong timing. A few years ago, Russian zoologists discovered some wild geese in the Baraba Steppe region of western Siberia that were behaving as if they had lost their minds. The birds have their summer nesting grounds on the steppe; each fall they travel south to their winter quarters on the Ganges River about 2,200 miles away. The remarkable thing about these geese, however, is not the mystery of bird migration, but that they travel the first 100 miles on foot.

Each August the birds become increasingly restless. One day they all suddenly start heading south--a gigantic army of geese (100,000 at the very least) slowly and painfully marching across the steppe like columns of weary soldiers in an army several miles wide. They manage to travel only nine or ten miles a day; and day by day they grow weaker. Soon foxes and other predators move in. After about ten days, the remnants of the army arrive at a lake-filled area some 100 miles south of the nesting grounds. The exhausted geese swiftly recover in the water, their natural habitat. A few days later they continue their journey. But now they fly like any other migratory birds. After all they have been through, the remaining 2,100 miles across China and the Himalayas probably seem like child's play.

What seems to be happening is that their internal biological clocks are off. Under normal conditions this mechanism works with remarkable efficiency, but something has gone wrong in Siberia. Their internal clocks are prompting the geese to migrate south too early, about ten days before they have completed their yearly molting; they have not yet acquired their full growth of feathers. Therefore, they are still unable to fly when the biological clock gives them the order to head south. They cannot simply disobey the order. So the whole army sets off on foot, aiming unerringly for its goal 2,200 miles away. Ten days later, when their feathers have grown back sufficiently, they are able to fly.

Timing is important. When a hitter's timing is off, he'll swing late at the ball or foul it off. Jokes fall flat without good timing. A drama loses its punch if the lines aren't timed right. If each of us had a dollar for every time we spoke too soon--or too late--we'd all be rich!

Jesus knew when the time was right or not right. In John 7, the disciples urged him to go to Jerusalem to the Feast of Tabernacles, but Jesus answered, in verse 8, "Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come."

There are proper times, spiritual timepieces, within us that call for response. Sometimes they are ignored and not acted upon at all; at other times they are acted upon too early, before one has developed to the point to act properly. Either way, timing is all important.

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Page 3

There is such a time; there is a right time. Whether it is an internal clock, or the Spirit of God getting things in order, there is a right time. In Ecclesiastes chapter 3, we read, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to keep and a time to cast away." We don't need to keep everything, there is a time to cast away, but knowing when is important. Someone said, "Junk is something you discard two weeks before you need it."

There is a "time to be born, and a time to die," according to Ecclesiastes. The tragedy of our modern technological era is that the right time to die is now often ignored, and people are put through medieval torture called surgery and cruelly, in the name of compassionate medical care, forced to live in prolonged discomfort, pain or vegetation. A sermon on this crisis is rolling around in my head. After I have done more reading, and when the time is right, I will preach a sermon titled, "LET MY PEOPLE GO!"

Timing is critical. A wise parent knows the truth of Ecclesiastes 3:7, "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." In dealing with children, there is a time to keep silent, and there is a right time to sit down and have a good talk. But many of us parents allow ourselves to be drawn into discussions at the wrong times where they end in tirades, quarrels and further estrangement.

Wise is the person who knows the right time. As folks get along in years, there often comes a time when it is the right time to sell the house and move into an apartment or into a retirement center. There is a right time to ask for a raise, or to make a job change, or to have that confrontation.

Of course, some folks are ahead of their time: artists, composers, and authors have gone unrecognized until subsequent generations. Puccini's Madam Butterfly was a failure when first presented at La Scala in Milan in 1904. Italian audiences at that time were very demonstrative, and the cat-calls, boos and hoots were deafening. But, Madam Butterfly went on to become one of the favorite operas of all time. When you are ahead of your time, be persistent and patient while you wait for the world to catch up.

But, there is one time when the timing is always right: the time for you to come to God, the time for you to accept God's love of you, the time for you to commit your life to Jesus Christ and begin living out the plans, the dreams, the hopes God has for you. Jesus Christ came into the world at Christmas to redeem us. Galatians 4:4, "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." The time is right now. II Corinthians 6:2, "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." Now is the time for you to get your life in order. Now, as a new year begins; now, as the songs, joy, and meaning of Christmas still linger in your ears; now is the time for your salvation. Now is the time to let go of your own ways of doing things, and let Jesus Christ take over. Such a time is now!

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