“***The Time Is Fulfilled***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Jan. 26, 2019

**Joel 3:13–16**

13 Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. 14 Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. 15 The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

16 The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. But the Lord is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

**Mark 1:14–20**

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

16 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. 17And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” 18And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

The connection between the two biblical passages is something about time and timing, regarding a *crucial* moment or a time of decision. In Joel we have the “valley of decision,” and in Mark we have “the time is fulfilled” (Joel 3:14; Mark 1:15). They are not saying exactly the same thing, but both *are* saying something about a crucial time, and I’m going to build on that, because we know that timing is everything.

What is Joel actually talking about? In what precedes our reading, there is that great saying where God pours out his spirit on young and old alike (2:28), but also the sun turns dark and the moon turns to blood, while the nations gear up for war (2:31; 3:9–12). Then the multitudes find themselves in the valley of decision. So it has an apocalyptic and ominous setting. It is highly suggestive, but the sequence of events and the subject of the decision are not at all clear. Readers through the ages have tended to lift out of context whichever part intrigued them, and use it as they saw need. I’m going to do that, too.

Let’s look at the gospel reading. It has to do with the early days of the ministry of Jesus. Verse 15 here gives a brief summary of Jesus’ teaching, and is fascinating for that reason. Mark lists four main points to Jesus’ early teaching: 1) the time is fulfilled; 2) the kingdom of God has come near; 3) repent; 4) believe in the good news. Two through four are familiar to us from other passages; they have to do with that wonderful offer of the kingdom of God, and with the necessity of repenting, that is turning away from sin. What is less familiar or less easy to understand is “the time is fulfilled.” It could mean that something is coming to completion, and a new thing will begin. I think that the age of the prophets and of the emphasis on sin is coming to an end, and the new age based on love and connectedness is beginning. Jesus taught that the age of *fearing* God is now to be replaced by the age of *trusting* God and drawing upon the inner spirit to move Godward. Our direction is Godward.

John taught repentance, goodness, and honesty. So did Jesus, but he went on to teach and to demonstrate self-forgetfulness, connectedness, and joy. Further, on Pentecost, Jesus sent the Spirit, and that inaugurated a new age.

Still, we need to know more about that mysterious sentence, “the time is fulfilled.” It doesn’t use the usual word for time, which is *chronos*, from which we get the word “chronology.” It uses a less common word: *kairos*. The classical meaning of *kairos* is “the right time,” “the proper time,” or “the critical time.” As the word is used in Jesus’ day, it usually means a time of climax, of crisis, of timeliness, or of appropriateness. Jesus seems to be telling the people that the right time, the critical time has arrived. The light of truth is being revealed. The kingdom of God has drawn near. The Messiah is here. As he says elsewhere in the gospels, “something greater than the temple is here,” and “something greater than Solomon is here!” (Matt 12:6, 42). It was a time of decision, and it still is today. When people are confronted with the Messiah, the promised truth teacher and prophet, the hoped-for deliverer, they have to choose.

Here’s where I’m going to use the prophet Joel again. He also has language about the time being full and about a need for decision. He says “Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. . . the wine press is full. . . multitudes, in the valley of decision!” (3:13–14). It seems prophetic, since, now that Jesus has come, multitudes of human beings are being asked to decide about him. Was he just another rabbi, a sage, or is he *the* sage, the Messiah, sent by God? How important is this decision? Joel says the Lord “roars from Zion... and the heavens and the earth shake” (3:16). *That’s* how important your decision is; it’s *your* heaven and earth that will shake. This is a critical decision.

Joel uses apocalyptic. But apocalyptic is not always about the future; it can sometimes refer you back to your own present state, and the decisions you need to make. *Whenever* you have to make an important decision, then the harvest is ripe, the wine press is full. In other words, the time has come. You have to put in the sickle and make a decision. What you decide will be shaped by your accumulated decisions of the past, your “harvest,” but you can also choose to change direction. You can shake your heaven and your earth. Or, as Bob Dylan sang, “strike another match, go start anew” (“It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue”).

But, of course, it’s not just one decision and you’re done. You need to make the many little decisions to develop and support the first decision. If you decide to build a house, you need to make hundreds of small decisions: to draw up plans, dig the foundation, pour the concrete, buy the lumber, and so on. We need to make decisions about praying, seeking God’s will, practicing compassion and fairness. It’s not enough to just say “I believe, now I’m saved. Don’t bother me with fairness and stuff.”

The first disciples had to make decisions, too. Simon, Andrew, James, and John did not just suddenly follow Jesus for no reason. They had to think and make decisions. There’s a back story, although the gospel here does not give it. They knew Jesus already, knew what kind of person he was, and they had heard John’s words about him. Now Jesus was saying that he was sent by God to preach good news to the people. We have to assume that these guys thought about this claim before they decided to follow Jesus. When they followed him, it wasn’t just because they were dazzled by his clever remark about becoming fishers of men. The apostles had to put in the sickle—put in the *time—*to think and to decide, although it seems the decisions were easy to make, for them, since they had a good feeling about Jesus. That ease is what Mark is picturing, in his condensed narrative.

Their decisions changed their lives, they followed through with more decisions and *action*, and they changed history.

Now, decisionmaking can be tense and difficult, or it can come more easily, as, apparently, in the case of these apostles. Turning to Jesus can actually be the most peaceful and natural thing to do, for some people, although for others, who need to turn away from bad behaviors or bad thinking, it can be a tumultuous birthing experience. But it can be profoundly normal and healthy to realize that God’s gift has drawn near, and that there is good news to be believed.

When *you* decided to respond to Jesus, was it stormy, like going through a valley of decision, or was it natural, like responding to a parent’s expression of love? The dramatic and apocalyptic passage from Joel may describe *your* time of decision. Or a different passage might do better, like Isaiah’s saying “I will trust, and will not be afraid” (12:2). Whichever way you experience it, the kingdom of God draws very near to you, when you decide to follow Jesus.

You will still experience ups and downs in life. You will need to practice resilience during the hard times, and to stay diligent during the easy times. You will need to be able to self-criticize and correct. But you will reach a place where you are not plagued with doubts. You will know that God is real and that Jesus permanently links you to God. You will know that you are loved and that the Son of God leads you.