

ASH WEDNESDAY

Joel 2:1-2,12-17

Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

the Rev. John Roberts

THE APPOINTED TIME

Remember last Friday? The temperature edged close to 60 degrees. The sky was clear. People were walking around without coats or jackets. Smiles seemed to glow on every face. And then came Saturday. The temperatures dropped back into the 20s and 30s. The winds blew the cold into our faces along with freezing rain and snow. On Saturday, some of us, I'm sure, felt that the day before now turned into a cruel joke played on us by Mother Nature or God or those cruel meteorologists. We forgot about the smiles we had received just 24 hours earlier. We put on our heavy coats and gloves again and dealt with the disappointment that winter was still with us for the unforeseeable future.

But just as sure as the sun shined on all of us last Friday, I'm sure there was someone who experienced the birth of their first child. Someone heard the words "will you marry me?" Someone heard the doctor come out of surgery to tell a loved one that the surgery was a success.

And just as we all experienced the cold, cruel weather of last Saturday, someone that day received the dreadful phone call that a loved one was in a terrible accident. Someone found out that their husband or wife was just assigned a tour of duty in Afganistan. Someone began to think about planning a funeral.

Time is called the fourth dimension. But it's the dimension we can't quite understand through our human senses. We measure time in two very distinct ways. That's why the Greeks had two words for time. **Chronos** is that time we measure with calendars and clocks. It's like what we all did when I asked you to remember last Friday. It was a Friday. The temps were up. The sky was clear. **Kairos** is the other kind of time. It's the times we remember because something significant happened. Asking you to remember last Friday, you probably had to put some effort into it. Once I reminded you about that day, you could bring it up in your mind. But if I

were to ask you to remember the day you first fell in love or the day you were told a parent had died, you would not have recalled the day of the week or the time of day, you would have remembered how you felt. All of those emotions could be lived again. Sadness or joy; excitement or dread; fear or hope are remembered when time is a **kairos** experience.

The Church has given us this day, Ash Wednesday, wanting it to be a **kairos** experience for us. But it is difficult for us not to think of Ash Wednesday and the whole season of Lent in **chronos** time. We are called this day to "blow the trumpet; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly." "The day of the Lord is coming, it is near," Isaiah tells us. Through Isaiah, God tells us to "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." And so, we will, as God tells us, take account of our sins both individually and corporately and confess our unworthiness to God. And we will begin a Lenten season of introspection and examination. And we will have week after week of confession of our sins. And, thank God, we will have week after week of the announcement that our sins are forgiven, the slate has been wiped clean. And then, we will go on to sin again.

We need this call to repentance. But why? Because we need the reconciliation with God and one another that absolution from our sins brings us. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of our Lenten journey. If we were to begin this journey on our own terms, for what we considered an **acceptable** time, I suspect we would never begin the journey at all. Lucy Lind Hogan, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C., says, "I can assure you that women, in the excitement of their first weeks of pregnancy, do not want to hear what labor and delivery are like." And if we see this day, this Ash Wednesday, and indeed our whole Lenten journey as days of **chronos** time, we will not have the reconciliation that God through God's Church want us to experience. If we see today through **chronos** eyes, then we will see that cross of ash and hear the words, "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return" when it is placed on an infant or young child as a cruel thing to do. But if we receive our ashes with a **kairos** mind, we will remember that the Cross we receive on our foreheads is the symbol of how God, through Jesus the Christ, makes our lives new each and every day. We will remember in the blink of an eye that Jesus' death led to his Resurrection. The moment we hear the words, "you are dust and to dust you shall return" we will remember Jesus telling us, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me will never die."

Listen again to the words of St. Paul from our Second Lesson.

“We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake God made him to **be** sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might **become** the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.”

In other words, the forgiveness of our sins has already been accomplished. **Our** reconciliation to God, God’s Creation, and one another has already taken place through Jesus’ death on that Cross that is placed on our foreheads today. **And so**, now we are to **become** that reconciliation to the whole world. Parents, live out that Godly reconciliation with your children. Spouses, live out that Godly reconciliation with your partner. Children of God, live out that Godly reconciliation with your neighbor and with the earth that God has given you as a home.

Our journey will be just like Paul’s. Paul reminds us that there will be affliction, hardship, calamity, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger. Along with all of that we could add plenty of fear and yes, even death. But, in St. Paul’s words,

“by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left; in honor and dishonor; in ill repute and good repute; treated as impostors, and yet true; as unknown, and yet as well known; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything; even as dying, and see- **we are alive.**”

And here is the secret of the difference between *living in chronos* or *living in kairos*. The ability we have to live as reconciled sinners; to know that we will make mistakes and reap the consequences and, at the same time live each day as beloved children of God; is to live life as though **now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.**

So, in Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel, **when** you give your alms and offerings to care for your neighbors and your world in secret, your Father who sees in secret has already rewarded you and will reward you again. And **when** you pray for the peace of the whole world and the well-being of everything that exists, your Father will hear all your prayers. And **when** you fast; and **when** you read and study your Bibles; and **when** you care for the sick and the injured and mourners who are your neighbors, God, you Father,

has already and will again reward you with forgiveness of every sin and every mistake; will comfort and protect your life; will give you this day and every day as a **Day of Salvation, the Acceptable Time**.

That's the secret, you see. Living a *kairos* day means we live the past, the present, and the future all at once. We live Jesus' death and Resurrection together. We live with a great treasure in our hearts. This is the acceptable time, the day of salvation, the Day of the Lord. And it will be here again tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Look and listen and remember and expect all of God's grace all the time.