

New Beginnings. Jan 1st, 2017. Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

So, New Year's Day. How many of you stayed up to count in the new year? What did you do at midnight?

It's a strange tradition all over the world. In New York, they gather in Times Square, in London it's Trafalgar Square, Toronto it's Nathan Philips Square, Rome it's at the Coliseum or St Peter's square ... it doesn't matter where you are in the world – people like to gather to count down time. Ring out the old and bring in the new. It's funny how we are so focused on either the events of the past, or the events of what might be in the future – that sometimes we forget to live in the here and now. In the present. And yet, the call of God is for us to be faithful right here, right now.

The ancient Greeks had two words for time. The first was Chronos, which we still use in words like chronological and anachronism. It refers to clock time – time that can be measured – seconds, minutes, hours, years. It's the type of time that we count down on New Year's Eve.

But the second type of time is Kairos. Whereas Chronos is quantitative, Kairos is qualitative. It measures moments, not seconds. In fact, it refers to the *right* moment, the opportune moment. The perfect moment. In Christian theology, Kairos is referred to extensively. It has a sense of 'ripeness'. For example, in this passage from the book of Ecclesiastes:

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to uproot...” (Eccl. 3:1-2) and so on.

In the first Greek translations of the Bible, each use of the word 'time' in this passage is actually Kairos, not Chronos.

In 1985, a group of black South African theologians wrote a response to crackdowns by the Apartheid government. It was called The Kairos Document, and it began: “The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived.” The Document had a strong sense that the time was ripe for change: the fate of South Africa was in a balance, and any small actions might have the power to change the path of history. It was:

“A time to heal, A time to tear town and time to upbuild” (Eccl. 3:3)

That’s Kairos. But Kairos does not need to be as dramatic as that. It can be a small moment in one person’s life that is ripe, and full, and perfect. The perfect moment. The carefree laughter of children playing,- ask Glenyce about the smile of a grandchild; or it might be the playfulness of a kitten; or the beauty of fresh snow in the early morning, - these are perfect moments.

As Christians, that perfect moment may be the moment when we experience God. Theologian Marcus Borg talks about those moment’s as the ‘thin places’. In his book, “The Heart of Christianity’ – he describes the ‘Thin Places’ as a time when “our hearts are opened”. It’s a time and place where the things of our everyday fade away and we experience God around us and within us. That time might be in church through worship, singing, praying ... or it might be through music, poetry, dance, or even a walk in the wilderness.

It’s hard to pin down an example of Kairos, but I’ll try. I remember the first time when I was in the Rift Valley in Kenya. I was with a group of women, and none of them spoke English. It was quite late in the afternoon, and they encouraged me to take a walk with them up a mountain path. When we reached the top, it plateaued out – and you could see Lake Victoria in the valley below. Several others had also gathered on the ridge, but no-one spoke. They would nod in recognition to each other, then they would look out across the valley in silence. The sun was slowly setting. It was a magnificent golden ball, dropping down into the water. And if any of you have ever watched sunsets at Lake Huron, you know

what I mean. When it had finally dropped into the water, the women turned to each other and said something in Kiswahili, to which the other woman would respond, and then they would silently walk away. When I later asked my translator what they had said, he told me that it was a tradition to watch the moment, the time, the Kairos, when God lowered the sun, and then say to each other “the lake as swallowed the sun” to which the response would be, “and so it shall be.”

That moment, that time, that Kairos, was a thin place. It was a time to experience the magnitude of God. A time when I stopped noticing the passage of time ticking past. Stopped counting down the seconds, the minutes, and the hours. Stopped thinking about all the hundreds of things that I might have been worrying about. It was a time when I was in the present, the here and now. That’s Kairos.

So how do we, as Christians, make sure that we do not miss these perfect moments? We are so used to planning our days, filling our schedules, checking our watches, or cell phones. And being organized is not wrong. But how do we take time to stop all that and live in the now?

Well, I think it takes a mental shift. Instead of looking at our time as grains of sand slipping through an hour glass, or opportunities flying past. We need to realize that some moments are more valuable than others. The time that we take to listen to a friend in need, for example. The time when we help a neighbor or a co-worker with something. The time that we pause in our days to spend deliberately with God in prayer or reading scripture. We need to always live our days looking for those moments, those inexplicable times when we can be in the presence of God.

At new year, we often make new year's resolutions. Promises for a NEW BEGINNING. We make a promise that we will lose weight, eat less or drink less and so forth. And if you're like me, you normally break those promises by mid-February, or sometimes earlier. But this new year, I encourage you to make a different kind of promise to yourself. I encourage you to have a new beginning to the way that you look at time.

And, since it's new year, we're going to try something new. I've handed out strips of paper for you to write your promises on. Write on it how you hope to find those moments of Kairos? What will you do? What do you need to change? I encourage you now, to write on them as we take a moment in prayerful mediation.

(music play)

And as we sing the call to prayer through several times, I encourage you to come and place your promise to God, at the altar, by slotting them into the prayer weave. Remember, God is always surprising us with those ripe, opportune moments; His perfect, Kairos timing. Is this time for you to make a new beginning with God?