

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered Down

Thursday, December 10, 2020

“... And Out of Season”

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

—2 Timothy 4:1-2

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it. —Mark 11:12-14

A few weeks ago, I “attended” an installation service for a local pastor. The “meeting” was done via Zoom video, which is not my favorite kind of gathering, but in times like these it was the only real option. As happens at any installation we prayed for this pastor’s tenure to be fruitful and that God will be glorified by that congregation’s ministry, and while the format for the celebration did not lend itself to as full an experience as one might otherwise have, there was one part of the service which spoke boldly to me. It was a word for our time.

During the charge to the pastor, when the new preacher is urged to walk in obedience and energetic service to Christ, the celebrated words of Paul spoken to Timothy were read. This is a very familiar passage which is heard at every service of ordination or installation. *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season.* I myself have affirmed this biblical exhortation a number of times in my pastoral service, and while it was a most familiar verse, I heard these words in a whole new way. We are called to be ready preachers both in and out of season, and as I heard these words spoken in this season of COVID, I suddenly gained a much deeper understanding of Paul’s words.

I began pondering the meaning of Paul’s artful expression and the precise meaning of these seasons. What does it mean to preach a word in season? One imagines a time and setting when God’s Word seems so especially appropriate and it is easily received by the hearers. One thinks of preaching hope on Christmas Eve, of Resurrection victory on Easter, of comforting words of eternal life shared at a graveside, or an enthused lesson shared with an active congregation. A preacher knows great satisfaction when the Word seems to fit right in and be such an encouragement to God’s people!

Then comes the harder question: What does it mean to preach *out of season*? Speaking from experience I can assure you that a young preacher enters ministry gladly anticipating sermons offered in season and strives to be in tune with the times. But what about the other times? This is usually not given much thought, though one senses that we may well be in such a period. To begin with, it feels as though we no longer have any seasons! For so many of us Easter did not feel like Easter, and it felt as though Pentecost didn't even happen. July 4th wasn't really Independence Day. It felt like just another summer day. Christmas is soon upon us, and many comment that it just doesn't feel like Christmas. This is feeling like a season-less year! Sunday doesn't feel like the "real Sunday" we once knew as many cannot join in worship at St. Luke's, and those who can experience a service which is missing so many elements of worship, like closeness with brothers and sisters in Christ and lots of heartily sung hymns. We count down the weeks before normal practices might be restored.

In the face of all this, we preach the word, and I now believe that this is the *out of season* which Paul had in mind. The immediate setting does not so naturally lend itself to enthusiasm, and as we draw near to God, we may not feel the usual joyful anticipation. Yet having said all that, it is at times like these when I find myself more gripped by God's Word. It is in exactly these times that I find the Bible so especially indispensable. How greatly we need this sustaining word of hope. It is at times like these that I find myself truly engaging the Scripture and finding deeper and more powerful meanings. And this is not merely a preacher's confession. It is every believer's experience as we are all called to find meaning, hope and guidance from God's Word, and in this strange out of season time it seems to be there in special abundance! Let us cling to and communicate the Good News of Jesus all the more in this season-less season.

The Gospels tell us of Jesus' mysterious encounter with a leafy though fruitless fig tree. Our Lord was disappointed with this plant which was not productive as it was out of season for a fig tree. I suppose that for the believer there should really be no *out of season*. May all of us—preachers and laity alike—pay special attention to our Bibles, and be blessed and guided by Paul's familiar words. *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season.*

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

O God, who hast promised that they who endure to the end shall be saved, give us grace to persevere in thy holy service all our days, that we may reach the end of our faith, even the salvation of our souls: through Jesus Christ our Lord. —The Narrow Way