

Sermon: February 14, 2016 – Lent I – Luke 4: 1-13
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

It would not be overstating the case to say that we live in a culture obsessed by time.

Online news agencies tumble over each other, trying to post the most recent version of breaking stories before the competition can do so, even if the information is shoddy or incomplete or does nothing more than re-post a series of infuriating little Twitter tweets. Getting the scoop has long been a key component of journalism, but that was a lot different when you were publishing a newspaper once daily or once weekly. Now, in the digital world it's continuous, and speed has become more important than depth.

Watch a movie, documentary or sports broadcast from the past ten years, and compare it to a similar type of show produced in the 1960s, and you'll notice how quick the cuts are nowadays compared with way back when. Video editors now give you three seconds of this, then three seconds of that, because that's what we want – or at least it's what we've grown accustomed to.

At the same time that news agencies aim for speed, and much entertainment is built around fast-cut editing, I don't know if any of my three kids, ages 23 to 27, actually wears a watch, and here's why: when I was growing up, my life worked around schedules that had been determined by someone else. If you wanted to buy groceries in Regina, you could only do it from Tuesday to Saturday, 9 am to 6 pm, with Thursday nights open til 9:30 (and I can remember when that revolutionary idea was first tried). Stores were closed all day, Sunday AND Monday. You wanted to watch your favourite show on TV, on one of the two channels we got, it was on this night, at this time, and if you missed it you'd have to wait for the re-run in a few months. If you wanted to participate in Sunday sports, they would start no earlier than 1:00 in the afternoon, after everyone's Church services had finished. But the world that my kids have grown up in does not relate to time in that way: shopping is available 24/7, entertainment is streamed on-demand, and Church participation? Well, that falls in line behind everything else. There are still 60 minutes in an hour and 24 hours in a day, but the way we relate to time has changed almost completely.

This funny relationship between humans and time goes back at least to the days of Jesus. The ancient Greek language had two words for time, CHRONOS and KAIROS. Theologian Paul Tillich famously distinguished between 'chronos' which signifies linear, measurable time and 'Kairos' which signifies a specific, propitious time, such as "at the right time." Chronos is the familiar time related to our world, "chronological", but Kairos implies a fullness of time – "God-time" if you will. There are some times when chronos is more important – like remembering that February 14th is Valentine's Day, rather than forgetting it and trying to sneak it in on the 15th – but for the most part, it's Kairos that we need to pay attention to.

Before getting to the way these words about time relate to today's gospel reading, I feel compelled to take a brief aside about a particular "time" issue in scripture. I find it half-way between hilarious and exasperating when I hear of people getting all bent out of shape about the six days of creation, arguing tooth and nail about the need for it to be six actual chronological days or else you might as well toss out any kind of relationship with scripture. To me, this is a great instance of chronos vs Kairos: rather than worrying about the chronos of the story, a six-day period with different tasks completed by God each day, it's the Kairos that matters: seven times in the Biblical account of those six days, we read the phrase "and God saw that it was good", and once the work was done there was one additional day, a period of Sabbath rest. Taken as Kairos, the six days of creation tell us that the entire unfolding process of the world and all who dwell therein are inherently good and within God's favour, which is a beautiful way to underline the interrelatedness of creation. Taken as Kairos, the Sabbath day of rest keeps us from giving our entire lives over to work, setting some precious time aside to go deep in the presence of God's divine love. Kairos, God's time, fills this story with life whereas using the stopwatch of Chronos wastes our time in silly, inconsequential arguments that miss the point entirely.

But back to today's gospel reading. Time plays a significant role in today's reading from the 4th chapter of Luke. The first impact that "time" has on this story, is the specified forty days in the wilderness. Throughout the Bible, numbers are rarely just thrown out there as a random detail, and the number 40 shows up no fewer than 146 times. It is one of those numbers that flashes like a neon sign, signifying "a period of testing, trial or probation". In the tradition of 40 days and 40 nights of rain in the days of Noah, 40 years of wilderness wandering for Miriam and Moses and the Hebrew people, the 40-day fast entered

by Jesus indicates a time of holy inquiry. The number 40 looks like chronos, a factual detail, but quickly reveals itself to be Kairos, a time filled with God's holy challenges.

The second way that time impacts this story is that it is wedged between the baptism of Jesus, and the beginning of his Ministry. Between his "aha" moment, when God's call came clear, and the day when his words and actions would start impacting the lives of others, came some much-needed testing. It was time – Kairos – to test the call.

Anyone in a profession that requires internships or practicums has some idea of how this works. After you feel guided into the profession and have done some training, but before you are unleashed on the world as an independent entity, is the exciting time filled with trial-and-error when you jump in with both feet and find out if you can actually do the work or not. If your internship is any good at all, it will stretch you, it will push you, it will force you to do stuff you don't want to do and challenge you to achieve things you never even imagined yourself capable of. And, perhaps, it will show you the temptations of the profession: the lure of prestige, the ease of shortcuts, the path of greatest financial reward.

After realizing that God had something special in store for him, but before that mission started to impact others, Jesus was sent out on his practicum, supervised by Satan. And so we have this wonderful allegorical journey, with the talented tempter directing the action. Three times, in three different ways, the unlimited power potentially available to one so closely connected to God is put in front of Jesus, and each of the three times, all he had to do to receive the gift, is follow Satan's lead. Addicts will tell you that they are most likely to act out with their drug of choice when they are Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired (HALT) and that's pretty much the space that Jesus was in when Satan took him on, yet even at his weakest ebb, Jesus sees through the falsehood of these deals and graduates from the practicum time of testing, to the fullness of his calling.

The third way that time plays out in this story is in the rather chilling words of verse 13: "when the Devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time." "Opportune time" is the translation for, you guessed it, Kairos. This concluding verse predicts, nay promises that there will be a future time full of spiritual challenge when Satan's influence will need to be confronted again. Checking a handful of commentaries, it's unclear exactly what Luke may have had in mind: will Jesus have to endure future episodes of direct temptation? Do these foreboding words anticipate some cataclysmic confrontation in the end times? Are these words anticipating Christ's resurrection, his victory over every power that tries to subdue his love? Or does this just refer to Satan's ongoing influence in the lives of others, such as Judas Iscariot, which will then impact Jesus' life? Opinions differ as to what Luke was referencing, but what is clear, is that Jesus' life is not going to be free from troubles, just because he withstood this early test. And to me, that brings me closer to Christ, for instead of falsely suggesting that life is simply a matter of proving yourself once then all is well, Jesus had to do what the rest of us have to do: he had to keep on making faithful choices as he navigated the chaotic realities of life.

Throughout the story of Jesus' time of fasting and the temptations that followed, this notion of time, chronos and Kairos, plays a major role. In recent years and recent days I have come to realize that the intersection between these two understandings of time impacts all of life, not just the grand stories of scripture.

Two years ago, the Sochi Winter Olympic Games were nicely underway but for me it was time for something else. After years of increasing frailty, my Mom had entered palliative care. Her time – her Kairos – had come.

Those weeks at the hospice gave my brother and me the chronos time we needed, to realize that there would not be many more days to be with Mom, and it gave Mom the time she needed to start talking with a wonderful, caring Chaplain, about the reality that death was near. Those days in palliative care had a time framework of their own: in one way, the days were terribly long; in another way, the days were full of meaning and depth. Each day still had a chronos of 24 hours, but the Kairos of those days was strong.

Nine days ago, a group of buddies at their Church's youth group hatched a goofy plan to hurtle down the bobsled run at Canada Olympic Park on their toboggans. That decision, aided by the still-emerging brain chemistry of the adolescent male, changed life forever for those eight young men and those who loved them. Earthly life ended for Evan and Jordan, who had been students at Westmount Charter School when I worked there, and the rest of the group suffered deep trauma to the body, mind and spirit.

This past week I have watched as my old school community which I still regard as “my Calgary family” have wrestled with the notion of time. Everyone has been so thankful for the time that they did spend in the presence of these exceptional boys, and yet there is such a strong sense of lost time: all those years of life that these boys had every right to expect. There wasn’t nearly enough chronos, and because of that, questions are asked of God: had their time come? Was there some bigger plan, some Kairos in the middle of these tragically shortened lives? Much love and support, much graciousness and gratitude has arisen to help them through this time, and the coming weeks and months will involve a lot more sorting. Sometimes we fail to recognize the gift of time, until it is gone.

I suspect that everyone here has these same kinds of very personal experiences with chronos and Kairos. As a society, as a planet, we are in the midst of Kairos time on the bigger stage as well: it is time to walk forward in a new relationship between Canada’s first nations and us “settlers.” It is time to re-set our lifestyles in light of climate change. It is time for believers of all religions to purge any notion that ties devotion to God with expressions of violence. Kairos means, there is no time like the present to engage the big changes that are in front of us.

Whatever the issues of your life – whatever changes need to happen, whatever overlooked blessings need to be celebrated, whatever depth needs to be found – know that this day and each day are times of Kairos, God’s time, given as pure gift. May you embrace that gift, in the fullness with which it is offered. Amen.

References cited:

Bible Hub. <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/4-13.htm>

The Bible Study Site. <http://www.biblestudy.org/bibleref/meaning-of-numbers-in-bible/40.html>

Tillich, Paul cited by Davis, D. Mark. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.ca/2013/02/twice-led-not-fed-well-read.html>

White, Ian. <http://calgary.ctvnews.ca/too-close-to-home-1.2774405>

© 2016, Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church