

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 19, 2012**

TIME TO SEEK THE LORD

Isaiah 55:1-13

I've been thinking a bit about time this week. Speaking of time, Albert Einstein reportedly said: "The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once." I don't know if Einstein was serious or not, but it is an interesting perspective, don't you think?

Back in the early 70s, Jim Croce sang of what he would do if he could save "time in a bottle." Remember the song?

If I could save time in a bottle
The first thing that I'd like to do
Is to save every day
Till eternity passes away
Just to spend them with you

But, you see, we can't save time in a bottle. It doesn't work that way. And eternity will never pass away.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said this about time: "The time is always right to do what is right." He was right.

And, of course, as Solomon famously said in Ecclesiastes 3:

There is a time for everything,
And a season for every activity under heaven.
There is a time to be born and a time to die,
A time to plant and a time to harvest,
A time to kill and a time to heal,
A time to tear down and a time to build,
A time to weep and a time to laugh,
A time to mourn and a time to dance.
A time to search and a time to give up,
A time to hold on and a time to let go,
A time to be silent and a time to speak,
A time to love and a time to hate,
A time for war and a time for peace.
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

A time for everything.

THE SEASON OF LENT

The season of Lent, which begins this week on Ash Wednesday, is a special time of soul-searching, repentance, and, in some Christian traditions, self-denial, in preparation for the remembrance of the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus for us on Good Friday, and the celebration of His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday. It is an opportune time for each of us to take a close look at the spiritual condition of our hearts, our lives, our faith, and our witness.

Officially, Lent is the period of 40 days (not counting Sundays) leading up to Easter. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, which takes its name from the practice of placing ashes on the foreheads of believers as a sign of sorrow for and repentance of sin. It has not been our tradition to do it here at Faith, but Pastor David and the Cove mission team had a special service on Ash Wednesday for several years. Like the date for Easter, the date for Ash Wednesday varies from year to year. This year, Ash Wednesday is February 22 – this Wednesday (which is also George Washington’s actual birthday). The day before Ash Wednesday is known as Mardi Gras or Shrove Tuesday, which is observed in some places (New Orleans is a notable example) as a kind of last-chance, wild, unrestrained celebration of self-indulgence immediately before the Lenten period of penitence and self-denial.

Here is an interesting little fact I came across this week: Did you know that in the Republic of Ireland, Ash Wednesday is also National No Smoking Day? Apparently it is. Ash Wednesday was chosen for it because, as is obvious even to a casual observer, there is a natural connection between the decision to quit smoking and the religious practice of giving up some luxury for Lent. Not a bad idea to consider if you’re a smoker and know you need to quit.

All of this is to say that, whether we are rigorous in the observance of its traditional liturgical practices or not, the season of Lent is an opportune time to re-examine and refocus our hearts. It is a time for spiritual renewal, a time even for reformation and revival (the kind of reformation and revival that can come only from God), a time to repent and turn away from all known sin in our lives, and a time to rededicate ourselves to worship, to love, to trust, to follow and serve the Lord with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

Now is the time. The time is now. I don’t want any of us to miss it.

As we enter the season of Lent and journey together toward Holy Week, I want to talk with you about the moment in time in which we find ourselves, and how to redeem the time, as Paul says in Ephesians 5:16, knowing that the days and the world in which we live abound with evil.

SEEK THE LORD

We begin today in Isaiah 55, where Isaiah says it is time to seek the Lord. Look at verse 6: “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while He is near.” Now, it is true that there is never a time when it is not time to seek the Lord. There is never a time when we do

not need God; never a time when we do not stand in need of His saving and sustaining grace; never a time when we have no need of His presence, protection, and provision; never a time when we don't need His grace and power at work in us. Never a time! Amen?

So then, if there is never a time when it is not time to seek the Lord, it means that right now – today – it is time to seek the Lord, because, as R. C. Sproul is fond of saying, “Right now counts forever,” and because right now – this moment in time – is all we are promised. The past is over. We can't relive it. The future – in this life – is not guaranteed. You may be blessed with many more years in this life. Or you may not. You may not live to celebrate another birthday, or to see another sunrise. Death may come unexpectedly. Just think of Whitney Houston and her unexpected death just a week ago.

More than a dozen years ago, a woman named Mary Leonard was diagnosed with a disease called polymyositis, a rare inflammatory tissue disease that attacks the muscles. Things took a deadly turn when the disease invaded Mary's heart. About two years ago, in March 2010, Mary's doctors told her she had only about 24-48 hours to live.

Have you ever thought about what you would do if you knew you had only 24 hours to live? What if, right now, you have only 24 hours to live? Or less than 24? None of us knows how much more time we have. The late Steve Jobs said you should live every day as though it will be your last, because one day, sooner or later, you will be right.

The doctors were wrong about Mary Leonard. She did not die within 48 hours. She lived another year, and a little bit longer, until the Lord called her home to heaven in May 2011. Through her experience, Mary, who thought of herself as just “an average Christian,” said she learned these five life lessons:

1. Know that prayer is powerful. (It is. It is more powerful and more mysterious than any of us knows.)
2. Mend fences now. (I don't think you can overestimate the significance of the word “now.”)
3. Release the reins of life to God.
4. Know that God is able – more than able. (I think there is a Bible verse [Ephesians 3:20] and a song about that. ☺)
5. Put your focus on what really matters.

Now is the time to focus on what really matters in life. Whatever your circumstances in life, whatever your age, whatever obstacles or opportunities or dreams lie before you, it is time to seek the Lord and His favor. It is time to seek the Lord and His wisdom. It is time to seek the Lord and His plan for your life. It is time to seek first – above all else – His kingdom and His righteousness, as Jesus Himself said in Matthew 6:33. It is time to seek the Lord and release the reins of your life to Him. It is time to seek the Lord and ask Him to show you if there is any area in your life that you are holding back from Him. Seek the Lord and ask Him to extend His rule over every desire, every detail, and every endeavor in your life. Seek the Lord, and give yourself to Him totally, unreservedly, with unbridled joy and trust.

There is a sense of urgency about seeking the Lord, and not only because of the uncertainty of this life. Isaiah urges us to “seek the Lord while He may be found,” and to “call on Him while He is near,” which means, does it not, that He may not always be found? And that He will not always be near?

This chapter (Isaiah 55) begins with an invitation from God that is all grace. It is an open invitation that goes out to everyone. This invitation is not just for Jews. Gentiles are invited to come, too. It is not just for Americans. It is for Iranians, too. It is not just for conservatives. Or liberals. It is for everyone. It is an invitation from God to everyone who is thirsty for the water of life and hungry for the food that truly nourishes and satisfies the soul. It is an invitation to come and receive. At no charge. At no cost to those who receive it. It is a free gift. The salvation God offers us is free. It is a gift of grace, which comes free of charge to people who do not, will not, and cannot ever deserve it. Like you and me.

This invitation from God to come to Him and receive what only He can give, we might say, is an offer that is too good to refuse. But the sad truth is that many people do refuse it. Millions say “No” to God’s invitation and choose to seek satisfaction in other things or places or pursuits. Actor Jim Carrey once made this telling comment: “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.” Do you hear that? Being rich and famous and doing everything you ever dreamed of is *not* the answer. Pray that Jim Carrey will find the answer.

What is the answer? Seek the Lord. Come and receive from Him the bread of life (John 6:35) and the water of eternal life (John 4:10-13; 7:37-39). But don’t delay. The banquet of God’s grace is free and abundant and truly satisfying, and the invitation is for everyone who will come, but – here is the hard part – the door to the banquet will not always be open. It is open now, but the time will come when the door will be closed, and it will be too late.

That is the haunting message of the story Jesus told in Matthew 25:1-13 about the ten bridesmaids who went out to greet the bridegroom when he arrived. Remember the story? Five of them were smart and brought along jars of oil for their lamps just in case the bridegroom was delayed in coming. Which, of course, as it turned out, he was. The other five, however, didn’t bring any extra oil. They were all at Wal-Mart buying more oil when the bridegroom arrived. After everyone who was there to greet him, including the five smart bridesmaids, had gone into the wedding feast, the door was shut. The five foolish bridesmaids were left out in the cold. By the time they arrived, it was too late.

Dear friends, the day will come when it is too late to seek the Lord. The time will come when the day of opportunity is past. That is why you and I must seek the Lord while He may be found – today. That is why we must call on Him while He is near. That is why we must, in the words of Ray Ortlund, Jr., “stop dawdling,” if we have been dawdling or procrastinating with respect to moral or spiritual matters in our lives, and run straight to the cross. Run straight to the throne of grace. Run straight to Jesus. As fast as you can.

The good news for you and me and the world today is that it is not too late to seek the Lord. The good news is that God is still waiting to be found. He is waiting to welcome everyone

who comes to Him. The good news is that He is still near. He has not moved away from us. As David declared in Psalm 145:18, “The Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth.”

What are we to do, when we seek the Lord and run to Him? He calls us each to abandon any sinful way in our life, to forsake any ungodly ways of thinking, to say “No” to evil, and to turn wholeheartedly to Him (55:7). To give Him the reins of our entire life. Not just some part of it.

What will we find when we seek the Lord in this way? This is the really good part. Mercy. Pardon. Forgiveness. Freedom. Grace. Blessing. Joy. Peace. (55:7, 12)

The Bible is filled with promises of blessing for those who seek the Lord. With these words the prophet Hosea urged the people of Israel to return to the Lord and to follow Him:

Sow for yourselves righteousness,
Reap the fruit of unfailing love,
And break up your unplowed ground;
For it is time to seek the Lord,
Until He comes and showers righteousness on you.
(Hosea 10:12)

We could use some showers of righteousness in the world today.

In Lamentations 3:25, right after he sang “Great is Your faithfulness” in verse 23, Jeremiah said:

The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him,
To the one who seeks Him.

The Lord *is* good to all who seek Him, to all who put their hope in Him.

Listen to David’s testimony from Psalm 105:

Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name;
Make known among the nations what He has done,
Sing to Him, sing praise to Him;
Tell of all His wonderful acts.
Glory in His holy name;
Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Look to the Lord and His strength;
Seek His face always.
(105:1-4)

Joy comes to those who seek the Lord.

And then we have the words of Jesus Himself from the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek and you will find" (Matthew 7:7).

Seek the Lord while He may be found, before the time of opportunity is over and the door of opportunity is closed, and *you will find*.

May we seek Him, and find Him, and worship Him, and love Him, and serve Him, and trust Him, and follow Him, until the end of time, and for all eternity. Lord, let it be so in us.
Amen.