

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia
September 16, 2018

“In a Moment, Eternity”

Mark 6:30-52

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This past Monday, a Worship service in Celebration of the Resurrection in Remembrance of the faithful life and witness of Sam McGhee was held in this sanctuary. Many of us know how important Sam was to his family, the Roanoke community and the church.

In my introductory remarks, I talked about how some of the most amazing developments in Sam’s life seemed to come almost by chance... by happenstance.

- He planned to enlist, not go to college, but a high school teacher heard about it and told him there was no way the best student she ever taught would not be going to college. So, he went and discovered his life’s work as an engineer.
- He went on a double-blind date to a basketball game. When the four met, he said to his buddy, “I’ll go with her and you go with her.” It was almost a coin toss, but both ended up marrying their dates who became their lifelong loves.
- He sold his house in Martinsville, packed up his belongings and moved his family to Narrows to be the City Manager. Because there were no text messages, emails or cell phones back then, the city had no way to get hold of him to tell him they changed their mind and eliminated his position. He didn’t know he was jobless until he arrived. Needing a job, he found one in Roanoke, a city he came to love and serve, and a city which loved him.

Almost random moments ended up changing Sam’s life. Sam had the gift of seeing what was possible in them.

In scripture, and I would suggest in life, there are moments that can define our relationship with God if we can only see what might be shining through them. They are



sacramental moments when we see, touch, taste, experience something that then shapes how we think of God thereafter. In our lives, we can plan for these moments- baptism, Lord's Supper, Confirmation, ordination, Commitment Sunday- set weekly times aside for worship and daily times aside for prayer. Those planned times can become God's time. But sometimes, the moments happen on God's time, and if we do not have eyes too see, we miss eternity shining through them.

Our passage from Mark this morning tells of two such moments:

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ³⁵ When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶ send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." ³⁷ But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" ³⁸ And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." ³⁹ Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. ⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² And all ate and were filled; ⁴³ and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴ Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

⁴⁷ When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. ⁴⁹ But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." ⁵¹ Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Here is a brief theology lesson to explain terms I will use in my sermon.

- **Chronos**: ordinary time. It can even be a dramatic moment, but without something of God shining in it, it is ordinary time.



- **Kairos**: God's time.
End of theology lesson.

For the second week in a row, I am going to tell you something odd about Mark's Gospel. Last week, I told you that Jesus is called "Teacher" in Mark more than in the other Gospels, yet very little teaching is found in Mark. This week, the odd thing I want you to know is that while the other Gospels have resurrection appearances, Mark only has a story of an empty tomb. The original version anyway; the later church tacked on a resurrection appearance. But the ending of the original Gospel of Mark tells of women discovering a tomb empty except for a young man- could he be an angel?- telling them that Jesus is risen and can be found in Galilee. Go find him. It's a Kairos moment if they can just see the writing on it, but a shocking Chronos moment if they can't.

They can't. Not now. They are too confused, too afraid, and rush from the tomb and tell no one. There the story ends.

So, with no resurrection appearance in Mark, does that mean that Mark is less about the resurrection than Matthew, Luke and John?

No. Some scholars say so, but I say to them, "No!" What Mark artfully does at the end is leave his audience wanting the women to tell someone about it. He leaves them wanting others to see the risen Jesus. He leaves *the audience* wanting to see the risen Jesus themselves. Now they- we- are searching for him. The second odd thing about Mark is that the Gospel of no resurrection appearances is about the resurrection from start to finish.

At the start, at Jesus' baptism, God says, "This is my beloved Son." In Mark's telling, Jesus is the only one to hear it and the audience of Mark's Gospel are the only ones to read it. Between that moment of baptism and the moment of empty tomb, Mark pushes his audience- you and me- to see what others, even the disciples, have such a hard time seeing. He wants us

- to hear Jesus' words pregnant with holy meaning,
- to see in Jesus' actions divine activity,
- to recognize in the moment of Jesus' life something of the truth of eternity.

So we, the audience, go back through Mark's stories, searching.

- Jesus **heals**. Do we see it?
- Jesus **teaches**. Do we hear it?
- Jesus **touches**. Do we feel it?
- Jesus **blesses the meal**. Do we receive it and taste it?
- Jesus **calls**. Do we follow?

There is a secret contained in these moments- treasures hidden- seeds planted that can help define a life lived for God, that can fuel a life lived for compassion, justice and



reconciliation, and thus be a life of meaning and purpose- if only there are ears to hear and eyes to see.

I just used images and phrases taken directly from Mark: **eyes to see**, **ears to hear**, a **secret hidden**, **treasures hidden**, **seeds planted**. All are Mark's encouragement to see something beyond the obvious in the stories he tells so we can see beyond the obvious in our own lives and glimpse something shimmering beyond the plain, something sacred beyond the profane, something of the Kairos in what on the surface might seem only a Chronos moment.

I could have chosen so many passages in Mark to illustrate what I mean. The one I chose tells of two moments when something shines but some can't see it. In each, Mark is asking, "Can you see it?"

In the first story, Jesus has scheduled a potential Kairos moment. He is playing the spiritual odds because in scripture and in life, scheduled times for worship, study, prayer, and service often are times for God's light to shine.

But the thing about Kairos moments is that the moments belong to God and not to us. Not even to Jesus in the story. While Jesus intends to be alone with his disciples in prayer, God intends for him to be among thousands in service. Five thousand souls hear that Jesus is nearby, figure out where he is going and beat him there. They are hungry for a good word. Jesus and the disciples are exhausted, but Jesus teaches them. It grows late, and they grow hungry for something to eat. The disciples have had enough: "Send them away." Jesus, though, embraces the moment and finds a way to feed them. It's amazing. God's signature is on the moment.

But do the disciples see it, or is the moment for them, as amazing as it is, just another Chronos moment in their lives... at least for now? We'll find out later, but Mark wants to know, "Do we see it?" Do we see God's Word shining through? Do we see that when the need is great, those who have should share? That if we pool what we have to offer, that not only will more be able to eat, but something important about God will be proclaimed?

- Do we see that when a hurricane hits a coast, hundreds of thousands are without power, and some have lost their homes, maybe pooling what we have from around the country will make a huge difference;
- or when children are stranded without their parents, and the temptation is to hope the problem goes away; that maybe pooling what we have will help see the children through;
- or that when we learn an opioid epidemic is running right through Roanoke, that maybe parents, counselors, peers, churches, city leaders, and law enforcement officials should pool what we have in order to do what we can?

Again, we don't know yet if the disciples see it. After the thousands are fed, Jesus goes back to Plan A. He sends the disciples across the lake, he dismisses the crowd and then he goes up the mountain alone to pray.



But, though he has scheduled time for prayer, as often happens at Second Presbyterian, a storm hits and messes up what is planned. As sometimes happens in the area, a storm sweeps over the Golan Heights and it is as close to an inland hurricane as there can be. The disciples are terrified. As Mark tells the story, he lays it on thick that this should be one of those Kairos moments when God shines through. Jesus walks on water (at Creation, the Spirit of God moved over the surface of the deep). The disciples are afraid thinking he is a ghost. Jesus answers “I am.” (How God declared himself to Moses at the burning bush). Jesus speaks a word and the sea calms. (At Creation, God spoke to chaos and creation emerged).

As with last week, I encourage you not to get lost in trying to figure out how the miracle happens, or if this is the heavy-handed way Mark describes a significant experience with the disciples. I do urge you to notice the one thing Mark does not want you to miss: *The disciples still do not understand.* God practically signs the moment, but they are illiterate. Mark explains why: *Their hearts are hard, and they didn't understand about the loaves.* They don't see the Creation God bringing calm in the midst of a natural disaster because they didn't understand about the Justice God meeting the hunger of thousands in the wilderness.

“But can we see it?” Mark wants to know.

Mark tries to make sure we do. Later in his Gospel, these same two events happen again: only the next time 4000 are fed instead of five, and another storm catches the disciples afraid at sea, but Jesus is on the boat instead of on the shore. And, by the way, on the boat Jesus asks the disciples, “Did you bring loaves?” (How can you miss it?) Again, the disciples do not understand. Do we?

Mark asks this question of his audience over and over again because he presents every moment in his Gospel as a moment shining with resurrection. He wants us to see what the disciples often miss. “Can we see God in the moment when Jesus feeds thousands who are hungry... even though the disciples miss it... even though most in the crowd miss it?” “Can you see God in calm being brought to chaos?”

What Mark really wants for us is to have the eyes to see God in moments that could be random or in moments, whether big or small, God uses to change us and the course of our lives.

Sam McGhee had ears to hear when he listened to his high school teacher. Having known Sam, I think he had enough faith to believe that maybe even God was speaking to him through her.

What stories can be told in this congregation about a conversation, a trip, an experience..., a role model or mentor who became a hinge moment in one's life, pointing one from this direction to that one?

Hurricane Florence has hit the coast and it truly is a disaster. Sam is my sermon illustration this morning, and he can teach us about a Kairos moment being in a disaster too. The fourth seemingly random occurrence in his life, is that he suffered a stroke that became the dividing line of his life between health and twenty years of homebound living (largely



anyway). What could have been just a Chronos moment leaving Sam a victim became for him a Kairos moment because he found a way to live purposely within his new limitations. His mobility shrunk but his community grew, and he found ways to serve. I am not one to say God was particularly present in the actual stroke. I don't use the "It must have happened for a reason" line except in talking about natural reasons. But Sam saw God in the moment in the same sense that Job had his Kairos moment in the midst of his disaster: he lost much, but he did not lose God. That is what he saw; it was his Kairos moment.

We are only in the early stages of learning about the devastation on the east coast from hurricane Florence, a natural phenomenon in a physical world. We already know that torrential rains fell on the just and the unjust. We already know that a few people died, and some people will never get over losing their houses and belongings.

But you know, and I know, that if we watch or read enough about this hurricane, we are going to hear that interview where someone is going to report on having a Kairos moment of seeing God walk in the midst of the storm. Someone who lost their house is going to say something like, "I felt like I lost everything. And then I saw my loved ones and realized I lost nothing."

Or maybe the moment comes later, in hindsight. Or maybe the moment comes later when the loaves and fish that are gathered from around the country are distributed and they see God's hand in it.

Maybe not. We feed thousands and respond to the chaos of storms not to get some kind of response, but because that is what Jesus does and we join in... if we have the eyes to see and ears to hear.

I will say this: In ordinary, Chronos time, we would do well to follow Jesus' example and keep scheduled times for worship, for prayer, for service, for rest. These scheduled moments can be Kairos moments on their own- God using the sermon or anthem or bible study or prayer to ignite something. At the very least, they are reminder times and practice times. They train our eyes to look and our ears to listen. They encourage us- put courage in us- so that maybe, when God is especially present in a moment, we won't be so afraid we miss it. And maybe we will be so encouraged we join in.

(The following was said at the benediction of the service)

At the end of every worship service here, a Benediction is offered. It is a moment, spoken by me but not from me; it comes from tradition. But I think it rather comes through tradition because it comes from beyond. It is a little drop of a moment in a week that says that no matter what is going on in your life, in your family, community, country; whether you are experiencing highs or lows, living in confidence, hope, anxiety or fear; here's a spoken word that is true no matter what is going on: God the



Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is with you, now in this moment and forever. Look for it. Listen for it. If you see or hear it, join in.

