

Good Tidings!

The Rev. Edmund Robinson
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Well, I'm really here at last! Thank you to all of you who have extended this call, from the hard-working search committee that sifted through all these applicants, to the lay leadership that help shepherd me through candidating week, to the congregational members who voted unanimously to extend the call at the special meeting, to the many hands who have helped us find a place to stay and get settled, and a special thanks to our hosts of the last two weeks, Jamie and Stephania McClennen, and to Hoyt and Deb Ecker who are renting us their fine beach house for the year.

The end of August is a poignant time, the shoulder of the year; one feels that we can sense the ebb of the summer and the onset of the fall at the same time. My brother-in-law Hal, who is a nature writer, suggested a figure of speech to describe this time of year, one well adapted to Chatham: he called it Cape August, as if it were a headland we round as we make our way down the coast of the year. As we sail around the headland of Cape August, the summer behind stays in view but we can also see September Cove, October Inlet, November Harbor ahead. So I want to talk this morning about time and tides, phases and rhythms.

For twenty years, I lived and raised children in what I considered the most beautiful spot on the face of the earth, Charleston, South Carolina. I have now had to reassess that ranking in light of Chatham. But be that as it may, I'll tell you an interesting fact about Charleston. In the first decades after its founding in 1670, the times of the Sunday church services were determined by the tides. This was because many of the most substantial supporters of the city churches were planters who lived up the rivers from the city, and they would travel to church by boat. So the services had to be timed to accommodate their mode of transport. When the roads improved enough to allow carriage transportation, the time of church services became fixed.

By contrast, First Parish in Cambridge is right in Harvard Square, where parking is next to impossible. There is a commercial lot right down the street from the church which allows church members to park there on Sunday, but only until 12:45. Thus all after-service meetings at that church must be concluded by 12:45. This imparts a very definite constraint to the program life of that church.

Each place has its own rhythm of life. Two weeks ago, we arrived in Chatham after a week in the Catskills, a week on Star Island 10 miles out in the Atlantic, and a week beside a lake in Plymouth. We discovered another pace of life entirely was resident here. And this sermon was inspired by that, by my finding myself here after having lived in places where the

rhythms are very different, and realizing how much I had to try to get into the rhythm of the place. This sermon is my attempt to catch the beat. But I also want to start us thinking about how as a church we may be catching the beat of the larger community or missing it, and what we can do about that.

To every thing there is a season. How many of you sitting right here right now know what the tide is in Chatham? The ones who know the best are going to ask me which part of Chatham. For the tide chart shows that it will be dead low at 12:17 PM in Stage Harbor, but won't be low until 1:26 PM in Chatham Harbor and not until 2:56 PM in Pleasant Bay. In other words, tides in this town occur at wildly different times: a 2-1/2 hour difference between Stage Harbor and Pleasant Bay. So if we are trying to catch the beat from the tides, we have to ask ourselves which ear we're listening through.

But the reality is that this is not a fishing village anymore. I saw a bumper sticker yesterday that described Chatham as a small drinking village with a fishing problem. Most of us do not make our living from the sea and only visit it for our recreation; we have no need to be tied into the tidal rhythms.

But the human tides in this town are just as complex as the natural ones. The flood tide of day visitors to Chatham seems to have peaked during the two weeks I've been here. If auto and foot traffic on Main Street is any indication, it swelled the second week in August and seems to have started to ebb. I am sure that a lot of summer visitors are returning to start school, and more will leave after Labor Day. I also understand that there is another set of people who are more or less permanent residents here who yet have winter homes further south, so there is a second ebbing in November and December, and true low tide doesn't hit until January. And I am asking myself how a church deals with this human movement and whether we understand its rhythms and have adapted to them.

Understand me, I am the new guy here. I need you to teach me about these things.

And a time to every purpose under heaven. There are two basic ways of thinking about time: a straight line or a circle. We all are familiar with the kind of illustration in history books and encyclopedias that present a timeline of events in history. We draw the line, we put dates on it and then we write in the pertinent events. We can write our day in linear form or we can fold the line into weeks and make a calendar to keep track of events at a glance.

When we tell stories, we usually use the straight line, which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A play is a kind of story, and the classical drama has five parts: exposition, complication, climax, resolution and denouement. A lot of the stories we tell ourselves have this kind of structure. We like stories that move somewhere, that have a resolution. We use the phrase, turns out – how does it all turn out in the end? But using that phrase assumes there is an end. And we really know that there is something that goes on before the beginning and there is

something that keeps on going after the end, but we ignore that while we're concentrating on getting the story.

A piece of music might have a linear form. A sonata has an introduction of one theme and then another theme and then complications between the two and reach a climax of sorts before ending in a coda.

It is often said that the three great monotheistic religions take a linear view of time. Time began at the creation of the world in Genesis 1, and will go on until the last trumpet shall sound at judgment day, at which point time will come to an end. For orthodox Christians, Jesus' life and death signaled a significant interruption in time, and all time afterwards got restructured in light of this event. The good news proclaimed by orthodox Christianity is that Jesus's death atones for the sins of the world and makes possible eternal life for those who believe in him.

In the King James version of Luke this good news has a particular wording: what the angels deliver to the shepherds in the fields at the birth of Jesus is "glad tidings." Now it would be very neat if I could tell you that the word "tidings" was related to the word "tide," but unfortunately the dictionary doesn't support me on this: it says that our English word "tidings" comes from old Norse words which mean news but have nothing to do with tides.

But the lack of etymology doesn't stop me from suggesting that since "tide" can be a verb, another meaning of "tidings" might be getting in synch with the rhythms of nature, or the rhythms of the human life ebbing and flooding around you. Good tidings is getting in the groove, learning the patterns of your own wash and withdrawal. My own psychological pattern is what might be called manic digressive – I get fascinated with one thing until my fascination is pulled away by something else – so I know that I have definite ebbs and flows and try to recognize them and work through them.

Here's one such digression: in a recent issue of Scientific American, there were some fascinating findings from two recent studies of rhythms and the brain. Scientists have known for some time that groups of neurons in our brains communicate with other groups of neurons. But these recent studies focused on the rhythms of the communication. In each of them, the scientists found that when two groups of neurons have their rhythms in phase with each other, then they influence each other stronger than when the two rhythms are not in phase. This makes for more lasting memories, clearer concepts, more effective action.

So within the brain, neuron groups communicate more effectively when they are in phase than when they aren't. And this holds true at the interpersonal level as well. Jacqueline knows that when she wants to tell me something important so that I will get it, she has to find the right moment. When she tells me something and I'm not ready to hear it, she might as well not have said it. Teachers know that sometimes a student has to be taught the same lesson over and over

before he or she gets it.

The right moment. The Greeks had a word for that, the word was *kairos*. *Kairos* is the opportune time, the appointed time in the purpose of God, the time that history is fulfilled. Theologian Paul Tillich placed great emphasis on *kairos*, the moment of existential choice.

Now I know that there is an ambiguity built in to that word opportune, for one person's opportunity may be another person's crisis – the Chinese character for crisis is directly related to the one for opportunity. I will illustrate with the following fable, the story of Alice and Sam.

Alice only knew Sam through friends of friends, and they didn't have much in common, she thought. but when he proposed to take her for a picnic on Monomoy Island in his father's big fat catboat, she agreed – she loved sailing. They were able to sail right up on the beach, and had a wonderful picnic, splitting a bottle of wine, and then another, and then they swam and walked and got fascinated with the seals and discovered a nest of osprey with babies. So when they finally got back to the boat, they discovered it was separated from the water by four yards of sand. They were stuck until the next tide would come in six hours later. Alice was furious. It was such bad timing. Now I can't tell you what happened in those six hours, but all I know is that forty years later, Alice and Sam are still married. Bad timing indeed. What may appear to be a crisis is also an opportunity.

Back to *Kairos*. *Kairos* is usually conceived of as a characteristic of linear time. But when we are talking about the rhythms of the tides or the days or seasons, we are talking about another model of time, the circular. Cyclical time is often thought to be an older and more basic point of view than linear time. If we are paying attention to the natural world, time consists in a nested set of cycles within cycles: hours marked by tides within days marked by light and dark within cycles of the moon marked by its phases within years marked by the progression of weather and the length of day. Nothing is new under the sun, the world keeps on going round. While linear time is associated with the great monotheistic religions, cyclical time is associated with paganism and the religions of the East, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism.

In music, circular time is associated with repetitive musical forms like ballads or dance tunes, forms that don't go from point A to point B.

To every thing there is a season. But this is too neat, because I can easily see a layer of cyclical thinking in the Bible. The Ecclesiastes text from which Pete Seeger wrote his song is one – a pure expression of cyclical time. But you see there is a rightness, an opportunity, a *kairos* within this cycle as well, a season to every purpose.

And as to Jesus, I follow my cousin James Robinson, who after forty years as a distinguished New Testament scholar, has come around to the view that when we strip away the distortions of later church editors, what we are left with as the original Jesus was a human who

was something of a nature-poet. A person who said “consider the lilies, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

Jesus knew about trying to preach a message when the other person wasn't ready to hear it. The parable of the sower and the seed is about this. When your seed goes on rocky ground, it's like trying to communicate when you're out of phase.

Jesus knew about cycles and he knew about phases and he knew about readiness. And he knew that when the fish are running it is time to dip your net in the water.

My friends, what this church has to give to this community is liberal religion, and it is something that this community needs. We are at a crisis when the more conservative religions are struggling to bring their ancient traditions forward and try to coexist with the modern mentality and the truths emerging from science. We have a secularized segment represented by the New Atheists like Sam Harris and Christopher Kitchens who take the most conservative religion as emblematic of all religion and reject it firmly. But we represent a religion which accepts the world view of science and yet trusts in the power of love to motivate people of goodwill to build a beloved community based on justice and equality.

We have our own good tidings, but how do we get them out to this hurting world? More specifically, how can we phase the activities of this church to coincide with the ebb and flow of the people through this town?

I find that you are already well aware of this issue and have been dealing with it for years. You have developed a great summer ministry in the thrift shop; a great indication of how this shop serves people from different economic backgrounds is that the money in the cash box after the yard sale the other day was mostly ones. You also perform a significant ministry to the visiting children and their parents by hosting the magic show.

But I wonder whether there is something else we could be doing to more directly bear witness to our religious values at a time when there are more people in town. I welcome any ideas for programs more geared to summer visitors.

After almost swamping their boats from the catch of fish, Jesus told his new disciples that from then on they would be catching people.

But it wasn't as easy as just putting the nets in the water. At other points in the gospel story, Jesus sends his disciples out into the villages around the Sea of Galilee with detailed instructions to proclaim the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God. These so-called mission instructions in Luke 10 are considered by New Testament scholars to be one of the oldest layers of text and thus to have a certain authenticity.

It is therefore poignant that Jesus gives them instruction in what to do if their words are falling on rocky ground: [Luke 10: 10] “But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 11 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our

feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'

The good tidings we have to proclaim is not that a kingdom of God is going to descend from the sky or that we are all going to be raptured up to that sky. The good tidings we have to proclaim are that there is a mystery at the heart of existence from which we all have come, that some will call that mystery God and for others it will have no name, but that it spawns the power of love and we stand firmly on the side of that power. Though many of us no longer profess a belief in something called God, we can affirm a faith in that transformative power of love by which every person is endowed with inherent worth and dignity. Though we constantly fall short of our aspirations, we are motivated to roll up our sleeves and do the work of justice-making.

In this unique place where the land finally ceases its eastward march and yields gracefully to the ocean, at this heartbreaking time of year, when we are rounding Cape August and can see September, October and November stretching down the coast ahead of us, it is easy to believe in love and beauty and truth. It is all around us, above us, below us, beside us, inside us. As Jesus says about searching for the kingdom of heaven in the Gospel of Thomas¹: "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the (Father's) imperial rule is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. 2If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. 3Rather, the (Father's) imperial rule is inside you and outside you. 4When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father."

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. The kingdom is within you, that is the good tidings of this hour, and let us catch the rhythm to share these good tidings far and wide, as far and wide as the sea itself.

Amen.

¹Gospel of Thomas verse 3.