

SERMON: "THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW"

**TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT
NEW TESTAMENT**

**PSALM 27:1-9
MATTHEW 4:12-23**

January 25, 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Timing. So much of life is about timing. That includes the crossroads that intersect at just the right time. I lived about 20 minutes north of Greensboro, North Carolina where our oldest son and his wife and our grandson live now. In those 10 years, I went to go see the local minor league hockey team play twice, just twice. But one of those times was when I met my wife. Right place. Right time.

Timing is also very much about the quote, unquote 'times.'

I've tried to learn from the wisdom of a friend twenty some years older than me I was talking about how times have changed so fast, how the church is changing You've heard me go on and on about that, haven't you? That's when she said, "I get all that ... but I was more comfortable then, I understood things better."

Hey, I get it. Take music for example. I grew up with rock n' roll.

But the popular music of today? What happened to the guitar solo?

I'm sorry ... but doesn't every good song need a guitar solo?

Timing is about intersections, crossroads. It is about "the times," the here and now.

Timing is also about the time we take. It is about how we spend our time

It is about what we find the time to do. Timing is all these things

So let's look at this passage from Matthew and think about timing in these three ways – intersections, era (borrowed that verbiage from Taylor) and urgency

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

The word 'immediately' jumps out as we hear this story. That is how Jesus' first followers respond to his call. Immediately they follow. It even makes clear that they leave what they are doing immediately. Leave it behind. It is abrupt, urgent

Can't help but think to myself ... what have I done with that sense of urgency?

I'm a bit of a planner. This seems kind of hasty to me. Is this what my mom meant when she would say someone went off "willy nilly." Whatever willy nilly is, my mom was not a fan. She didn't want her boys going off willy nilly. Wonder what their mom thought? What Zebedee, who got left with the nets, thought?

IMMEDIATELY

I don't think these call stories, and how they use the word 'immediately,' are calling us to make rash decisions or even snap decisions, but they are challenging us to respond to Jesus' gracious invitation. There is a sense of urgency. What are we going to do? Jesus' gracious love, evident in everything he says and does, is always asking that question of us ... what are you going to do?

His is a call to follow, to get up and go. It is, tapping into Johnny's sermon last week, 'come and see.' It is more than 'think about it.' Jesus' call is a call to action. More than 'I will get to that later.' There is, in the call stories in the gospels, to borrow the words of Dr. King ... "the fierce urgency of now."

I particularly like how the quote on the screen ends.

"This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action." I think that is a good way of talking about faith, about following Jesus Christ (Dr. King was a very good preacher) Following Jesus is vigorous. It is active. It is positive!

Jesus' call is not just about decision. It is about direction ... following Jesus. Let me try and speak to that and how the urgency of the moment fits with the era – what following Jesus looks like today, in these times. Sure seems to me like we're still fighting the same fight Dr. King fought with the great tool that is non-violent protest

Rather than list the many examples of corruption or cruelty or complacency that fill our screens, our minds and our hearts – things that, to quote the late, great Marvin Gaye, "make me wanna holler" ... I'll stick to the script. Right before we get to these call stories and how they responded "immediately" Matthew tells us by way of both transition and introduction
From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

That right there is how the gospel writers summarize Jesus' ministry. This is what he talked about the most – the kingdom come. He announces that God is at work. And that we are to respond to God's ongoing work by changing our ways. That is what repentance is, changing direction.

So where does the fierce urgency of now intersect this era, this day? You know one thing I stopped doing (maybe it was the chemo that got me out of the habit – didn't need to check my hair) was taking a look at myself in the mirror before I left the house. Need to start doing that again. Start there ... with myself, with the person in the mirror, then with the church

Where does the urgent call of Christ to see how God is at work now begin? It begins with repentance, with us taking the time to stop and look in the mirror. We start with ourselves, what we as individuals and as the church can do better. And another thing about that time, about taking a look inward. That should be the extent of our looking back, just enough to start with ourselves

URGENCY TODAY

In thinking about urgency and eras, the call of Christ is not about going further back than that. Not about keeping Jesus in the 'once upon time.'

Not about pretending we got Christianity right back when ... Back when
I was more comfortable, back when there were more guitar solos

The fierce urgency of Jesus' call is the fierce urgency of today, of these days, of now.
Beginning with that look in the mirror, that repentance, we follow Jesus with humility
The world sure as heaven doesn't need Christian folks boasting about how good
we are, how morally superior we are. "Those people ought to be like us."
The world certainly doesn't need Christian bullies. Talk about an oxymoron!

Are we not, in this era, where it is so easy and seemingly cool to call people names
(to call other people garbage), to slam somebody online, to spread some gossip
You've heard it, read it, seen it (maybe said it or typed it yourself) ... Are we not
called to stand up to that kind of bullying no matter who says it

No matter how powerful the bullies might be, you too have power
History teaches us that change for the good begins with you and me, us and them,
with ordinary people participating in the building up of the kingdom of God,
loving God and loving neighbor with humility, with hope ... and with healing.

Again, our directions are written in the script. Let's keep reading in Matthew
Right after Jesus calls his first disciples and they respond immediately,
Matthew gives another verse that is both transition, summary and introduction

**Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and
proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease
and every sickness among the people.**

Again, Jesus' ministry is about proclaiming the good news of the kingdom
That is what Jesus talks about the most, like a lot, like more than me talking about
Georgia football plus being "A Place for Everyone." Good rule of thumb
for following Jesus – pay attention to what he says and does the most
Major in the majors (what is important to Jesus) and minor in the minors

And how does Jesus talk about the coming kingdom? Two ways. Show and tell
One is teaching, the tell. Remember the parables where he tells us the kingdom
is like ... a mustard seed that grows, like a valuable treasure we find, etc.
the other way is by healing, the show ... curing disease and brokenness

That, I am suggesting, connects back to our connections, our intersections
(another way of talking about timing – urgency, era and intersection)
Are our intersections healing ... or are they collisions, healing or harm?

Let me try an example that starts local, with a local controversy of sorts
Then encourage to you to take that illustration and expand it outward
out to real conflicts and collisions – from the Cedar Valley to the Twin Cities

WATERSHED MOMENTS

Yes, I'm talking about roundabouts. That's how I'd ask you to think about the urgent call of Christ to a ministry of healing. Let me admit my bias upfront. I like roundabouts. You know why they work? Why they are safer? Because you have to slow down to go around one! And that's coming from a guy who learned to drive in Atlanta traffic. Rev. Speeding Tickets

Every driver has to slow. A stop light has those who have to stop and those who drive on through, including those who drive in a way where green means 'it might change at any minute, slow down' and those who rush through the yellow light, "squeeze the orange."

My suggestion is this. How bout we slow down, especially at intersections? (and I'm not just talking driving here). The horrific shooting of Renee Good should never have happened ... not if ICE officers followed their training. The same is true of the killing of Alex Pretti yesterday.

Lots of examples – trained not to walk in front of a car with someone at the wheel, trained not to shoot at a moving car, trained to immediately render aid (which was not done), trained to de-escalate (not escalate) tense situations

That is what the training manuals have in writing. That is not what happened. Instead we find ourselves swimming in systems (and algorithms) that push us further and faster into collisions and confrontations. The otherizing of immigrants, and the militarization of law enforcement, especially the masks, have that effect. So too does the rhetoric and the culture it creates.

I admit that I am not surprised by this tragedy. We, the people, have been heading toward that intersection at high speed ... urged on by people itching for a fight to prove their might or their right while most of us are silently hoping whoever is driving this thing knows what they're doing.

In March of 1965, leaders of the Civil Rights movement organized a march from Selma, Alabama to the state capital in Montgomery about 60 miles away to protest the police killing Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was clubbed and shot. On what is now known as Bloody Sunday, troopers on horseback using tear gas and Billy clubs advanced on the peaceful protesters

They were cheered on by the crowds that assembled waving confederate flags. The beating of unarmed people was filmed by TV crews and aired that night interrupting a blockbuster movie, "Judgment at Nuremberg" about the Nazi's abuse of power. The scenes from Selma sent a shockwave through this country (the juxtaposition to Nazi horrors adding to the horror).

It was, looking back, a watershed moment. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed a few months later. I bring that up to ask a question. Might the killing of Renee Good and Alex Pretti be that kind of moment?

SUMMARY

We've seen the footage of both shootings. The video evidence in front of us clearly refutes the dismissive talking points that these American citizens exercising their rights to assembly and speech (and in the case of Mr Pretti) to conceal carry a firearm were 'domestic terrorists' or planning to massacre federal agents. The truth is right in front of us.

Like Selma, the question before us is "who has the power and how do they use it?" How has ICE used its power? And how does that differ from how other law enforcement agents do their work? I see a very clear difference in how ICE is deployed (and where they are deployed) and in their tactics and in their response when there have been officer involved shootings

I pray this is that watershed moment when we stand up to the abuses of power.

We, the people, in the fierce urgency of now, if we want to be part of the healing that Jesus is all about ... we need to resist the urge to escalate
We need to de-escalate ... not rush to prove how right I am

If we are going to rush to anything, do anything 'immediately,' we need to rush to render aid to those who need it. Alex Pretti was doing that, helping a women who had been shoved to the ground by a masked agent.
That is when the officer advanced on him, sprayed him with a chemical.

That's what the training manuals says ... and not just for law enforcement
The training manual that is the gospel narrative of Jesus' life and work is calling us not to rush to confront or collide ... but to heal, to render aid

I like how our city has put roundabouts up and down Main Street
It has made the city safer. My prayer is that you and I can be part of building some figurative roundabouts – slowing the roll toward escalation
And instead building roundabouts that are Midwest nice
With everyone gesturing as if to say, "no, you go"
... which is then answered politely "no, you first, please."