

# When the Time Comes

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On the cover of your bulletin is a picture of a 12<sup>th</sup> century Abbey that stands on a small island off the west coast of Scotland – named Iona. The Isle of Iona. The Isle of Iona was the landing place for a 6<sup>th</sup> century Irish monk named Columba. St. Columba. There are all sorts of stories why Columba left Ireland – some think he was escaping arrest – but he came to Iona with his small band of brothers and in doing so brought Christianity to Scotland. Columba established a small community of Christ on the island from which the light of Christ shone and out of which came the spread of Christianity to Great Britain and beyond. It can certainly be said that the seeds of your Christianity and mine came from the seeds sown on this little island. It became for centuries the center of Scottish, Irish and British Christianity. Over 50 kings of Scotland and Ireland are buried there. I've been to Iona twice in my life and it is truly a sacred space. A "thin place" the Celts call it – a place where the membrane between heaven and earth is very thin.

Now having said that, the interesting thing about this little community of faith and the Celtic tradition born out of it – was that they believed that sacredness was not to be found in any one particular place and time, but that sacredness is to be found in all places and all times. You don't need a ticket to some event, you don't need to travel to some island, you don't need to make sure you are at the right place at the right time, you don't have to have all conditions working in just the right order for the divine to descend – but that the truth is, according to the psalmist, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge." All time and space is sacred. So, for example,

when those sixth century monks beheld the spark that lit their morning fire – they saw God in that time and space. When the sun rose above the Irish Sea – they saw God in that time and space. When the first blossoms of spring burst from their shoots – they saw God in that time and space. When a hungry pilgrim came to them for food – they saw God in that time and space. George Macleod, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Celtic leader put it this way – “We are in touch with God every moment that we live, for the simple reason that God is life; not religious life, not church life, but the whole of life – God is the life of life.” This isn’t and wasn’t some form of pantheism – thinking that God was in all these things. But rather we see God through these things. God inhabits every moment of time and space.

We are blessed this week to have the chance during our daily readings to be reading the great story of Queen Esther. Esther – a beautiful Jewish servant girl – finds herself inside the court of the maniacal Persian King Ahasuerus – whom historians know as Xerxes. A pall of fear and death hangs over the court of King Ahasuerus. He is one of those very insecure kings that won’t allow people even to appear and speak without permission lest they be put to death. Now through a providential series of events Esther is named Queen. So unbeknownst to him, the Persian King has a Jewish Queen. At the same time Ahasuerus has been influenced by his advisors to issue a decree that all the Jews in the land be destroyed. And the only person standing between the wicked Persian King and the genocide of the Jews – is the Jewish queen Esther. And it is the Queen’s brother, Mordecai, who sends a message to the Queen – and says, “Esther, perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” This is your moment Esther. This is your time. You and only you can do something. And at the risk of spoiling the ending of the story – you can only imagine what Esther does. The people are saved.

Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this.

Now there is perhaps no more inspiring story in all of scripture than this story of this young woman – who risks her life to speak out of turn to the King to save her people. Our Jewish brothers and sisters have named a holy day after it – Purim. It is a humbling and inspiring tale that places the scale of courage high above any of our heads. What would we do when presented with such a time

and place? What choice would we make? If this was the moment that God had placed us in – what would be our response? Would we risk the sacrifice of our own lives in order to save our own people? Good questions. Now the danger to those questions is the subtle suggestion that for each of us there awaits – or has already passed – a moment ... THE moment of our lives. That somehow God has placed us in a particular and specific place and time and we better get it right or there won't be any other chance. That when your time comes you better be ready. I find myself, to be honest, captured by this myth and drawn into the great histories of the world to learn of men and women who responded at the critical time with some incredible act of courage. It's why I love Lincoln. It's why I love Bonhoeffer. It's why I love the heroic stories of soldiers in battle. It's why I love Martin Luther King. Today is Pearl Harbor Day and it was most certainly a mark in time that led thousands of men right down to the enlistment office. I find quite compelling these stories of people who, like Queen Esther, responded to a critical and momentous time and appeared to do the right thing. And that somehow such moments of grandeur and history await us all – or have passed us by.

But that, of course, is not the Biblical message – for the Biblical message is that your time and my time comes not in a moment, not in the moment, but in every moment. Because all time and space is sacred – and all time and space calls forth our response.

The grand jury rulings of Ferguson and New York along with the stories and events behind them – pregnant with great tragedy – may lead us to think these are THE moments above all moments. But to think so might be letting ourselves off the hook too easily. For are not the moments ahead of us when we could intentionally cross the racial divide with grace and compassion – are these not pregnant moments too? Pregnant with the glory of God?

It's what the Advent journey calls us to, doesn't it? To be on the lookout for what is ahead. To imagine some surprise along the road. To realize that maybe the journey is not only about THE moment and place of Bethlehem, but to imagine that God is going to surprise us at probably every turn of the way. No surprise then when Jesus tells us the story of that Good Samaritan. It was the holy people – the priest and Levite – who missed the moment while they were on the way to the moment.

But it was the person of suspected race who sees the moment at hand for what it was and crosses the divide.

Somehow one way or another, our love of God is going to intersect with our love of neighbor.

We all know Tolstoy's great short story of the Russian cobbler named Martin who grieves the death of his wife and wonders what the remaining days of his life are for? What is the purpose of living without her? But a certain wise man inspires him to find a copy of the Scriptures to read which he does in his long stretches of solitary time. He finds compelling the story of the Pharisee who is not welcoming of the "sinning" woman. One night he receives a vision that the Christ will appear to him that next day. So the next day he waits. He waits for the appearance of Jesus. And while he waits – he notices a laborer outside his shop shoveling snow. He invites the laborer in to have a hot drink and a warm conversation and sends him on his way. A couple hours later he sees through his window a young mother trying to cover her new child from the cold. Martin invites them in and gives them warmer clothes to battle the elements. Finally, he sees a young boy steal an orange from a clerk – and he runs and intercedes and handles both the victim and the thief with unmerited grace. Later in the evening as he drifts to sleep he wonders why Jesus had not visited him that day. And in his dreams God speaks and says, "Did you not see me in the laborer, the mother and the thief?" I visited, Martin, and you received me well.

Our time comes. Sometimes in the courts of Persia, sometimes across town, and sometimes outside our window. Sometimes even inside our own families.

I love the story that David Michaelis tells in his biography of Charles Schulz. Charles Schulz the creator and only composer of the comic strip Peanuts. As it turns out, according to Michaelis, Charles Schulz did not grow up in an affirming family. His mother and father did not have great hopes for his future and couldn't see what could ever become of his constant doodling and scrawling. It was however, his grandmother, who lived down the road who made a point to spend time with her grandson every week and told little Charles – you can do something. You can be

something. And one of the artist's greatest childhood memories was when his grandmother and would take the young boy downstairs in the basement and with hockey sticks and a ball she would play goalie while the young Charles would practice his shots. Said Charles years later: "I'd like to think she made a lot of great saves." And Michaelis adds, "Perhaps her greatest save was the boy himself."

Such is the calling right? To see through all things the presence of God. To find in all times the presence of God. To save each being ... each being ... as if in the presence of God. For such a time as this. For such a time as these. For as C.S. Lewis put it, "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."