**Sermon for January 21, 2024 Mark 1: 14-20 “It’s About Time!”**

*After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*

The Rev. Woodie White is one of our shining stars in United Methodism. Born in 1935 in Harlem, New York City, ordained in the early 1960’s just in time to be another black clergyman risking life and limb alongside Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in the civil unrest of my childhood years, appointed the first General Secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race in 1968, he exceeded himself to be elected Bishop in 1984, and ably led two annual conferences for twenty *more* years, retiring in 2004 at a spry 69 years young. Bishop White holds 6 [honorary doctorates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honorary_degree), and countless awards and honors for his lifelong dedication to being a follower of Jesus.  He is currently the bishop-in-residence at the [Candler School of Theology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candler_School_of_Theology), [Emory University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emory_University) in [Atlanta, Georgia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlanta,_Georgia). With the passing of Congressman John Lewis in 2020, Bishop White is now the pre-eminent authority on racism and Christian discipleship in the world. And all of that achievement really began thousand of years ago, with the humble ministerial beginnings of his lord and Savior, Jesus. Here is how St. Mark records that inauspicious beginning: **After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”**

Bishop White, now 89 years among us, knows deeply that the time has been fulfilled and more, the time for authentic Christianity is now! For indeed, God’s reign has come near, and requires us to repent and believe the good news, not only of salvation, but of God’s design for the peaceful, fruitful world we have yet to create. And so, every year on Martin Luther King’s birthday, Bishop White writes an update for him, a birthday letter. And the bulk of my comments today will actually be *his* comments, because on this subject, he actually knows what he is talking about in a real-life, ‘lived through it all’ kind of way that your white pastor will never know. He writes:

*Dear Martin: A few weeks before the 2016 election, I was having a casual conversation with a young adult African-American male, and out of the blue he said, “Bishop, I hate white people!” Astonished by this revelation, from one typically soft-spoken, low-key and not otherwise given to anger or hyperbole, I asked, simply, “Why?” He replied with little emotion, “Because they hate me!” That is often the way of hate, especially group hate or prejudice. It finally settles on an individual, a single person; someone’s mother or father, son or daughter, brother or sister. It is a person who is hated, abused, marginalized. Sadly, the election season and presidential campaigning were filled with ugly rhetoric of a racial and ethnic character. The emergence, at least in the news, of neo-Nazi and white nationalists groups has been more prevalent. Our racial conversation has been polluted by prejudice and racist words and behavior. Increasing acts characterized as hate crimes are reported across the nation. The late poet Maya Angelou wrote: “When people show you who they are, believe them.” And so, it appears more Americans embrace such sentiments than we realized, or wanted to acknowledge. Which means there are many, thousands upon thousands, the human objects of such racial scorn, who are left with no other choice but to believe what they hear and see! Martin, the power of racism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia, in the minds and hands of politicians and the shapers of institutions, is proof such animosity can be institutionalized. Ideas can become policy, policy can become law and law can become regularized behavior. It is what, at least regarding race, has come to be called institutionalized racism. Individuals don’t have to act on their racism; institutions do it for them! And perpetuate it at the same time.*

One could argue that this dynamic is not new, that it was thriving in Jesus’ day too, but that admission just makes me too sad. For all the good the Church Universal has done in the last two thousand years, it doesn’t seem like we have mastered ourselves enough to purge racism from our world. And it’s not like we didn’t know; hear the next portion of the gospel lesson for today: **As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”** *And immediately they left their nets and followed him.* The first of these stories to appear in the first Gospel, and right off we notice several important pillars of our faith: that it was founded on relationships, using the strength of brotherhood from the beginning. That it was first offered to the blue-collar, working class, everyday folks, and that Jesus *never* said “follow me, and I will make you fishers of white people!” The Holy land knew, and still knows, infinite variety of skin tone and ethnic background. When Jesus groomed these Semitic brothers to become pastors, it was known that they would potentially be pastors of *all sorts* of people.

Let’s return to my favorite pastor of the day, Bishop White. Having just discussed institutional racism, his letter continues like this: *That’s why democracy is important. That’s why elections are essential. That’s why who is elected makes a difference at every level of governing — local, county, state and national! Sadly, there are those who would undo progress, who prefer exclusiveness and division to inclusiveness and unity, who prefer to erode the principles and ideals of American democracy itself. Thanks to you, Martin, and countless others, we moved from a less than great America to a greater one, to one more true to its ideal: “One nation under God, with liberty and justice for all.” However, it is increasingly clear; there is still much work to do — more protesting, marching, organizing, registering people to vote, and being more politically engaged. We must bring people of good will, from all races and backgrounds, to find common ground.*

Jesus, by the way, did not limit his followers to just fishermen…even though the next two called are also fishers, they are quite different from Andrew and Peter. Listen: **As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.**Did you catch the bit about the ’hired men’? Peter and Andrew didn’t have any hired men! Peter and Andrew were brawny, hands-on fishermen, but the next pair chosen, again brothers, are from another social distinction. So far, only four followers, but we have blue-collar *and* white collar, workforce *and* management, self-employed *and* small business owners. From the beginning, literally, Jesus was creating a broad base of welcome and service.

Woodie White totally understands that…his letter concludes like this: *Martin, our goal from the first was not merely a better, more just America. We Christians strive for a more beloved community, for what we sometimes call the reign of God. It is where love and justice prevail, and where we embrace a common humanity, not just as citizens, but also as brothers and sisters. We strive for a beloved community that fulfills the will of God, a place where brothers and sisters not only hold common citizenry, but all claim a common creator. It is a place where we seek to make God’s will real in all we say and do, and how we live together in the place God has provided — the world. While I was trying to navigate an array of emotions, Martin, I came upon a little book by Congressman John Lewis, who caused so much anxiety during the March on Washington on that hot day in August of 1963. I find his words to be both enlightening and inspiring: “The most important lesson I have learned in the 50 years I have spent working toward the building of a better world is that the true work of social transformation starts within. It begins inside your own heart and mind, because the battleground of human transformation is really, more than any other thing, the struggle within the human consciousness to believe and accept what is true. Thus to truly revolutionize our society, we must first revolutionize ourselves. We must be the change we seek if we are to effectively demand transformation from others.” Martin, the morning following the 2016 election of the new president of the United States, I arose very early, having had little sleep, and offered a prayer to God, emptying myself in unedited emotions. I concluded that prayer with these words: Forgive me, dear God, if I, even for a moment, placed more trust in nation, party, candidate, than in you. For YOU are my rock, my strength, my hope. Amen.*

You know, my friends, how I labor to maintain a non-political pulpit, which is sometimes harder than you might think. I will not get out of line today except to remind us all of the truth as I understand it, and as I believe Bishop White, St. Mark, and Jesus himself understood it: that following the teachings of Jesus will always put us on a collision course with the values espoused by our greedy, fallen world. Every nation has segments of its population who can draw no distinction between religion and patriotism, but I implore you in the name of all things holy, let’s not be those kinds of followers. The laws and demands of our great nation and also of our great God are not the same. Please, let’s not pretend that they are, for as Jesus said, no one can faithfully serve two masters. As we slide inexorably into another election season, our discernment and clarity of heart aren’t just niceties. They are the foundation of our faithfulness to both God and country. Amen.