

A Newly Inaugurated Era

Ottawa Mennonite Church

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Scripture: *Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20*

I, like many of you, was eagerly anticipating the end of the Bush Administration in the United States. So when on Tuesday, Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States, I shared with the rest of the United States, and much of Canada, a sense that some good might come out of it all. While I don't share the undying hope that President Obama will be the saviour that the United States is hoping for, I do believe that he will do a great deal of good for the country. We have already witnessed him being faithful to his campaign promises by closing the Guantanamo Bay Prison Camp and sending envoy's to the Middle East to try and negotiate peace.



A friend of mine commented on this major change in United States politics. He called it an end of an era. He reflected that for much of his young adult life, all he has known was the Bush Administration. It was in 2001 when both he and I were 19, when Bush took office, and that is the political landscape that we have known, and have learned to know. Being a child of the 80's, I was born when Ronald Reagan was in office, I have some memories of George H.W. Bush as a president, largely surrounding the first war in Iraq, and I remember Bill Clinton, more for his saxophone playing and his other indiscretion, than for any particular policy which he enacted. It is George W. Bush, however, that I remember the clearest and when I think of the United States Presidency it is his face that comes to mind.

I have lived my adult life in a world where war has been ever present yet very hidden. I've watched Baghdad bombed on live television but have seen no American caskets come home. I've seen the American people give their president unlimited power only and then wonder why the leaders have abused it. I've seen the United States set up "detention facilities" purposefully off of American soil so that they would be outside of the U.S. judicial system. I've seen young Americans turned into killing machines and then the American public wonders why these same people would stack other human beings in naked pyramids and take pictures to send to home to mom. I've seen wars started where there was no cause. I've seen a president, who got elected by telling people he was a devout Christian, sign off on orders to torture people in prison camps that "officially don't exist."¹ That is the world I have known for the last 8 years, and on this past Tuesday, one hopes that this era has come to an end.

I find it interesting how we measure periods of time. Eras are talked about frequently, when, in fact, they are probably the most irregular measurement of time. Eras denote clearly defined periods of time

¹ Adapted from Alan Stucky's blog entry "End of an Era",

http://alanstucky.com/AlanStucky/Blog/Entries/2009/1/19_End_of_an_Era.html

of arbitrary but well defined length.² Era's can be either good or bad, but most often they occur around turning points in time or history.

We talk about events as before or after, indicating the beginning or end of an era. We talk about the world before 9/11 being such and such a way, after 9/11 we name how it was different. Some of us can remember the world before and after World War I and II, or the Great Depression. Most often ends of eras are highlighted by a sudden change from bad to good, occasionally it can be the other way around.

In our personal lives we mark time sometimes by celebrations, or major events. Some people talk about before they were married, others talk about, sometimes with a hint of nostalgia and sentimentality, the time before they had children. Others talk about a time before they were saved or baptised. Maybe you mark time before or after a life changing trip. Perhaps it is a graduation from school. We use any number of things to define time in our lives.

We are creatures who like to mark time, who like to denote when one thing ends, or when another thing begins. The morning ends at 12 noon, and the afternoon begins at 12:01, television prime time begins at 8pm. Weeks start on Sunday (or Monday depending on your calendar) and end on Saturday or Sunday (again depending on your calendar). The seasons change on particular dates, rather than when the weather does. Our years end on December 31st, and the next one begins on January 1st.

Like with the End of the Bush Administration, it is easy for us to name it the end of an era. At the same time with the inauguration of President Obama, it is the beginning of a new era in the United States. It is the beginning of a time of hope, a time of change, as his campaign promised.

Our three scripture passages this morning are talking about a new era, each with their own understanding of time.

Our first passage is from Jonah. Most of us know the Sunday school version of Jonah, the story we know encompasses the first two chapters of the story; however, it is the other two chapters which we are less familiar with. Jonah, the prophet of God is sent to warn Nineveh of its impending destruction. Jonah flees by boat in the exact opposite direction. An act of God on the high seas threatens to destroy the ship and all aboard. Phoenician sailors, more deeply religious than Jonah, determine who is to blame for the predicament and what to do about it. The Phoenician sailors toss the Jonah into the sea, where Jonah is promptly swallowed by a large marine creature. From the belly of the whale-like fish, Jonah delivers himself of a prayer so lousy with pious platitudes that the poor sea creature pukes him up onto dry land.³ But that just sets the stage, Jonah, makes his way to Nineveh, and in seven words Jonah tells the citizens of Nineveh that their time is at an end. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4) It is the succinctness of his oracle is almost humorous.

² Entry from Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Era>

³ Paul Keim, "Mutant Ministry (Jonah 3;1-5; I Cor. 7:29-31; Ps. 62-5-12) ," *Christian Century*, January 11, 2003, pp. 17. Found online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2685>

It is also the succinctness of the oracle that makes it the most effective. It communicates not just to the people but also to the king the not just significance of this oracle, but also the magnitude. It is a turning point in the city. It begins a new era for the people of Nineveh. The king orders a city wide fast, for both the people and the animals, everyone must don sackcloth, young and old, king and citizen, chicken and cattle alike, and shall cry to God for mercy. It is an oracle that re-orientes the entire population of Nineveh.

Mark's gospel contains another turning point, the start of another new era. The authors of the synoptic gospels flag different moments for the start of Jesus' ministry. In Mark it takes place here between vs. 14 and 16. We have the text "Now after John was arrested" (Mark 1:14), right at the start, it is this verse here that is a flag for us. Jesus waited until John was arrested before he began. Much like we could name one event as the catalyst for another. The Greek here translates to arrested, but it could also be translated as, being handed over, or to be betrayed, an early foreshadowing of Jesus' fate perhaps.

If John's arrest is the catalyst for Jesus' ministry, then we can say that Jesus' ministry begins in verse 15, with the words "The time is fulfilled" or in other translations, "The time has come", or "The time God has promised has come" or even the time has arrived. This is the turning point; this is the beginning of the new era, the new Era of Jesus' ministry, and of a world where God is with us, the era of Emmanuel.

Time with Mark is different than it is with other gospel authors. This newly inaugurated era which Jesus ushers in is one where you either keep up, or you could be left behind, at least that is the case when following Mark's account. This new era, is a fast paced era. Jesus quickly moves from being in Galilee, to the Sea of Galilee, where he, in what appears to be a matter of moments, calls the first disciples. There is no dead time, there is no time to ponder, and you are thrust right into the midst of it.

"Jesus sees four fishermen and announces that he has new plans for them. They are to give up everything and follow him. Their response is immediate: No questions asked, no preparations made. They simply leave everything and follow him.

We as readers are left with our heads spinning. Just like that? No persuasive arguments? No preparations for the journey? No clarification of where Jesus will lead them? No backup plans in case it turns out to be a bad choice. One minute these men are fishing and mending nets; the next they are following Jesus. One minute they are running a fishing business; the next they have left it all behind to follow a man they hardly know."⁴

This is how it is going to be in Jesus' era. One moment we will be living the norm, the next everything will be upset and we will be re-oriented to follow Christ. Follow me, this, like Jonah's oracle, is short, but also extremely powerful. While it doesn't appear to be the case at the time, soon enough this carpenter from Nazareth will literally change the world. This life re-oriented is going to be distinctively

⁴ Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2001), 45-46.

different. Living in this new era is going to be challenging, it is going to be different from the norm of society, and we are going to have to get comfortable living outside of the status quo.

This is how our third passage connects. The citizens of Corinth had a hard time grasping this re-orientation. The Corinthian church had no problem living within the status quo, but the re-orienting life which Christ taught was a challenge for them, because it was outside of the status quo. The lifestyle which Jesus encourages is a life that is free from anxiety, a life where there is hope in God's faithfulness and in God's providence. A message like this is counter cultural in that it is in opposition to what society expects. Society expects each to provide for themselves so as to not rely on others. Like Jesus calling the fishermen to follow him, so too are we called. Sometimes it is a scary calling to drop everything and follow Jesus into this new Era. The call of 'follow me' is different for each person.

Paul admonishes the Corinthians to stop worrying to stop being anxious. Paul is living with a different perspective on life. Ever since his experience on the Damascus Road, his life has been re-oriented towards Christ. It was that turning point which helped him enter into the new Era which Christ inaugurated. In his letters to the Corinthians he is trying to help them experience this freedom. He is trying to help them see this new era, he is trying to guide them so that they can live within this new era and feel the same freedom which he feels. He is encouraging the fledgling church in Corinth to live counter culturally. One group that didn't have a hard time with living counter culturally was the early Anabaptists.

While the news media was consumed with celebrating the inauguration of their 44th president, there was another event that happened this week, albeit with much less fanfare, much less celebration, and much less hype. On Wednesday, the Anabaptist Church celebrated its 484th birthday. 484 ears ago, a small group of gathered at the home of Felix Mantz's mother, in Switzerland, only a stone's throw away from the Grossmünster church, in Zurich. They had gathered to plan a response to the Zurich city council. It was at this meeting, where George Blaurock, a former priest, asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him with water for the remission of his sins. Blaurock then proceeded to baptize the others at the meeting. This act of rebellion marked the symbolic beginning of the Anabaptist tradition, a tradition which we all are a part of.⁵

We can say that this baptism re-oriented a number of people in their outlook on life. Their re-orientation also ushered in an era of conflict and suffering for Anabaptists. The Anabaptists held to a different authority in their lives. They lived to the principle of Scripture alone. This set them apart from the rest of the world. It forced them to wrestle and deal with a number of hardships, the least of which was persecution for their beliefs. The Mennonite heritage began at this moment of radical rebellion.

Eras come and go, there are turning points in history which signify the beginning of one era and the ending of another. When the Romans crucified Jesus of Nazareth they believed that they ended Christ's era, but they did the exact opposite. It was the crucifixion and the resurrection three days later that

⁵ John D. Roth, "Stories: How Mennonites Came to Be," (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006), 72.

ushered in a new era. The resurrection is a turning point for all Christians. While the news tells us that we are now in a new era, following the inauguration of President Obama, an era of hope, I like to think that we have lived in an era of hope since the revelation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That we live in the light that Christ calls us to follow him, that by following him we can rest assured that through the coming and going of era's God will be present, Christ will guide us and the Holy Spirit will empower us.

Amen ⁶

⁶ Quotations of Scripture are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless otherwise noted.