

“A World Without Deadlines”

Jonah 3:1-10
Mark 1:14-20

Jan. 25, 2009
Rev. Paul Burns

On February 17, 2009, federal law requires that all full-power television broadcast stations stop broadcasting in analog format and broadcast only in digital format. We've been hearing about this for a few years now. And we've had an actual deadline for the last year or so. Unless you buy a HD TV or a converter kit that will allow an analog TV to receive the digital broadcasts, you will no longer have TV. Perhaps, you've already taken care of this or you will soon. Is anyone just not going to watch TV??

Jonah was called by God to deliver an announcement to the city of Nineveh that they would be overthrown in 40 days time. There was no “unless” in the proclamation. No...unless you change your evil ways...or unless you worship God. Just simply, you will be overthrown. Did it mean they would be destroyed, or taken over by an army, or what? They did not exactly know, but they believed that God's deadline of 40 days was the real deal.

And so they did the only thing they knew to do, they repented of evil ways, they fasted, they wore sackcloth (where would we even get sackcloth these days? Target?), they sat in ashes. They did everything they could to show God that they were willing to change and relied upon God's mercy. It took a deadline for Nineveh to call for a lifeline.

We live in a world of deadlines: school, work, governments all work on deadlines. If the demanded task is not met by the stated deadline, there will be definite consequences, otherwise the deadline is meaningless. Some of us procrastinate, but when the pressure of the deadline mounts high enough, we will get it done...usually. Deadlines work. Employers, teachers, and governments all know that if they do not give a deadline, then at least a significant percentage of the population will never get anything done.

So here's the problem with which we are faced: God has not given us a deadline. In the Jonah story, God changes his mind and does not destroy Nineveh. One wonders if some of them went back to their old ways when they realized that God's threat was not fulfilled. Over the years, so called “prophets” have set a deadline in the name of God for the end of the world. I believe the current deadline is 2012. But the deadlines pass and nothing happens. The vast majority of the population pays very little attention to this kind of thing. We continue our lives as we have been, very little change if any.

In our passage from Mark, Jesus announces to the people that the time has been fulfilled, or rather the deadline has been reached, and the kingdom of God has come near (either time for consequences or maybe some kind of major change is a foot...something much bigger than no more analog air waves). Repent and believe in the good news. Wait a moment. Good news? Not consequences. That's not how deadlines should work. It's all-backward.

One, the deadline has already occurred, it's not some future determined date.

Secondly, what was it that people were supposed to do before the deadline? Nothing? Too late now anyway. Thirdly, where are the consequences? Jesus is talking about good news not bad news. Shouldn't it be some like, "Repent, for all those that do not change their ways will be thrown into Hell in 40 days." Now that's how to get results. But that's not what Jesus says here.

It sounds more like, "The deadline has come, the boss is on his way with raises for everyone, let's put aside our work and plan a party." Doesn't seem like a smart way to run a business, but it does sound like good news. Certainly, the fisherman that Jesus called to follow him heard it as good news. Otherwise, why would they leave their pretty good lives to someone they barely knew if at all. They didn't even hesitate a second. They dropped their nets and followed.

Think about what would possess you to leave work in a instant: Imminent danger, or a sure thing better offer. For instance, you would leave work immediately if you were told your child or spouse was just rushed to the hospital. When the danger, the fear, subsides, though, you will go back to your work or whatever you are doing. Fear is only a temporary motivator for change.

But what if you got some kind of amazing offer...one that you would drop what you were doing immediately and go? Everyone has that dream job in mind. Maybe it's a total fantasy, like pitching for a major league baseball team or singing for the Metropolitan Opera. Or maybe it's something that you have always wanted to do and believe you can do, but the opportunity has never come up.

Perhaps these disciples had all felt like someday God would call them to do something great, something besides fishing until they die, upholding the status quo. Who knows, but they saw whatever their dreams were in Jesus. They saw fulfillment in Jesus.

They weren't responding to a fearful deadline, begging for mercy. They were responding to the offer of a lifetime...to good news.

We are so programmed by the world of deadlines, that we feel like we need them to do anything. Even the church participates in this...Get your pledge cards in by such and such a date (please do by the way)...Sign up for this or that by this date...RSVP for this or that by that date. Church deadlines don't seem to work nearly as well as work, school, or government deadlines: no obvious consequences. Some churches throw around the Hell consequence or a more here and now punishment like smiting or blindness or AIDS. But that only creates fear and/or resentment. Or we use a vague deadline like death. Accept Christ now while you are alive, because once you die it's too late. But most of us feel like death is far off. But again that's about fear not good news.

This Kingdom of God that Jesus was talking about is not a fantasy world, it's also not just a better version of this world, it's a new world, a better offer, an infinitely better offer because it has no deadline. This world will indeed end. We don't know when. But it is a dying world. It has been dying since Adam and Eve ate the apple. There's no real

future in it. The kingdom of this world runs on ulcer producing deadlines and bad news headlines.

God's kingdom is never-ending! It's about Good News. It's about love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It's about forgiveness, togetherness, and celebration. It's a party not a prison. It's a promise, not a threat. It's about grace, not begging. It's about transformation, not degradation. It's about life, not death. It's about eternal things, not those things that have a deadline.

Does a world without deadlines sound pretty good to you? Then what are waiting for? It's already begun. The New Age of the Kingdom of God has already dawned. Has it dawned on you? Or did you feel stifled by a world based only on fear and threats. Maybe this doesn't mean that you leave a job, but maybe it means your job know longer controls your life.

Jesus calls us to repent and believe the good news. Perhaps repent means that we no longer allow the things of this dying world to keep us fearful. It doesn't mean that we ignore deadlines, but we do not sacrifice our life for them. We don't give every last bit of life for them. We don't sacrifice our relationship with those we love for them. We put God's kingdom, one without a deadline, one that is a lifeline, one that forgives and frees us. One that is about good news. God has a better offer for you. Take it.