

Date Preached	24-Jan-2021	Date Initiated	14-Jan-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Epiph 3, Yr B

" The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. "



It's a little hard for me to believe that not even six months into my ministry, I have already preached for you on Jonah, today's Old Testament reading, *and* the calling of St Andrew, today's Gospel reading.\* And that's a *good* thing, for it frees me to help us unpack, a bit, dear St Paul's troublesome instructions to the Corinthians that we hear today. I don't presume to criticize the church committee that determined the texts we read each Sunday, but I think they did Paul a true disservice today, for our Epistle lesson excises a few difficult sentences from a longer and more nuanced context. As a result, most of us hear "let ... those who have wives be as though they had none" and, understandably, either want to check out in disbelief ... or begin marshaling mental arguments against Paul's views on women and marriage.

But let me reassure you: If we zoom out a little and consider what Paul says in the *lead-up* to today's reading, he sounds a good bit different. The Corinthians have, in fact, suggested in an earlier letter to Paul that celibacy—remaining single and sexually inactive, for life—is better for Christians than marrying. Paul responds firmly but also pastorally, giving counsel that is more thoughtful ... more humane. He observes, if a bit earthily, that for many, sexual passions and desires are too hard to resist for a lifetime. Therefore, he says, it is better to express them in the context of a loving and mutual marriage—Paul sees marital duties and privileges extending to *both* spouses—than to attempt stifling them in celibacy ... fail ... and then end up in cheap, unloving hook-ups or affairs. This is compassionate pastoring: While purity—personal holiness; continence—may be the ideal, if maintaining it will vex your faith ... make you follow Christ less completely than you might ... then it is better to enter into an honorable, moral, mutual relationship, so that your passions may be satisfied and your faith more fully lived. Thus, Paul actually sanctions the bonds of marriage: All spouses are bound to love and honor their partners, full stop.

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So, then, what *does* Paul mean when he urges married men to "be as though they had" no wives? Paul's real message to the Corinthians, I believe, is not about marriage but about *time*: not the time-of-day ... not hours and minutes ... but about the age ... the era ... that they (*and we*) are living in. And his ultimate point is that, as Christians, we, in fact, live in *two* times—*two* ages—simultaneously. We live in the *chronos* time of this world and the *kairos* time of God. *Chronos* is the time we know so well: the time of marriage and divorce, of success and failure, of health and sickness, of joy and despondency. *Chronos* is the time that insistently demands to know whether it is more Christian for single people to marry or not; or for widowed people to re-marry or remain alone ... as if there were any one spiritual answer.

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\* Albeit as found in Matthew, not Mark.

*Kairos*, however, is the time of God's abundant fulfillment of God's every intention and design for humanity ... and the good news is that we're *already living in it!*<sup>†</sup> *Kairos* time began with Jesus' birth ... withstood the brutality of the Cross ... and then delivered us—*forever*—into the merciful redemption and never-faltering love of Our Savior's arms. In *kairos* time, there is no doubt about our being forgiven ... no possibility of losing what Christ has gained for us ... no uncertainty as to our ultimate destiny. *Kairos* is the restoration of creation to Eden—to what God fervently desired for us from the very beginning. For a man to "be as though" he had no wife, therefore, is *not* to ignore or abandon her; he must love and care for her. But, Paul counsels, he also must remember that his earthly marriage is but a foretaste... a prelude ... to the divine and eternal wedding feast that Jesus has already procured for him ... and for all of us. God wishes us to live in and through the *chronos* time we are in ... and—*also*—on *past it*: for us to know and anticipate and savor the *kairos* that will remain for us, in Christ, when *chronos* passes away.

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Once upon a time, there was a kindly farmer who was perfectly normal in every way, except that he always wore two watches. The one on his *left wrist* kept perfect time. It told him when it was time to milk the cows ... time to put supper in the oven ... time to take his pills. It was the watch he looked at frequently, throughout the day. But every once in a while, he'd look at the watch on his *right wrist* instead: when something was troubling him or he felt sad or anxious or lonely.

One day, his granddaughter noticed this and asked him what time his second watch kept. "Well," the farmer replied, "when the overdue notices have piled up and the bill collector's on his way, I look at that watch and it shows me all the love that's been in my life, which no collector can ever take away. Or if I'm feeling guilty about something terrible I did long ago, that watch gives me a gracious look. And when I'm missing your grandma something fierce—God rest her soul—that watch lets me hear her sing my favorite song again—just like I was sitting right beside her."

"But why *two* watches, grampa?"

"The first watch helps me mind all the things I gotta take care of. The second one reminds me: Everything that really matters ... My Savior has already taken care of, for me, and forever."



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<sup>†</sup> Paul saw *kairos* in an almost chronological way, if you will: that Jesus' triumphal return would take place next week or next year—certainly within the lifetime of Paul and his generation. But in today's Gospel reading, Jesus goes Paul one better, for the very first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel are, "The time *is* fulfilled; the kingdom of God *has drawn* near."