

**“THE RIGHT TIME”**  
**Genesis 18:1-15; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35 – 10:8**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**June 18, 2017**

This past April 22, the Waterbury Symphony Orchestra and a mass choir performed Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, the *Ode to Joy*. The week before that performance, the orchestra’s fine conductor, Leif Bjaland, was interviewed by the Republican-American. Bjaland recalled that he first conducted Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> when he was a graduate student at Yale at the tender age of 25. One of his professors scolded him for doing so. “You have no business doing this piece,” he said. The professor was mindful that Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony is one of Western culture’s towering monuments. It is a celebration of human community, composed by a man cut off from the world by deafness – pretty heady stuff for a conductor in only the third decade of his life. The former student now understands his professor’s point. When Bjaland first conducted Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup>, he lacked the breadth of human experience necessary to approach a work of such scope. He said, “It’s a little bit like, you don’t want a 25-year old actor playing King Lear.”

When I read that interview, I immediately identified with Leif Bjaland’s perspective. At the time of that April 22 concert, I was just two weeks away from attending the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of a church in Jackson, Mississippi, which I had pastored in the mid-1980’s. Back then, that church had 800 members and was filled to the brim with movers and shakers, including three dozen doctors and a United States Senator. My predecessor, John Claypool, was one of the most renowned preachers in America. Needless to say, that church’s standards and expectations for its pastor were off the charts.

I was called to be their spiritual leader at the age of 34, and didn’t have sense enough to know that I was in over my head! As I look back with 20/20 hindsight, I say to myself, “What was that church thinking by calling me to be their pastor, and what was I thinking by accepting their call?” I now realize that I was like a 25-year old trying to conduct Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> or play King Lear! Five years into my tenure there, a member of that congregation told me what he had said to his wife about me when I was starting out. He commented, “John is a fine preacher, but he hasn’t hurt enough.” I knew exactly what he meant. At age 34, I had plenty of book learning, but I lacked life experience. In particular, I hadn’t spent enough time in the school of hard knocks to be a credible preacher and pastor.

Friends, in so many of life’s endeavors, timing is crucial. Success depends not just on doing the right thing, but on doing things at the right time. In order to achieve our goals, we have to be both ready and willing; and sometimes we’re willing, but not ready. Whether we’re leading a church, a business, or a family, you and I have to discern not only what to do, but when to do it.

On this Father’s Day, I’m reminded that dads often face this dilemma. When, in the course of a committed relationship, is the right time to start a family? Is this the right time to reprimand a child for bringing home poor grades, or would he or she be better served at this moment by a word of gentle encouragement? Is this the right time to push a daughter into playing a sport or to talk with a son about the birds and the bees? Is this the right time to take on

a new job, to uproot the family and move to another city? Is this the right time to go deeper into debt, or to undergo elective surgery, or to consider early retirement? The decisions fathers have to make must be governed not just by a checklist of what needs to be done, but by an internal clock that tells us when to do it.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, we're introduced to twelve men who are about to possess extraordinary authority to preach, to heal, and to cast out demons. But notice, they don't just assume this authority; it's given to them. They're not exactly volunteers; they're recruits. They don't just decide one day to sign up for discipleship; they're "called"; they're "sent"; they're "charged" – a good Methodist word! They are disciples and ministers by the grace of God.

And look at who these men are. They're a mixture of the famous, the not-so-famous, and the infamous. Some, like Peter and John, still have their names up on a marquee today. But whoever heard of Alphaeus, or Thaddaeus, or Simon the Cananaean? Not all of the disciples are superstars – or saints, for that matter. Some are even scoundrels. One of them has betrayed his own people by collecting their taxes and plopping them into the Roman treasury. Then there is the one who is remembered only because he betrays Jesus himself. These unlikely characters are our Lord's first disciples, successors to the twelve sons of Israel, princes of the new kingdom of heaven, given authority to cleanse lepers and raise the dead. But at the time Jesus calls them, what have they done to deserve such honor, such authority? Nothing, so far as I can tell.

I heard once about a pastor whose church began to rise up in rebellion against him. Some members circulated a petition asking for his resignation. The document declared that he was incompetent, unworthy, unfit to be their pastor. When the petition wound up in his hands, he signed it himself.

There is one theme that runs through all of our Scripture readings this morning. It has to do not just with God's grace, but with God's sense of timing, which is often mysterious, even bizarre. The God of the Bible has this incredible knack for choosing and using people when they seem most useless, for loving and forgiving people when they least expect it and deserve it. What makes grace so amazing is its timing. The apostle Paul tells the Romans: "While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6).

Excuse me: at the right time? Paul must have forgotten that today's worship service started at 9:30 instead of 10:30! The right time to die for somebody is when they've demonstrated that they're worth dying for.

One of the most entertaining movies I've ever seen was entitled *Dave*. It's about a man who bears an uncanny physical resemblance to the President of the United States. For security reasons he is asked one day to be a stand-in for the president at a public function. Then the unthinkable happens: the president suffers a massive stroke and is completely incapacitated. His top aides hatch the idea of letting the look-alike, Dave, serve as president, except that he would be their puppet, their ticket to absolute power.

Well, they convince Dave to go along with their scheme, and he begins performing the charade. He speaks at political rallies, welcomes foreign dignitaries, and throws out the first pitch at a baseball game. He does a convincing job of playing president, but he still knows that he's only playing, that he's only a pretender. Late one night he is alone with his bodyguard, a

Secret Service agent – a big, imposing, stone-faced black man. It's occurred to Dave that, while he is not really the president, he could be the target for any crazy person who thinks he is the president and wants to kill him. He begins to feel nervous about his protection. So he asks the Secret Service agent, "Would you take a bullet for me?" And there is a long, long silence; the agent does not answer. He's not at all sure that he would take a bullet for a pretender to the presidency.

The apostle Paul says that it's one thing to die for a righteous person, a worthy person. It would still be hard to make that sacrifice, but at least the sacrifice makes some sense. It's quite another thing to die for someone who doesn't deserve such a sacrifice, who has not earned that kind of love. "But," says Paul, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (v. 8). Do you know that this means? It makes no difference whether you're a president or a pauper, a bishop or an infidel – Christ will take a bullet for you. He already has! Whoever and whatever you are, God loves you – not someday; not in some distant, ideal future; not when you're deserving enough; God loves you now!

What makes God's grace so amazing is its timing. When Sarah, the wife of Abraham, is old, far beyond her childbearing years, she is promised a child. When she overhears the news, notice how she reacts. Because she's a famous character in the Bible, you and I might expect her to respond piously, like the Virgin Mary does when she is informed of her pregnancy: "Behold, I am a handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). But Sarah is no spring chick like Mary. At her age a pregnancy is the last thing she expects; the idea is so outrageous that she laughs to herself, even guffaws in the face of God. Her biological clock has stopped ticking; she is barren; she has given up hope of ever becoming a mother, much less the mother of a child who will be a patriarch of God's chosen people. And yet, less than a year later, Sarah is giving birth to a son named Isaac, and God is giving birth to a mighty nation.

Sarah reminds me a lot of Annie Scarborough, an elderly woman in a church I once served in East Texas. When I first met Annie, she struck me as the shy, retiring sort. She was the kind who worked behind the scenes, cooking food and washing dishes at our monthly church luncheons. She didn't feel inclined to serve on church committees or take on high-profile leadership roles. She didn't think she was gifted for those kinds of duties; and besides, at her age she believed she was past her prime and that younger people should be shouldering those responsibilities.

Well, about a year after I became her pastor, Annie's husband, A.G., became seriously ill. Soon Annie was physically unable to care for A.G. on her own and had to place him in a nursing home. Over the next couple of years Annie was the very model of faithfulness and caring. She spent each day at A.G.'s bedside, keeping him company, feeding him, and helping him get some physical exercise.

Presently, Annie began to take notice of other residents at the nursing home – especially those who didn't receive the kind of attention she gave to A.G., those who went weeks or months without receiving a single visitor, those who would go for long periods without even leaving their rooms. I don't know what got into Annie, but one day this shy little woman gathered up her courage and went to the activities director of the nursing home and asked if she and other members of our church might be helpful in some way to the residents there. She had seen how her attention and care for A.G. had not only prolonged his life but also given him a better quality

of life. She wondered if she and her church friends could offer that same gift of life and love to others.

From that initiative was born what came to be known as the “VIP Ministry.” VIP stood for “Volunteer In-Room Program,” which meant that the volunteers from our church went into the rooms of residents who were unable to come out of their rooms. Other churches provided worship services, entertainment, and games in a large activity room. But a number of the residents weren’t well enough to get out and participate in group activities, so we took activities to them – things like taped music, story books, card games, and flowers.

The VIP Ministry provided a weekly oasis of companionship and joy for people who were stranded in an oasis of isolation and despair. And it all started with the vision of a little woman in her late 70’s who thought she was past her prime, who didn’t have an outgoing personality, who wasn’t a leader in any organization to which she belonged, who didn’t like to stand up in front of people or give speeches, who didn’t have much formal education or a certificate of ordination or anything else to qualify for her to lead an ambitious church ministry. What she did have was a heart of love, and her own experience of ministering to her ailing husband, and a clear sense that she was called by God to minister to others. When God proposed to Annie Scarborough that she undertake this task, even at her ripe old age, instead of laughing, she began planning and working.

Friends, God’s sense of timing is incredible! When you feel least worthy of God’s love and acceptance, God is most ready to give it to you. At the very moment you feel unqualified or ill-equipped to do something great for God and make a difference in the lives of others, God will dial your number. Just when you think you’re over the hill, washed up, out of gas, nothing but a “has been,” God says, “Surprise! You’re still good for something. I can still use you – if you’re willing to become an instrument for my purpose, if you’re willing to be called, charged, and sent.

So let me ask you: at the age of 25, was it the right time for Leif Bjaland to conduct Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony? At the age of 34, was it the right time for me to pastor a church with 800 members and lofty expectations? At whatever age you are, is this the right time for you to answer God’s calling to a ministry that pushes you out of your comfort zone? Who knows? God only knows.