

And Ordinary Time Begins: The Beauty, Grace, and Mercy of the Liturgical Calendar

The long journey through Ordinary time begins this Sunday. OT is the longest season in the Liturgical Calendar indicated by weeks and months of the color green in our Altar hangings and Clergy Vestments. As a seminary professor of mine said, “God must love the ordinary, because God sure did make a lot of it.”

Our journey through Ordinary time is our chance to claim the sacred in all things, even in the boring day in and day out of our everyday lives. There are no mountaintop celebrations like Easter or Christmas in Ordinary time, just a long march through the valley of keeping the faith quietly and courageously as time marches on.

As Tish Harrison said in a handout (I think) I gave you when we talked about the Liturgical Calendar in Adult Forum, “We long for good things to keep going — celebration, the joy of community, music, feasting. We were made for it to go on eternally. On t-shirts, bumper stickers, and in high school yearbooks, I often see the lyrics of a Robert Earl Keen song quoted: “The road goes on forever and the party never ends” These lyrics speak of what we long for — hope of an endless joy. But the reality is that this side of heaven, in a world broken and bleeding, any party that never ends would at some point cease being a party and would become a mockery, cruel and oppressive.”

During times like then last 24 hours, when the horror of the London apartment fire or the shooting in Alexandria occur, our addiction to never feeling grief or pain can inhibit our ability to be people of compassion and mercy.

She goes on to say that there can be a tendency in our culture to think things ought to be shiny and happy and fun, fun, fun, at all times. We want entertainment and crave a thrill. We project perfectly happy lives on Facebook and Pinterest. We are tempted to move from celebration to celebration — a month of Halloween to three months of Christmas to the Super Bowl, Mardi Gras, Cinco De Mayo, and on and on. “You gotta fight for your right to endlessly party.”

This is why the Liturgical calendar comes as beauty and grace and can help, as Tish asserts, “to keep us sane.” Our liturgical calendar reminds us that there can be no celebration without preparation. It keeps us from cheaply proclaiming hope before we’ve adequately waited, mourned, and sat in the ache of longing. We aren’t ready to celebrate until we acknowledge over time through ritual and worship that we and this world are not yet right and whole. [[SEP]]

Life does not come to us as an endless, happy, clappy song of, “Don’t worry, be happy” moments (Although I do love Bobby McFerrin’s wonderful song). People we love get sick, marriages fail, jobs are lost and sometimes the blues just creeps up behind us and slugs us, knocking us down for a while.

Allowing the full spectrum of our experiences in life to move through us one part of a whole and as a natural part of the human equation saves us from the helpless feelings of “Why me?” when life is interrupted by the unexpected.

And here again is why the church calendar is so helpful. The seasons clearly carry us through times of joy, times of mourning, times of fearless self examination, times of festive celebration, times of longing and preparation---and yes long, long stretches of Ordinary Time, where the challenge can be simply to stay engaged. The full spectrum of life is there and guides us to expect and embrace the same flow of seasons in our own lives.

As Trish says, “Life has times of deepest grief and groaning and times of profound joy and Hallelujahs. But much of it is neither. Much of it is small and unnoticed and hums along, years

spent in work, sleep, maintenance, and everydayness. And this too is honored in the church calendar. In the long ordinary, neither the valley nor the mountaintops but the plain planes of life, God is still with us, working and rooting us when it seems like not much is happening. And this also is part of the story of the gospel. And this also is part of the story the church tells us in its changing seasons.^[SEP]Part of what it means to be human is living in time. And living in time is always communal and ritualized. All of us mark our lives by days, months, and seasons.”

We can begin to think that whatever we feel at any one time is the truest reality there is. But the liturgical calendar tells us otherwise. It tells a story big enough to sweep us up into it. It calls the shots. It gives us a time to ache, a time to prepare, a time to celebrate, a time of repentance, a time of feasting. It says that something defines time that is truer than our circumstances and our feelings about them. It establishes a regulative tempo for our emotional life beyond ourselves into a common story with the human family. It allows us to enter in to the tragic and violent events of the last 24 hours as people of hope and reconciliation instead of people co-opted by fear and division.

Come and be with us on Sunday as we fall headlong into both the season and gift of the ordinary. We will travel this long and unbroken road together rejoicing in the grace and beauty of God's rhythm and flow.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+