

Pastor's Message for January & February 2012

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Songs and Shadows

The liturgical year is either wise or depressing. It does not allow us to get very far from darkness and suffering. It reminds us regularly that this dear, dear world is not our home. Even if we are here transiently, it reminds us that the glory does not last nor, of course, does the sorrow. This may be small comfort to carry us through the journey of our brief life.

Is this wisdom or is it depressing?

Chinese Taoism reminds us that life is a rhythmic pattern in which no one succeeds all the time and no one fails all the time. It draws our attention to the nature of success which has limits built into it and to the nature of failure which is also circumscribed. Taoism merely observes the phenomenon. No one gets through life with gains alone and no one loses everything.

Is this wise or depressing? Or is it, quite simply, the way it is so that there are no remedies for it and no strategies that will change it.

The liturgical year is like an excursion, beyond fantasy, into reality.

In January and February, just weeks after Christmas, we encounter Ash Wednesday. We go from angel songs in the heavens to demonic forces in the desert, from all the joy of a new-born child and the conviction that God is with us in an utterly unique way, to a Lenten season that will end with the most despairing human cry ever heard: My God, why have you abandoned me?

So, in the liturgical year, the joy goes only so far before the shadows cluster. The certitudes are not stable enough to endure before they are undermined by ambiguity and confusion. The journey from crib to cross, the distance from Bethlehem to Calvary is a short one, even geographically, and, clearly, metaphorically.

So, perhaps, there is wisdom in the liturgical year.

Rejoice but prepare the other ways we must also walk. Making a crooked way straight cannot be accomplished without suffering. The suffering is not endless. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” is the final prayer declared soon after the terror of abandonment.

Success without limits makes us arrogant. In Eden, the Fall occurs because we assumed that success should have no boundary. Suffering without limits makes us hopeless. So the Eden story ends with a promise.

Success gives us only the present. It prompts us to build barricades against failure. We want only the present. Suffering is all in the present. We feel the pain every minute. No past memory or future remedy helps.

The rhythm of success and failure hurls us into the future and into hope. All the joy of Christmas is shallow without the riskiness of growing. A child whose life ends in the crib fills us with unspeakable sorrow for all that might have been. The suffering of a lifetime is the anvil on which commitment and fidelity and forgiveness and faith are hammered into life.

The liturgy reminds us that this is the way it is. The way it is gives us Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of Easter, our own lives and communities. The way it is gives us the Gospel message and the nearness of God. The way it is has made us conscious and brought us love. Dare we seek to change it? If we did, would love go with it and the human heart?

It is not depressing to live the liturgical year. There is wisdom in it at every turn. It teaches us and it brings us peace.

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