

## **Colors and Seasons**

Something you may have noticed recently is that the paraments on the pulpit changed three times in the space of three Sundays. They went from Easter white, in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, to Pentecost Red last Sunday to Green for the Season of Pentecost (which we are now entering).

Each color evokes something of the wonder and attraction of the season, and I do love the color green and the way it symbolizes what I the season of slow growth we are entering. Now that we have gotten over the breath-taking suddenness with which the barren earth and branches of winter exploded into flower bedecked greenery, we slip into that slow season of summer; a season in which we don't always notice the growth that is going on, but in which it is still happening.

I love this season, because I feel as though the growing that is happening to the grasses and trees and the creatures of the field feels like it is also happening inside me; that I am too am being slowly ripened, so that when harvest comes and I finally drop from the tree, I like to imagine that the fruit I bear will be mellow and sweet.

What a pleasure it is to walk across the landscape and breath deeply of the sudden warm pockets of earthy and flower perfumed air or drink in the cool silence under the trees. Although my wallet is not so fat, I feel like a wealthy man, enjoying bouquets finer than the finest wine. And what makes it even more wonderful is that we didn't play any part in creating this summer wonderland. Sure we cut a path through it all, but every bit of it comes to us as a gift from God. And so, I think it is good, especially for those of us who are always busy trying to fix and improve and change things, to just stop from time to time to let that sink in.

### **Heschel on the Sabbath**

I guess one of the reasons, I am thinking about these times of enjoyment is because I am going on vacation next week. Another reason is because I recently read a couple chapters of a book by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel on the Sabbath.

Heschel locates the Sabbath at the end of a work week, in keeping with the way God, in the beginning of Genesis, makes the world in 6 days, then designates the 7<sup>th</sup> as a day of rest; a day in which God permeates the newly created world with holiness. And of course, it can't be lost on us, that we structure our own time according to the same pattern.

We spend 6 days working on our various projects and then on the 7<sup>th</sup>, we supposedly rest and open our hearts to God.

Heschel describes the week as being made up of time and space. On the first 6 days of the week we devote ourselves to space. In other words, we move things around, building things, shape them, plant them, sweep them and generally organize things in space. We spend the 6 days in space ordering and shaping the world and ourselves so that we can prosper. And then on the 7<sup>th</sup> day we stop doing and shift the emphasis on space to an emphasis on the appreciation of time.

We very often think of the seventh day of rest as a day to reenergized ourselves, with an eye to being effective at work on the other six days. But according to Heschel, we have it backwards. God does not create the day of rest as a preparation for six days of work. Instead, the six days of work are a preparation for the seventh, a day in which to savor and experience God's presence and providence.

The seventh day is meant to be the crown of the week. And the way we appreciate it is by letting go of our concern with getting things done in space, in order to exist with hearts open to the experience of time.

I have to confess that I am still trying to make sense of what Heschel is saying about time and space. While space is full of objects that we can touch and see, time is an invisible experience, that accompanies our movement through space. It cannot be seen or grasped, and we can only experience it qualitatively, with experiences such as love, joy, sorrow, devotion etc... These qualitative experiences are what gives our relationships meaning and they are only accessible to us through our experience of time. And so, it is in time that we locate our experience of God. I think this is part of what Heschel is saying.

### **Moments with Mozart**

Many years ago, when I was in Seminary, I had to drive from the suburbs west of Chicago to morning classes in Hyde Park, just south of downtown. I always had a morning class, and so I always had to go in at rush hour. Horrible!

One of the ways I dealt with it was by listening to Mozart piano concertos. And even though the traffic much of the way was stop and go, when I got to school I often felt blissfully energized, as though I wouldn't mind just sitting in the car and listening some more. Even though I had heard the pieces many times, they never seemed boring or predictable. I especially liked the places in the slow movements

when the rest of the orchestra fell silent and the piano would leave the orchestra behind and play on by itself; one note following the next, sometimes ascending, sometimes descending, sometimes hopping around, sometimes pausing.

When the orchestra hushed and the piano began to play it was what I imagined it would be like walking in the garden of Eden. Each note is like an exploratory footstep, taken in wonder and anticipation. And each note is somehow the right step; beautiful in a way that draws us closer to God.

I feel as though this kind of musical experience helps to clarify what Heschel is getting at when he talks about the relationship between time and space and what Jesus means when he says that the “sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath”, because the sensations that are aroused when God touches our hearts on the Sabbath are so beautiful and life affirming, that it is impossible to then think of the Sabbath as a burden imposed on us for God’s sake. We can only understand it as God’s gift to us for our sakes. What we receive is an experience of God’s presence that relocates God at the center of our lives, bringing fulfillment and proper perspective to the rest of the week.

But in order to have this experience, we have to have to honor the Sabbath day. It is no wonder that honoring the Sabbath is one of the top priorities in the Bible. It is no less than the 4<sup>th</sup> of the 10 Commandments and the first that deals with our relationship to the world around us.

### **Keeping the Sabbath**

The “keep it holy” part is important for us partly because it stands against a lot of the ways we choose to relax nowadays. Partying hard, socializing constantly, or being always on a cell phone, are just as much distractions that prevent us from being open to God, as are the tasks we involve ourselves in during the week.

The fact is, it is hard to switch gears from accomplishing tasks to being receptive. I think it takes most of us only a few seconds of silence or inaction to start worrying that “time is a wasting.” And in many cases, we don’t particularly want to think the thoughts that pop up when are simply open to receive.

I think it is interesting that when Jesus was crucified, we are told that the women, after seeing his body, proceeded to rest on the Sabbath, before going to the tomb to treat his body.

Imagine what it would be like to not be able to do busy work or engage in some kind of distraction, just to not have to relive or feel the difficult emotions that must have been welling up in those women in response to the crucifixion they had just witnessed. Yet even under those circumstances, they held to the discipline of setting all their work and distractions aside.

I think this is an important example, because, even though the Sabbath is intended for our good and to be anticipated as a source of great pleasure, it reminds us that keeping the Sabbath isn't always easy. There are plenty of demands and disasters that come up that can distract us from this commitment.

In fact, it is pretty clear that the accent in our culture today is on working until the work is done, regardless of what else has to get trampled over in order to get it done. And that even includes quality time with the kids. So that, for many, the idea of taking a regular Sabbath represents not an opportunity but a source of guilt or an added burden that takes 24 hours away from time when money could have been made or other items on the to-do list could have been ticked off.

In other words, our values today very much side with Martha in the Gospel reading, who is busy with preparations and complains that Mary is not helping. And we tend to agree, until we are surprised to find that Jesus takes the side of Mary who he says has taken “the better part” by choosing instead to sit by his side and enjoy his presence.

Notice that Jesus is careful not to devalue Martha’s work. Neither is honoring the Sabbath even remotely about giving ourselves permission to procrastinate or be lazy. Martha’s work is important, but in this situation, Mary has taken the “better” part. And so the story is about being able to change gears and be in the right place and the right posture, when Jesus comes to visit.

So I guess what I want to lift up today is that stopping what we are doing periodically and just spending some time simply appreciating what God provides is not just something we should feel permission to do. It is highly important. God didn’t put us here simply to do the work of moving things around, making changes and improvements and serving others. God also put us here to appreciate and experience creation, knowing that if we experience the holiness of the day, our hearts will respond with joy and love and praise. Nothing could be more restful and nothing could be more important.

