

Banging the Slow Drum: Living in the Church Year

The Rule of 7

As someone who teaches, preaches, exhorts, I definitely know the feeling of redundancy. “Haven’t I said this already?” There is a sense of droning on, *the feeling* of saying the same thing over and over. “They’ve heard this before, right?” We’ve all experienced this in one context or another. If you have children, every parent has uttered the phrase, “Haven’t I told you a million times?” If you’re a teacher or trainer, you know the feeling like you’re being repetitive. It turns out, though, repetition is a good thing. Humans are designed to receive redundancy. It’s only due to the fall, influenced by modern trends, being distracted to death, that people value variety at all costs. Our minds wander, we think novel is better, we’re always seeking something new. But we need repetition for anything to stick. This wasn’t a problem in the Garden. But it’s a problem for us sinners.

So, communicators and teachers fall prey to the feeling of “saying the same thing over and over.” Because *we* feel self-conscious about it! But we also must realize that for any idea or concept to truly take hold, one has to say it effectively over and over, up to *seven times*. This was popularized by the movie industry in the 1930s, where studios realized that the magic number needed to promote an upcoming movie was seven. Otherwise, the message wouldn’t stick. I know this too from my background in retail management. When I had to deliver a corporate initiative, I endlessly repeated myself. While I thought I was being redundant (to the point of people tuning me out), I was actually a more effective communicator when I kept repeating my message again and again. It turns out most people don’t even start listening until something has been told to them at least three or four times.

This is relevant when considering our topic for this month. I feel like I’ve talked about the Liturgical Church Year *a lot*. I have written about it in this space before. But I also know that I get the feeling of being repetitive, or “droning on” usually when I am just starting to get people’s attention. So, here we go again. I will once more emphasize the importance of the Church Year, and how living in synch with it actually blesses the Christian.

Banging the Drum...Slowly

Everyone knows the phrase “bang the drum.” It means to show enthusiasm for something, to highlight something important, wanting others to know about it. Todd Rundgren added the element of repetition to the phrase, which is helpful, even if obnoxious. So, we might say I want to bang the drum...not loudly, certainly with redundancy, but bang the Church Year drum *slowly*. This slow banging drum (not to be confused with the 1973 movie) is to be enthusiastic about the Church Year, providing needed repetition, but with the goal of getting people to appreciate what’s being offered. Not loud staccato beats, but a slow, methodical, banging. For there’s a rhythm to it, a cadence. A noteworthiness. To bang the drum slowly is to draw attention

to the Liturgical Year, not to the point of annoyance, but to the point of appreciation leading to treasuring it.

And the Church Year repeats. It's rhythmic. It can be loud...but also soft. Most importantly, It emphasizes the things God wants us know, an invitation to investigate things further. Each "bang" represents a huge moment in time and history, emphasizing something cosmic and life-altering. The big bangs are Christmas and Easter. So too Pentecost and the Ascension. Lent and Advent are muted tappings to prepare us for the big bang to come. Perhaps the season of Trinity/Pentecost (the season of the Church) is more like rhythmic heartbeats—how we are supposed to live. But the Liturgical Year provides a repetition that is good, that seeks to draw us in and synch us up with God's timing and work of salvation in His Son Jesus. The bang then, isn't the point, neither is the drum. It's what, or Who the drum signals that matters.

The Church Year: Is It Biblical?

So why do so many Christians and faith traditions ignore it? Why do I feel compelled to repeat myself about it? Why are many Lutherans oblivious to it? Many reasons. One is our society's rejection of tradition *ad hoc*. We like nostalgia, just not anything we're bound to follow, that's been handed down to us by those who've gone before. Another reason is our short-attention spans—we're off on the next thing and don't have the patience to stay within a moment, a season, a rhythm. But some well-meaning Christians might point out that the tradition of the Church Year *isn't biblical*. That these feasts, festivals, and "saint days" were added later, that the formulation of the Liturgical Year developed slowly over time, and isn't necessary to worship Christ. This is completely misguided. And frankly ignorant.

Without doing a deep dive on everything the Bible teaches about God's use of yearly, monthly and weekly patterns, I simply take you to the book of Leviticus. It is a strange book (to us!) in many ways, but Leviticus provides the basic organization of the religious and civic life of the people of Israel. They were *not* to live like the pagan demon worshippers of the land of Canaan. They were to be a holy people and live and worship according to God's precepts. Holy means *set apart*, by the way. One of the prescriptions for holiness was that they were *to keep a liturgical year*. The basic unit of time is of course the week. The Sabbath was the day of rest, the seventh day, the day of worship. The Sabbath anchored their entire worship life, tethering them to the Creator and His creation. But Israel was also to hold monthly and yearly convocations. Some were times of fasting; others were feasts. In Leviticus 23 & 24, God gave several key appointed feasts: Passover, the Feast of Firstfruits, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Booths. God also gave the Day of Atonement—a holy convocation where the people were to afflict themselves, to receive atonement before the Lord for their perpetual sin. Many other days and ways were to be observed in their worship of God to remember all that He had done for them. For this is the purpose of a Church Year—to remember, rejoice, reflect, and receive.

You might say, "That was Old Testament times. We don't do any of those now." You're right. We don't do any of them, *because Jesus has fulfilled them in Himself*. In fact, those OT festivals,

seen in their liturgical calendar, all pointed to and foreshadowed Him. Jesus is the substance of all of their feasts. He is the Lamb of God, Who keeps the Yom Kippur. But in this completion, Jesus then transformed the old feasts into new ones. He gives us new ways (better ones!) to remember His work of salvation, to rejoice in the eternal life He gives, seasons to reflect on His ministry and Word, rhythms to receive His gifts. Our Church Year reflects this transformation, giving us the fullness to live in synch with God's timing and Son. When we follow it, we're actually more deeply imbibing all that God has to give us. When we observe feast days and commemorations, we bring to remembrance the contributions of the saints of every age and are edified by their example. When we fast and feast according to the Church Year, we begin to live in God's timing and not our own.

Of course, observing a Church calendar doesn't merit us favor before God or earn us standing. That is a perversion of the Gospel. We don't keep a liturgical calendar to make ourselves righteous. But observing the patterns and keeping the days (in Christian freedom) enables us to benefit from God's gifts and more deeply be shaped by God's timing, and not the world's.

Living by a Cosmic Calendar

So, how do we do this? The first thing is a basic awareness of what and when things are. I am providing you a color-coded chart of the Church Year following the One-year lectionary. This gives the broad strokes and keeps you synched up with how we worship here at St. Paul's. If you want to go deeper, begin to familiarize yourself with the contents in the front of your hymnal. If you don't have one for home, then order one! They can be purchased from CPH (pew edition is \$32; the devotional is \$50). But inside is a listing of all the feasts and commemorations of the entire year (pg. x-xiii in the front). You can also order a liturgical calendar. The St. James Calendar of the Christian Year is excellent (and will give you way more than you can imagine).

But let's get basic: how do you follow the Church Year, practically speaking? You go to worship every Lord's Day, the basic rhythm of the Christian life. Every Sunday, the day of our Lord's resurrection, we worship the Triune God, and receive what He has to give us—Word and Sacrament. *You go to church.* When you skip or go only occasionally, you miss out on so much...the richness of God's timing and seasons, the focus on the life of Christ (Advent through the Ascension) and all the other days in the season of the Church...not to mention the preaching of the Gospel and reception of the Supper! Of course, special occasions are celebrated during the year. Very often, due to our size, we "observe" certain days on the nearest Sunday. But every now and then, we have a particular day fall during a time when we already gather. This year, the Annunciation of Our Lord (March 25) falls on our normal Midweek Lenten service time. So, guess what? We will observe that feast day! Can't wait. One of the loudest bangs of the liturgical drum—the announcing to Mary of the Incarnation.

But living according to the Church Year is also about learning and growing. It's diving into some of the lesser-known saints, or asking your pastor questions about the significance of the liturgical colors and ceremonies. As part of *The Congregation at Prayer*, I list weekly the saint days and

commemorations so that you might be alerted. *The Treasury of Daily Prayer* (\$59.99 from CPH) is a great resource that you may imbibe the tradition of the Church Year in a devotional way. There are also some great podcasts that do deep dives into the liturgical year. *Issues Etc.* is a must-listen for any Lutheran.

The point of all of this—learn more about all that God has done in history, through people, to bring about the salvation of the world through His Son. That’s what the Church Year teaches you...how Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s timing and purpose. He is the center of the cosmic calendar, the hinge of all history. When you follow the Church Year, you are in essence, following Christ every step of the way, and reflecting on all that He has done for you...here in time and there in eternity. This is what I mean by banging the drum, slowly. *A purposeful rhythmic practice that allows you to synch up with Christ*, according to His gifts and Word...which means we slow down from our busyness and live according to God’s timing.