

Celebrating the Seasons of Life: A Brief Guide

by Evan B. Howard

We all have our ups and downs. In fact, I will go one step further: we all *ought* to have our ups and downs. Rhythm is a part of life (see Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). Furthermore, rhythm is also a part of our *spiritual* life. For example St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his well-known *Spiritual Exercises*, encourages those who are "up" to "consider how he or she will act in future desolation, and store up new strength for that time." When we are up, we prepare for when we are down and when we are down we look to the time when we shall be up again. Seasons of the soul: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, and Spring again. Around and around it goes.

But there is more. Christians not only recognize spiritual ups and downs that we encounter somewhat passively as part of the course of life, we also celebrate and identify with these seasons *actively*. Indeed, Christians have always celebrated these seasons. Sunday is the day of resurrection. And along with the weekly celebration of resurrection there developed, from a very early time, a time of self-examination and repentance that identified with Christ's suffering and death on Friday and Saturday (ever hear of "fish on Friday"?). A Christian weekly rhythm developed: Monday through Thursday - ordinary time; Friday and Saturday - self-examination, repentance/confession, and fasting; Sunday - celebration of resurrection and new life. Each season prepares us for the next as our thoughts, our practices, and even our moods take us from life to death and back again.

But there is more. Christians recognize these seasons not only in their weekly rhythm, but also in yearly rhythms. Easter season, beginning with resurrection Sunday, is the high holiday season of the Christian year. And yet we prepare for that day through the observance of Lent, a time of fasting and repentance leading to the solemn remembrance of Jesus' suffering and death on Holy Week. Similarly Christmas is another "up" season of the year, celebrating the incarnation of Christ. Christians have historically prepared for Christmas with a season of Advent which, like Lent, is a time of self-examination and looking forward to Christ's "coming" in all its forms (some traditions observe other "feasts" and "fasts"). In between these are the "ordinary times" which carry elements of both up and down and yet are really neither. Ordinary times are just that: ordinary.

But there is more. Christians also celebrate a daily rhythm. The "office" of prayers used in the history of the Church reflects a similar rhythm of intentional ups and downs as we celebrate each day with God. We rise "up" and greet the morning sun with a joyful remembrance of new life. We consecrate ourselves to this new day and the go on about our ordinary business of life. In the evening, as the sun begins to set, we examine ourselves and review the course of the day: where we found God, where we fell short, and so on. The evening services of the church give more space for confession, and for remembrance of our death. Then we yield ourselves to God's care in the night (also symbolic of the darkness of the grave) and await the rising of the new day again.

The seasons of life on this earth--daily, weekly, yearly: in church and in nature--model for us the ups and downs we encounter in our lives: times of suffering and repentance, of resurrection, or ordinary living. But we can also *choose* to embrace the flow of these seasons through an intentional observance of the rhythms of day, week, or year. We choose to practice certain forms of prayer, meditation or Christian discipline which help us to identify with a particular season of earth or soul:

First, we join with the church (or with the seasons of the earth) in times of withdrawal, of self-examination, and of **repentance and suffering**. (for example, in the evenings, on Fridays, during Lent or something like this)

- We restrict our indulgence with regard to food or other things (fasting).
- We choose to read sections of Scripture that speak of Christ's passion or of our own need for transformation (like the end of the Gospels, Genesis 1-3, or commandments in the Old and New

Testaments) and we reflect on our lives in light of these passages.

- We reflect on our own suffering or the suffering of others. We just sit with it, just as Jesus sat in-between on Holy Saturday.
- We spend some time confessing our own sins: our self-hatreds, our addictions, our fear, our lack of trust, our pride and so on. Here it is not merely a matter of "saying it," or "being guilty," but more about finding God's presence and guidance in the midst of it. That is what it means to "celebrate" a season of Lent. This, then leads us to:

Second, with join with the Church in a joyful observance of the **resurrection** of life (in the morning, on Sundays, at Easter season or something like that)

- We eat our favorite foods without any reserve and truly "feast."
- We read Scriptures that speak of the resurrection of Christ and the ministry of the resurrected Christ in the Spirit (like the book of Acts).
- We make lists of the great things of God: in history and in our own lives.
- We explore new ideas and new possibilities.

Third, we choose to embrace the **ordinary**, celebrating the details of life as a gift of our Creator. How might we do this? For example, we might:

- We decide each meal to take a few bites slowly, savoring each mouthful.
- We choose to read sections of Scripture that reflect the ordinary practices of life (like Proverbs) or the life of Christ (like Mark).
- We spend moments here or there throughout the day, just being present where we are, with God.
- We honestly remember the mixed experience of our life.
- We listen carefully to others in conversation, whether in person or "virtually," recognizing that this ordinary relationship is a reflection of the beauty of the Trinity.

Here is one simple example of how it might look like if I were to observe the *daily* rhythms of the soul:

- Morning - I celebrate *resurrection* and new life with juice, coffee and happy music. I read a few verses from the book of Acts and give thanks for each part of my day before I leave for work.
- Noon - I observe the *ordinary* character of my day by taking five minutes to remember the day so far, just taking it all in. I make sure and eat a few bites slowly, appreciating my conversations.
- Evening - I close the day by a general review, giving thanks for the graces of the day and taking note of places of *suffering* or *repentance*. I offer myself to God looking forward to new life the following day.

These are only a few examples. The idea is (1) to prepare ourselves for the ups and downs of life through the observance of these ups and downs in the rhythms of the Christian Church, and (2) to consciously worship--in the midst of it all--the God who is with us through it all.

How do you fare in the midst of our own ups and downs? Want to celebrate them with the whole of the Christian community? How might you give this a try?