

GOD IN THE ORDINARY

For the past several months I have been writing about the Liturgical Year. Up to this point in this series of articles I have covered the major “festivals” relating to the historical events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as well as a general defense of participating in the ebb and flow of the Church Calendar. But when you look at the calendar you will find that these redemptive events cover less than half the solar year. What has the Church historically done with the rest of the year? Well, the Church has designated the time generally to Ordinary Time. This does not mean that Jesus is not proclaimed Lord over this part of the calendar. Not at all. In relating Ordinary Time to the rest of the calendar the church has proclaimed Jesus lordship over all of the calendar and, thus, all time. Through the observance of Ordinary Time the church proclaims that Christ is Lord all of the time and not just when the obvious things happen.

In order for us to understand how we should celebrate Ordinary Time, we need to have a good biblical understanding of the ordinary. And so, it is advantageous for us to understand biblically what is going on all the time. To understand what is going on all the time, we must look at the biblical teaching of God’s providence. A refresher on God’s providence should be both refreshing and aid us in appreciating God in the ordinary.

GOD’S PROVIDENCE

What I write here is by no means comprehensive. This serves only as an introduction and a broad stroke picture of God’s providence. Our Standards, in the Shorter Catechism, define God’s works of providence as, “his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions” (WSC #11). In this definition—which I believe to be consonant with the Scriptures—there are two main aspects of God’s providence: preservation and governance. The work of preservation in providence speaks of the fact that God keeps in existence all things that he has created and maintains them so they will always act according to the way they were created. Hebrews 1.3 speaks of this when the author there says of the Son that he “upholds all things by the word of his power.” The word translated “to uphold” speaks about bearing something along or carrying something along. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is preserving all things. He is carrying them along so that continue to exist as they were created.

But this is not some formaldehyde-type preservation. This preservation has a purpose. The Son is upholding all things as he is bringing things to their appointed end. Paul alludes to all things being held together in Christ when he says in Colossians 1.17 that in Christ all things “consist” or “hold together.” There are plenty of other places in the Scriptures which speak directly or implicitly about God’s acting in preservation of creation. Psalm 104 speaks about the many daily actions of God in creation to preserve and sustain the life of creation. God waters the plants and feeds the animals. God causes vegetation to grow so that man may eat bread, drink wine, and use oil to make his face shine. God preserves the earth by causing the earth to continually experience day and night and season after season. And, when God decides that it is time for a living creature to die, he takes away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

The Levites who were leading the returned exiles in worship in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra proclaimed at the beginning of their recounting of redemptive history: “You are YHWH, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; ***and you preserve all of them***; and the host of heaven worships you” (Neh 9.6). The idea of the Hebrew word here is that God gives being to all things at all times. He causes things to be, thus, preserving them. God’s activity did not cease in

creation. Rather, God continues to work personally in order to maintain that which he has created.

The second aspect of God's providence is his governing of all things. God's work of providence in governing creation is his activity in overseeing and moving things toward his purposes for them. As I said above, God's preservation is not stagnant. He is preserving creation and moving it along until it reaches the purposes for which he created it. God is not hoping that things worked out like he planned. God is executing that which he has planned *ensuring* that things will fall out the way that he has decreed them. As Paul says in Ephesians 1.11, God works all things according to the counsel of his own will. From him, through him and to him are all things, to whom be glory both now and forever (Rom 11.36). God's governance of all things means that God is directing every thought, word and deed toward a specific end.

It is this biblical teaching that stands behind and provides foundation for all of our comfort in the midst of ordinary as well as difficult times. God's sovereignty and providence provide the assurance that life is not a meaningless conglomeration of "chance happenings." Life finds meaning and purpose in understanding God's providence. There is a goal and God is taking the world to that point. But God is not only doing this in what we would deem the "major" or "extraordinary" events in life. He is accomplishing his purposes in the ordinary, not so flashy times of life.

This understanding of God's providence stands over against what is really a popular view about God. The popular view of God is what has been historically called the deistic view of God. Deism has a god that created the world like a machine. There are iron-clad natural laws that run the universe. Every once-in-a-while God comes down to stir the pot with what we would call miracles. Other than these times of intervention into the world, everything is run by impersonal natural law. Although many Christians would not affirm the deist's position in theory, many times we affirm it in the way we think and act. But as Christians we are committed to the Scriptures. And the Scriptures plainly teaching that God is personally involved in the world at all times and in all circumstances. God does not intervene as if he is at a distance and must jump on the moving wagon in order to control the horses. We must affirm that there is no such thing as natural law as something that is outside of God himself preserving and governing the creation. When we speak of natural law (if we do so at all), we must think in terms of God's ordinary providence. God's ordinary providence is what God usually does in preserving and governing the universe. From these observable patterns in providence we can do scientific experiments, drive our cars, walk on a solid ground, eat food, etc. and understand that *ordinarily* these things are going to remain essentially the same. There are certain "cause and effect" relationships that God is pleased to continue in order for us to perform scientific experiments and make discoveries. God keeps chemicals stable so that gasoline explodes just the right way in our combustible engines and the ground that we walk on does not turn into quicksand or water. We can know by God's personal presence and consistent working in creation that some foods are nutritious and some are poisonous.

Just because God's providence has regular and predictable patterns we are not to assume or presume that these observable regularities are somehow so fixed that God cannot and does not work outside of these patterns. God can and does do things out of the ordinary at times. Usually people stay dead after they have once died. But God has been known on occasion to raise people from the dead. But this does not mean that God has to come in from a distance and break natural law in order to do this. In these miracles God is merely working in an extraordinary manner within the creation in which he is already present and working.

It is vital to the sanity of the Church and the individuals within the Church that a good and healthy understanding of God's providence be acknowledged. Each of us needs to realize that God is at work at every moment of every day in the most mundane things of life. Every breath you take is a direct action of God. You are not just a bunch of chemical processes working together. You are not a machine. Every bite of food you take that nourishes your body is a blessing from God. This is not a mere impersonal cause-and-effect. God is always at work whether we consciously aware of it or not.

THE CHURCH'S ORDINARY TIME

What does all this have to do with the church designating Ordinary Time in the Liturgical Year? It has much to do with it in every way. The blandness of the word *ordinary* is, well, not too exciting. All around we hear "break free from the ordinary." We always want extraordinary. But when everything is extraordinary, the extraordinary becomes ordinary. And so it goes. We seek the next biggest and best thrill ride.

Oddly enough the origins of the non-festive times of the Liturgical Year being called "Ordinary Time" were not found in these times being mundane. The term "ordinary" finds its roots (for these times of the season anyway) in the term ordinal, as in the ordinal numbers. The cardinal numbers are one, two, three, four, etc. Ordinal numbers are first, second, third, fourth, etc. Ordinary Time has its name because this is how the Lord's Days in between the festive times were identified. For example, the first Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, etc. Though not originally intended to convey the meaning which we normally (ordinarily!) ascribe to ordinary, there is a delicious ambiguity to it. This is a time in which there are no great redemptive events. These days are the day-to-day travels of Jesus with the disciples, eating, drinking, talking, praying, attending synagogue, etc. These are things that are not necessarily recorded for us in Scripture. (Remember, the historians were selective because all things done and said could not have been recorded; cf. John 21.25.) This is the church settling in after Pentecost moving from daily worship to what seems to be more of a fixed weekly worship. This, of course, does not mean that God has left them or that God has ceased working. One of our problems is thinking that if we are not seeing a bunch of things going on that God is not working. It means that the great events have occurred and now we must live in light of them in our day-to-day lives. We have crossed the Red Sea, now we must live in the wilderness eating the everyday manna ... without forgetting that we are eating manna because we crossed the Red Sea.

Our everyday, what we tend to think of as mundane, lives are dependent upon the great events, but we don't live in those history changing times all the time. The church, in many ways, has followed the sinful culture in these trends toward breaking out of the rhythms of life—the ordinary things—always seeking the great thrill ride.

Just as a side note, something that is interesting is that in our culture, while we are seeking to be extraordinary all the time we have become quite bland and monochrome. For instance, it used to be that certain types of clothes were worn to certain types of events. Certain colors used to reflect particular seasons. Our culture, breaking out the ordinary, dresses the same for almost everything. Casual is in. You ought to be able to wear what you want anywhere you want. "I want to break out of the mold!" But instead of breaking out the mold, we have become moldy with our lack of distinguishing between events with appropriate symbols.

The church has done the same thing in all of its new and exciting worship experiences. Throughout church history there have been parts of the liturgy that have been "ordinary." In

liturgical language these are the fixed parts of the liturgy. This is what you say and do week in and week out. To a Church which has lost its focus on God's providence, this becomes ritualistic and boring. We have the same order. We say many of the same prayers. We sing many of the same songs. We have the Supper every week. Many in the Church have decided that these ordinary elements of the worship service need to be spiced up a bit. And so, arrogant ministers, ignoring the wisdom of many ages, have assumed to themselves the role of shaking things up. But then they find themselves constantly on the horns of a dilemma. What are you going to do next week to top this week? What are we going to do next year to top this year? In situations like this where there is little or no understanding of how God works in the ordinary, there is a high turnover of membership. The next ice cream and candy shop that plants its store down the road promises bigger and better thrills. This church may serve coffee, but that church has a Starbucks! There I can have my latte and drink it too. There is no satisfaction, only cheap and very temporary gratification. And like many of the marriages that exist today in our culture, when I grow tired and bored with this hunk of flesh that is here for my gratification, I will move to the next hunk of flesh.

At the heart of this problem is an idolatry that refuses to give thanks to God. A thankful person and people are those who can be content with what God gives in the ordinary. Ingratitude blinds us to what God is doing in our everyday lives. The church, which should be the place where God is gratefully worshiped and a stable island in the midst of a tumultuous sea driven by desire, has become part of the problem in our culture.

Before we begin to point fingers at other particular churches, we might need to be warned about the dangers that threaten us. Over the past few of years we have gone through some extraordinary changes. Entire worldviews have been transformed, which is no easy or ordinary task. There have been changes in thinking, dramatic leaps in learning, radical changes in the way we worship, etc. So many things have been extraordinary for so long, are we ready for the ordinary? Are we ready to "settle in" as it were into this time and be content with a slower progress or a more ordinary pace? Many parts of our own liturgy are ordinary (in the liturgical sense). But much of that is relatively new to many of us. Even though we have been at it a while now, we must ever be on guard against the evils of formalism as well as informality. Neither one of these sisters has anything to commend her. Formalism ceases to be grateful and begins to see things as mechanical and magical. Informality ceases to be grateful and is always seeking the next greatest thrill-ride. A deep understanding of God's work in everyday life—God's ordinary providence—provides foundation for gratitude for the ordinary. With a deep appreciation of the ordinary comes all sorts of wonderful fruits which many in the culture and in the Church lack desperately. *Contentment*, that which many seek but never find through their seeking of thrills, is borne by the tree which has its roots running deeply in the soil of gratitude for God's ordinary providence. Hanging right next to the fruit of contentment is *joy*. When you are not always seeking the next biggest and better thrill, you have less of that disappointment that comes when you can't be gratified. The tree upon which this fruit hangs is *faith*. You are relying upon God's word even when you don't see God doing spectacular things. Might I say, you are relying on God's word in spite of the fact that you do not see God doing extraordinary things all the time. So, Ordinary Time is useful for the church in many ways. Appreciating the ordinary will increase our excitement in those festive and extraordinary times.

There are a couple of places within the Liturgical Year that are normally designated as Ordinary Time. The parameters of Ordinary Time occur between Epiphany and Lent and between Pentecost and Advent. There are what we might consider minor celebrations and commemorations that occur during this time. But there is no prevailing redemptive-historical

theme that unites the time.

Within Ordinary Time there are certain Lord's Days that are sometimes viewed as transitional between Ordinary Time and the major seasons.

Transfiguration

Transfiguration Sunday occurs the Sunday before the Lenten season begins. As the name suggests, this is a remembrance of our Lord's transfiguration before he went to Jerusalem to die. It is good, right and healthy that we should remember what occurred at what has come to be called the Mount of Transfiguration. There Jesus is borne witness to by the Father through the law and the prophets, represented by Moses and Elijah. He is the one of whom they spoke. He is the One in and through whom the promises they prophesied will be fulfilled. A foretaste of his coming glorification in the resurrection is demonstrated there at the Mount in that he is transfigured and shines like the Sun. The placement of the commemoration of this event just before Lent is very appropriate. Lenten season is a time of fasting and waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled. But we are reminded in the transfiguration that God's promises will be fulfilled just as he said they would.

Trinity

Trinity Sunday is the Sunday after Pentecost; transitioning into Ordinary Time after the Easter season. Some have criticized the Church's celebration of a Trinity Sunday because this is not an event but a doctrine. But the criticism should be seen as somewhat misplaced. No, the Trinity is not an "event" but is rather the God who is working historically to accomplish everything in redemption. We are reminded here that the work of redemption is not the accomplishment of any one member of the Godhead but the entire Godhead.

Christ the King

Christ the King Sunday occurs the Sunday before the first Sunday in Advent, transitioning from Ordinary Time to the Advent-Christmas season. This celebration is evident in its name. This is a focus on Jesus Christ as Lord of the world. The implications of this are as broad as the kingdom of God is. We as God's people in Christ are reminded once again that Jesus has won the victory, received the inheritance promised by the Father, and is Lord of the world. We are assured that all things will be put under his subjection. Jesus' lordship is also a constant reminder to the Church that *Jesus* is Lord and Caesar isn't. Our loyalty is to him alone and only to others as he has commanded. Jesus' as King and Lord of the world does not speak of political or military might. Jesus is the Prince of peace. And as we celebrate his lordship we are reminded that we war, but we do not war with the weapons of the flesh. We are peaceful warriors fighting with all our God-given might. We are to seek peace and pursuit it.

These are all things that we are to be doing on a day-by-day basis. These are our ordinary lives. Many times there is not much exciting going on in our lives. We get up every morning, breath like we do every day, eat like we do every day, go to work like we do all the time, etc., etc., etc. All of these repetitive, mundane activities are not times when God is taking a vacation. God is active preserving and governing all things; in many ways quietly and seemingly hidden. But we are to learn how to recognize the ordinary and give thanks to God for it. Let us learn, then, how to be grateful to God in the ordinary.