

“There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens”
(Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Another Christmas season has come and gone. Time again to put away the lights and to take down the tree; time to remove the wreaths and holly and to carry Santa and his sleigh back up to the attic; time to stow away the bows and wrapping paper and to carefully pack up the ornaments and Nativity set for another year. For as much work as we put into Christmas, and as much joy as we get out of it, it always seems to pass too quickly, leaving us feeling a bit let-down as we return to plain, old Ordinary Time.

Ordinary Time, however, is anything but ordinary. We call this, the longest of our liturgical seasons, “ordinary” from the ordinal numbers that we use to mark its passage (1st week in Ordinary Time, 2nd week, etc.). It begins the Monday following the Sunday after January 6th, the traditional date for Epiphany. In the new liturgical calendar, promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1969, Epiphany is celebrated on the Sunday after January 1st, and the Sunday after January 6th is the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the final day of the Christmas season. That is, except when the Sunday after January 1st and the Sunday after January 6th are the same Sunday, as happened this year. In that case, we celebrate Epiphany on that Sunday and the Baptism of the Lord is celebrated the next day, which means that Ordinary Time actually began on a Tuesday this year. Confused yet?

Don’t worry too much about the math, because it is the purpose of this season that makes it truly extraordinary. While festive seasons like Christmas and Easter focus on specific aspects of God’s plan for our salvation in Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection, Ordinary Time celebrates the entire saving mystery of Christ’s life as we rejoice for thirty-four weeks in his everyday actions, words, and ministry. The passage of the weeks of Ordinary Time recalls for us that God, who is beyond all time and is Lord of all time, entered into time to redeem all time. Christ didn’t just save us in spectacular and defining moments like the Resurrection; his entire life, and every moment in it, was redemptive. The quiet years he spent in Nazareth, working each day beside his foster father Joseph as a carpenter; the many weeks he spent traveling from town to town, not performing miracles or offering any profound teachings, but simply walking, talking, and eating with his friends; the regular hours he set aside for prayer, rest, and relaxation - it is all part of God’s redeeming plan, and it all leads us ever-forward toward the end of time, when all who spend their time in this life serving the Lord, in ways both extraordinary and ordinary, will be one in Christ.

Perhaps the meaning of Ordinary Time is summed up best by the blessing of the Paschal Candle, which, while lit for the first time each year at Easter, burns throughout the year at every baptism and funeral, reminding us that all time, including Ordinary Time, is the time for our salvation: “Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. All time belongs to him and all the ages. To him be glory and power through every age and forever. Amen.”