

A Season of Transition at Saint Ann's  
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October 25, 2009

Most people I know who have left New England for warmer shores collectively pine for one thing--seasons. 4 of them. I know that I am supposed to mark the rhythms of time according to liturgical seasons--Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent...and I normally do. But I have a confession to make. I LOVE fall. Really love it. Like, maybe even more than Christmas.

Clean powerful rains saturating layers of fallen leaves... on lawns, on roof tops, all over the road. It is quite messy and can make for hazardous driving. Raking dry fallen leaves into huge mounds and diving into them is great fun. Being instructed to re-rake the piles and put them into large leaf bags, not as much. As the sun comes up its lively rays triple the number of colors that hug the highway of my morning commute.

Some people have no use for fall. They consider it one of mother earth's gratuitous interludes, a place keeper between the real seasons of summer and winter. Some have strong negative feelings toward fall, because it signals impending frost and the struggles of winter. Some simply long for endless summer. But then there are the peepers.

If you have lived in New England for any significant period of time then you probably know that peepers are those dear earnest souls who devote vast amounts of time and energy trying to pin-point the exact moment of the most brilliant array of autumn leaves for a given location.

Did you know that in the fall, via an interactive Yankee foliage map, you can receive real time reports of what people see... when they go outside. Deep yellows and oranges, plum purples, scarlet reds, burnished bronzes and chocolaty brown. Whether it is the fruits of a road trip or the view of a backyard, leaf peepers are compelled to share with anyone and everyone, the beauty they behold. They stay alert, study the winds, measure the rain and review past patterns in preparation for the nature's present moves. The peak. The turning.

Part of the appeal of the turn and peak for peepers is the fleeting nature of fall's foliage. For peepers, paying close attention is paramount. Every turning is unique, it will never happen again in the same way. At the same time there is a sturdiness to this progression. Winter always comes. Long, short, bitter or mild, it comes.

While most of New England has now moved through foliage peak, CT blessedly enjoys autumn's brilliant palette generally into November, as maples, nut trees, beeches, birches, and sycamores reflect God's mind blowing creativity.

Fall is beautiful and messy and fleeting and hard work.

The community of Saint Ann's in Old Lyme is in a turning season. The departure of a rector with a very long tenure, the selection of a search committee and a commitment to work together to define the identity, needs and dreams of this community. Like our peepers many will embrace the work of transition. The marvelous mess. The thrill of being present as God leads the way through this process.

Others may not be as enthusiastic about the turn, the gazes of some fixed either fearfully forward dreading the unknown, or resolutely backward, a rear facing posture held still by longing, or disappointment, or grief. Or we may find ourselves feeling a little of each of these and sometimes all of them at once. Inevitably, conditions will get slippery. Previously veiled agendas will surface. Some legs of this journey might even qualify as hazardous. But in the midst of come what slippery crazy may, we can be fairly sure that at some point the season will complete its turn. St Ann's will have a new rector. And a new chapter in the life of this place will have begun.

Saint Ann's is actually in the midst of two transitions. Yesterday in Hartford a new Bishop was elected to serve the Diocese of CT beginning in April of 2010. Over the past year the state of CT has worked through a process quite similar to the one upon which we now embark. After the selection of committees, data collection through surveys and focus groups, applications, interviews, and visits around the diocese, an election was finally held and a decision was made. It was a beautiful process which I am sure we'll hear more about from our voting delegates soon.

And so we, in like fashion, in fear and trembling, begin to search.

We are aided in our discernment by the lessons of nature. But we of course have an equally authoritative resource, our Scriptures.

Today our Epistle reading is from the letter to the Hebrews. The author of this letter took his readers through a fairly heady discourse about priesthood, in particular the priesthood of Melchizedek. For an astute explication of those themes, may I direct you to the Saint Ann's Study Bible, John Talbott. (I can't even spell Melchizedek.)

Here is what I was able to extract from today's portion of the Hebrews explication of New Covenant priesthood. Melchizedek for Dummies, as it were. A primary function of priests in the Old Covenant was to intercede for the people of God, either to ask God to forgive their sins, or to help them in some way. The priests made sacrifices and prayed for the people. Someone had to stand in the gap between the people and their god. They used to have to keep getting new priests because, being human, old priests would die. Jesus became the high priest who did not die and so there is no need for another. And because of the cross, there is no longer any need for a priest to make sacrifices in order to secure for us God's listening ear.

So what are we doing looking for a priest? Or electing a bishop for that matter?

According to our tradition as expressed in the catechism at the back of the BCP the primary function of both of these orders is to act as a pointer, a neon sign saying look here. Look to Christ. Not to me. I am not he.

From the service of the ordination of a bishop:

*A bishop in God's holy Church is called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ's sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of Kings.*

It is the job of post resurrection clergy to point others to Christ, who is our true high priest. There are, to be sure, tasks and duties which such clergy must perform including preaching, teaching and pastoral care; and a search process is certainly designed to help find someone who possesses these skills, but today my challenge to every one of us is this... As we move through this process let us remember that Jesus is our true high priest. He intercedes for us with the father day and night. He died to save us and gives us eternal life. Let us keep at the front of our minds the truth that the primary function and call of any clergy person is to tell both the world and the gathered community this very good news.

It is a season for turning. A messy scary thrilling season of change. keep alert. Listen for God. The season will turn. The snowflakes will fall. but in the mean time be at peace. breathe in. breath out. and enjoy the dancing of the leaves.