

Assignment: Get to Know the Liturgical Year

by Anselm Beckwith

Music educators frequently find themselves using seasonal repertoires in their classes. The seasons under consideration may be the four seasons of the annual planetary cycle, built around the solstices and equinoxes, or they may be the two great seasons of the liturgical year (Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter). Sometimes attempts to program for these seasonal cycles, without understanding the cycles themselves or the connections among them, causes a clash of sensibilities, particularly, it seems, when it comes to planning winter and spring concerts. Following our country's current seasonal practice, for example, we often include Christmas carols in our winter concert, which almost always falls during the preparatory liturgical season of Advent, and that gets us in trouble with the liturgical purists who demand that Christmas music be reserved to the Christmas season (that is, from December 25 to the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord in January). Likewise, when our spring concert falls during Lent, we are solemnly warned by liturgists not to include Easter music (and especially not anything with the word "Alleluia") in the program.

All of this may leave some music educators wondering about seasons in general and about liturgical seasons in particular: Why are they so important? And where did they come from? And how, if at all, are they connected with the planetary cycle? In this article, I hope to answer some of those questions.

Three Sources

Our current liturgical year with its two great seasons and its long stretch of Ordinary Time has been crafted over the millennia from three sources: the rhythms of heat and cold, light and dark that are the result of our oddly shaped and off-center planet's wobbly course around the sun; the planting and harvest cycles of the Fertile Crescent (the Middle East) and Western Europe; and the religious histories of Judaism, the early Christian Church, and early Christendom in Europe.

The studies that have led to reform of the liturgical year in the twentieth century have, in effect, consisted in an uncovering of those sources, an examination of their significance, and an attempt through changes in the liturgical calendar to restore their long-buried significance. Only now, however, at the end of more than a century of study, are we beginning to recognize the important connections between planetary rhythms and harvest cycles and the structure of the liturgical year. Even recently published descriptions of the liturgical year move at a good clip through the cyclic elements of day, week, and year and the harvest cycle of the Fertile Crescent, preferring to spend time on a more detailed examination of the Jewish and Christian ritual calendars and their cycles of fasts, feasts, and festivals. The fact is, we are discovering, those liturgical cycles are actually much more attuned to the planetary seasons than we have thought in the past.

But a question lingers: Why bother very much about seasons, whether annual or liturgical, at all? At least in current Western culture, we gather in climate-controlled and artificially lit buildings where we need not worry about the outside temperature or, for that matter, whether it is day or night. We can have roses in midwinter, if we wish, and summer fruits are available year round. If we prefer winter's chill in the summer, there are ice-skating rinks and the temperature control knob on home air conditioning. So is there any point in celebrating an annual cycle that we no longer seem to attend to or about which we don't seem very aware in our daily existence? Why not adopt an approach to Sunday worship, and therefore to the liturgical repertoire that we teach in music education classes, that formerly marked "non-liturgical" churches like the Presbyterians or Methodists liturgy that ignored the traditional liturgical seasons and chose, instead, to focus on the changing scripture readings and music as the sources for whatever variety was needed?

In this article I hope to show why attentions to the seasons of Church and of the planet are necessary, as we say just before we begin the Eucharistic prayer, "for the praise and glory of God's name, for our good, and for the good of all God's church."

An Inherited Year

The place to begin my argument in favor of attention to the seasons is with a little history: The early Christian Church inherited from rabbinic Judaism¹ and adapted for its own use a liturgical year that was built around three major elements: a belief in God as creator, a seven-day week, and a cycle of harvest festivals.

Judaism at the time of Jesus and the early church affirmed a belief that the God of Israel, named YHWH², is the creator, the source of all that is and all that may be. Further, Jews believed that creation and its ebb and flow reflect the creator and that the planetary cycles are sacred, even sacramental, revealing the purposes of that creator. Hence they offered prayers for rain and good harvest or sang the psalms' images of God riding on the storm clouds and speaking in the thunder (see Psalms 77 and 104). God and nature, while separate in Jewish thought, are closely connected.

Jews, like some (but not all) of their neighbors, followed a seven-day week that they used to focus attention on the creator working through nature because their week centered on observance of shabbat (the Sabbath, Saturday), the one day each week when humans were expected to leave well enough alone and acknowledge that God is in charge. For twenty-four hours, from one sunset to the next (a way of counting the day that Jews borrowed from the Babylonians), Jews were to act as if they relied totally on God's providential care to run things, even if the nation were at war!

The annual Jewish liturgical calendar included a cycle of major feasts that developed initially from the harvest cycles of the Mideast, onto which they crafted two layers of historical remembrance: the Sinai covenant and the covenant with David, observances which drew attention to God not only as creator but also as the nation's savior/redeemer.

The original feasts were linked to three harvests. Pesach (Passover), the feast of unleavened bread, celebrated the return of the flocks to spring pastures and the beginning of the barley harvest in the month of Abib in the Jewish lunar calendar; this observance was later moved to the fourteenth day of Nisan (which falls in March or April in the current secular calendar). Shavuot (Feast of Weeks or Pentecost) fifty days after Pesach, fell during the grain harvest in late spring. Sukkoth (Tabernacles) celebrated the fruit harvest "at the turning of the year" in autumn (eventually set on the fifteenth day of Tishri in the Jewish calendar, September or October in the secular calendar.)

Sukkoth was originally considered the greatest of these three feasts; it followed the final ingathering of all the crops and was a great thanksgiving of celebration to YAHWEH. This was the celebration that the prophets had in mind when they described the great messianic feast that would take place "on that day" (see Isaiah 25:6-10).

Two layers were placed over these harvest celebrations. The first was the memorial of the Exodus that gave these festivals a historic cast. Not unlike the way Christians observe various aspects of the mystery of Jesus at particular times of the year, Jews in the centuries before Jesus came to associate certain aspects of the Exodus with particular harvest festivals: The escape from Egypt was linked to Pesach, for instance, the Sinai covenant was linked to Shavuot, and the memory of the desert wandering was associated with Sukkoth.

David's centralization of government and worship in Jerusalem added a final layer to the festivals: They became pilgrimage feasts, which were to be observed at the Temple with certain rituals, and their dates were standardized so that they could be observed at the same time by the whole nation.

Remembering Jesus

This was the structure of weekly and seasonal observances that the first Christians inherited. They had to adapt it to their own circumstances and beliefs, however, for very practical and well as theological reasons. The practical reasons were that Christians, considered heretics by other Jews, had been expelled from the

synagogues and cut off from regular Jewish ritual, and after the year 70 Christians as well as Jews could no longer participate in the rituals associated with Jerusalem and its Temple, for both had been destroyed by the Romans. The theological reason for changing the rituals, of course, had to do with the Christian need to incorporate belief in Jesus as the Christ into their vision of God as creator and redeemer.

The basic Christian adaptation of the Jewish liturgical year had three aspects: a theological shift from creation to redemption; a shift from shabbat to Sunday; and an adaptation of the pilgrimage feasts.

Christians maintained the Jewish belief in the one God as creator and redeemer, but Christian ritual quickly focused less on creation and more on the ways in which God was revealed in human history and especially in the Christ. This move drew attention away from creation as a kind of sacrament and focused it, instead, on the sacramentality of human activity "in Christ."

Christians adopted the Jewish seven-day week when they could (in some places they had to adjust to an eight-day or even a ten-day week). Pretty quickly, though, they moved away from shabbat as the chief religious day of the week. Because of its historical connections with the resurrection (Jesus rose at dawn on the first day of the week, that is, on Sunday) and Christian messianic expectations (the imminent return of Jesus was expected at dawn on the day of the week on which he rose from the dead), Christians chose to gather for worship on the first day of the week, which they came to call "the Lord's Day." Since this was a workday in the Roman Empire, they gathered before dawn or after dark to commemorate the central fact of their faith: the dying and rising of Jesus. The Lord's Day was not considered a day of rest to celebrate the creator, as shabbat was; Christians did not have a weekly celebration of the creator or of the creation.

Christians gradually adapted the three harvest/pilgrimage feasts to their own purposes and observances. Since Jesus died at or near Pesach, that time of year, known as the Christian Pasch, came to be celebrated as the heart of the Christian year. This worked out well, since many cultures considered the spring equinox to be the beginning of each annual cycle. Shavuot (Weeks, Pentecost) came to be associated with God's covenant with the church sealed, if you follow the chronology in Luke's Gospel, with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Sukkoth, the chief festival of the Jewish calendar, was dropped from the Christian cycle for two reasons, one practical and one theological. The practical one had to do with the expansion of the church into Europe: The fall harvest in Europe was minor at that time; the spring harvest was the time for major celebrations. The theological point was that Sukkoth anticipated the messianic banquet, and since Christians believed that they celebrated that banquet every Sunday, the feast was redundant.

The development of the Christian calendar out of the Jewish calendar includes many other complexities, such as the rise of the Christmas festivals or the development of the sanctoral cycle. But for now, just one other element has to be noted: All of the Jewish festival/pilgrimage feasts followed a period of fasting. That same pattern of fast and feast was carried over into Christianity, though it lost its ancient roots in the very practical facts that food was in short supply before a harvest, and what was available had to be shared among the community - excluding the very young, the sick, and the old, who were not required to fast.

What We're Missing

The patterns of prayer that we've inherited were shaped by our ancestors' attention to the planetary cycles of seedtime and harvest, winter and spring, light and darkness, as well as by the monthly lunar cycle. To a large extent our dominant culture and our worship ignore those cycles and their influence on human life and our awareness of the creator, and that ignorance has put us out of touch with ourselves, our communities, our planet, and the ways in which all of those are linked together in Christian ritual and faith. In order to restore our sense of the creator and of our place in the pattern of creation, and in order to firm up the links between our liturgical seasons and the turning of the year, we need to recover a sense of the importance of the ancient patterns of daily prayer, of the lunar and solar cycles, and of the connection between feast and fast.

The pattern of daily prayer that we have inherited from Judaism calls for personal or communal prayer three times a day: at dawn, at midday, and at sunset. Those were the times, of course, when you woke from sleep, stopped to eat, and prepared for sleep. Sleep is important in this package, because there was-and is-no guarantee that you will wake from sleep. In fact, sleep was once known as the "little death" because it gave you some sense of what the "big death" was all about. Each day, surprised by your own awaking, you were to ask God's blessing on the day before you had breakfast; in the evening, having survived the day, you gave God thanks before supper and asked for divine protection when you went to sleep. Midday prayer, of course, was a pause to ask for God's continued help for the work of the day as well as a pause for lunch.

This is not a bad pattern for personal prayer; it's also a good pattern for school prayer. Perhaps music educators could work with the religion teachers in a school to develop an appropriate pattern of sung prayer that could reflect this ancient tradition and, at the same time, teach children how to make this pattern part of their daily life.

Solar and Lunar Cycles have given us our current secular and liturgical calendars. Judaism is much more attuned to the lunar cycle, since that cycle is the basis for its calendar, but Christians should also become aware of our connection to the moon, especially in the scheduling of our central feast, the Paschal Triduum, which is still dated as the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. This usually means that Ash Wednesday and Pentecost are also celebrated on or near a full moon.

While the cycle of fasts and feasts associated with the mystery of the redemption is keyed to the lunar cycle, the set of feasts most closely associated with the other great Christian mystery the incarnation are linked to the solar cycle the earth's rotation around the sun. Just as Christians adopted and then remade the Jewish liturgical cycle which uses a lunar calendar, so they adopted and "Christianized" the Roman solar calendar.

The place to begin examining this Christianization of the seasons is with what was once New Year's Day: March 25, roughly the spring equinox. Christians came to celebrate this first day of the new solar year as the Feast of the Annunciation, the beginning of the Christian mystery in the angel's declaration to Mary. Nine months after March 25, of course, is December 25: the celebration of the incarnation at about the time of the winter solstice. Three months after March 25, on about June 24, the Roman Empire celebrated the summer solstice, and Christians celebrate the birth of John the Baptist, herald of the Messiah. Three months after the summer solstice comes the fall equinox, and on about that day, on September 21, Christians celebrate St. Matthew, whose Gospel appears first in the New Testament.

The changes of the seasons, in other words, are celebrated in the Christian calendar with feasts of three people who proclaimed the Incarnation: Mary, John, and Matthew. Music educators might work on appropriate ways to keep this "incarnational" focus throughout the year in their music programs as a way of teaching that we are called, like Mary, John, and Matthew, to be heralds of the Messiah at all times, not only at Christmas.

Fast precedes feast in the Jewish and Christian calendars, but since we tend to think of fasting as a private thing an act of penance for our sins or a way to lose the weight that we put on during the winter we have almost lost the original sense of fasting as an act of accountability to the community. The Talmud, the collection of Jewish law rooted in the commandments of the Bible, says that no one should lead community prayer who is not fasting. We need to recover particularly the Lenten fast as a reminder of our responsibility to the poor and the weak. We might also begin to think of other ways of promoting fasting before major festivals; this is something that is more the responsibility of the religious educators in a school or community, but the musical selections for school liturgies that music educators make might emphasize ideas of communal responsibility and the need to care for the poor.

We have gotten out of touch with our planet's cycles of change, of ebb and flow, and with the patterns of our liturgical year that connect us to the life of the planet as well as to our religious heritage. But a recovered understanding of the liturgical year can help to put us in touch once more with these essential patterns, and

music educators certainly can make a strong contribution to reinforcing those patterns of living and of prayer that reveal the God who is creator and incarnate redeemer.

Notes

1. "Rabbinic Judaism," or the Judaism of the rabbis, developed out of the ferment in the first century of the Common Era that also gave birth to the Christian movement. Rabbinic Judaism became the mainstream of Jewish thought; like some of the teachings of Jesus, it arose from the lay movement known as the Pharisees.
2. Jews hold that the proper name of God is unpronounceable, so it is frequently transliterated from Hebrew as four consonants without vowels: YHWH. Since this unpronounceable name is not to be spoken, it is frequently read by substituting the Hebrew word for "Lord," transliterated as "Adonai."

Dr. Anselm Beckwith is a retired liturgist and musician who lives in northern Virginia. This article first appeared in Catholic Music Educator 6:5 (March 1998).