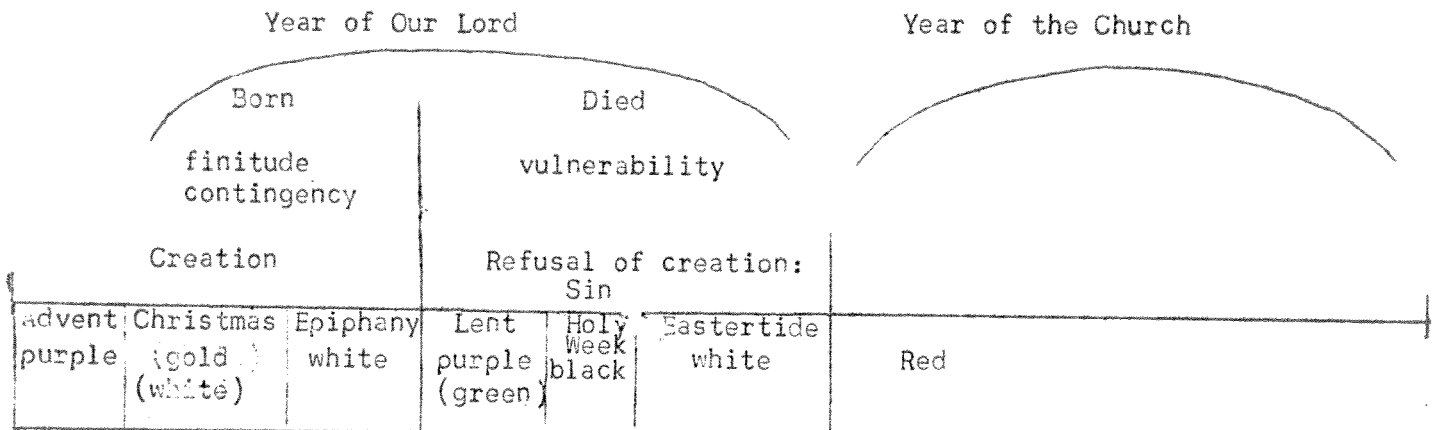


THE CHURCH YEAR AND CHRISTMASTIDE



The first six months is the Year of our Lord, and the second six months is the Year of our Lord's People or the Church or the People of God--Son of God, People of God. One of these days--who knows, it might even come out this morning--Gene Marshall will share with us his working out of the phase line of life--0 to 20, 20 to 40, 40 to 60, and 60 to 80. I've got an idea that in the sociological delineation of the New Religious Mode that's going to play a role. And I'm pretty persuaded that, however it's done, the Church Year will be recovered. Man cannot live without telling time. I sometimes wonder what most of us who are Protestants have been doing in neglecting the Church Year. It's not a matter of putting up the colors at a certain time, or even having scripture lessons that coincide. It's in your imagination. When I say you wonder what most of us who are Protestants have been doing, I leave out the Lutherans who have had more brains than most of us, and the Anglicans who have had more brains than most of us who are Protestants, who have kept this in their imagination and memory. When I say you wonder what we've been doing--we haven't avoided a Church year--only it hasn't been the Church Year. It's been some other year. We've let the Gospel slip away from us by telling time, ritual time, kairotic time, in some other fashion. And no doubt our day will do something to the way the Church has told time. If the emphasis of this group ever gets into history, one of the keys is the emphasis upon the red, or the pentacost. The other one has to do with one of the colors of it. Whenever I fool a little bit with this, I just sort of get shocked with the wonder and the glory of it.

The Year of our Lord is divided into two parts, as you know. One has to do with getting born, or with finitude or contingency, and the other one has to do with getting died, and with vulnerability. It's very interesting how spiritual death is tied into that. The first half has to do with our creation. The second has to do with our refusal of creation, or with sin. Everything about the Gospel is there, everything. And then each half as you know is really divided into three parts. In a moment I'll point to another kind of emphasis that if this group ever got into history would be called particular attention to. It's not that it hasn't been there, but it hasn't been used like some of the others. The first half is the period of Advent and Epiphany, and the second is the time of Lent and Eastertide. Advent as you know is purple and Epiphany is white. Lent is purple, although one time in the church they had great discussions whether or not it ought to be green. Some people hold it as green yet, and have tried to make a rhythm of Advent and Lent, and Epiphany and Trinitytide for the sixmonths of

of the church. No--our fathers weren't that irrational. And this of course is Christmastide. Traditionally, Christmas is white, as is Epiphany. We've changed Christmas to gold, so you have purple, gold, and white. In-between Lent and Easter is Holy Week. Holy Week has never found its way into the calendar like Christmastide has, although Good Friday is there. In practice the Church for many centuries has celebrated Holy Week, the climax of which is Good Friday, and the color of which then is black. So you have purple, gold, and white, and purple, black, and white.

It is very, very interesting to me to think about Epiphany and Eastertide in relationship to the periods which lead up to them in each case. The first is the time when we experience our finitude. It is the horribly sombre time of judgment, judgment relative to our contingency. The four Sundays of Advent, for instance, are the Sundays of the Bible, the Law, the Prophets, and then the last one is horribly sneaky. You and I are judged. And judgment here means shoved up against our contingency by the Bible, and by the Law (the Torah), by the Prophets, and then, the Second Coming. Interesting, isn't it? In the days we're in right now, Advent, you're not living before the coming of the King. You're living before the Second coming of the King. And oh the poetry in that is fantastic: "If Jesus were coming tonight, Would you be found ready for flight--Your lamps burning steady, Your robes pure and white--If Jesus were coming tonight?" That's a Gospel song so old, you never heard of it! And you know how they moralized that for us. "Would you want to be found...?" But you see that's the perversion of it. The Second Coming has always deeply excited me. You say that word to yourself, "Purple. Purple. This is the hour of purple." But not too long, and then, oh my! what a day! when our finitude is once and for all addressed, and in which you say, "To hell with the Second Coming. Whoever is going to come the next time, why he's already here. And I can't go anywhere, where the Second Comer won't meet the First Comer. No longer will he meet me. He'll meet the One within me, the One who came." But you don't know that yet, because Christmas hasn't come! You understand that? I remember Ed Hobbs one time preached a sermon in which he said that we never want to live in the season that we're in; we always want to live in the next one! You get that? I think he's right. We never like our present time to live in.

And then--oh ho--Epiphany is frightening also. It's almost as if you just had a little bit of breathing space. You romantics, you think this is great. No, no, no. This is the audacious time. This is the time when you walk on the water. Wait--I didn't put that right. When you don't have any choice, you've got to walk on the water. This is the time in which you stand up and say, "I say so." This is the time in which you walk around doing wonders--unstopping ears, loosening tongues, taking the scales from the eyes. That's Epiphany. That's the time of the King. One of those things that shocked me is that for many parts of the world, January 6th is really their Christmas. You bring gifts to the King. But they miss the point on that. It's you who are there as the King, receiving gifts. That's Epiphany. We had a discussion here not long ago about pride, pretentiousness. I'm not one to scorn the great virtue of humility, but Epiphany is the audacious time in which we're kings. We're kings. To me this is a frightening time.

I sometimes think of the Lutherans here. They started to back Lent up. They made Little Lent by stealing the last three Sundays out of Epiphany; and we begin to be crushed by our sins. I sometimes talk to myself, "Why, hell, the reason is they couldn't stand it. They couldn't stand the horrible pain of the audacious life. So they hurried up Epiphany and added what they call Little Lent onto the seven weeks of Lent." What a moment.

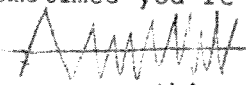
The first whole part is Life. Look at the Word: seeing our utter contingency, we'll stop and sing that man's song. And then comes the one who picks up our contingency, and makes us kings. But mark you. We're just the same old slobs we were in Advent, and in Epiphany we're kings. Then and only then are we prepared for Lent.

Those of you who like to go around and beat yourself over the head, you be sure you only do that on the other side of having walked on water or unstopped ears--done the wonders of life. You'll never know what Lent is, until you've walked the earth as God!

Thénobhold the 40 days, the 40 years. Very interesting here that it's death that makes you aware in Lent. And then that week in which you die. My God, what a week! And then, the Resurrected One. We've sentimentalized this so. We sort of hastily get over this when we're here. When we're back here, we want to get into it. We easily sentimentalize it. Here, the Resurrected One. I sometimes try to think, "Now what is the difference between the Kingship of Jesus"-- and mark you, we need to look at the ancient lectionary readings, which in Epiphany are about the great happenings in Jesus' life. I say to myself, "What's the difference between the Kingship of Jesus and the Resurrected Man?" Maybe walking on the water isn't right. Ah, it's right. You go through walls. To me this is the time in which you do the impossible. That's a way to get at it. What does it mean, the Resurrected Man?

I didn't begin talking about the Church Year for that. I did it this Christmas--I did it for myself---oh, no, no--I don't want to put it that way. Are you like I am? Every Christmas--how ridiculous being a clergyman is, you know, when you have to get a Christmas sermon. We've ruined our clergy. I have to tell myself a story every Christmas--being reared a lowly Methodist, the Church Year has never caught my being, caught my mind. I live out of this calendar, but it's only here (in the mind) not down here (heart). I've yearned at times...but anyway. Each Christmas I have to tell myself a Christmas story--not to tell somebody else, but so that I can live by it, you know at Christmas. I wonder what yours is. I won't tell you mine in detail, but you can probably guess what it is.

Here's the life urge (the first half of the Year of our Lord). You understand that? And here's the death urge (the second half). I won't go into detail, but I've got a sneaking idea about something.

The other day I just about got my fist through that bit of tissue paper before which I have the death urge. But you see, how ridiculous. I'm not there! I'm in Advent. "I'm going to have myself a great Easter," I say to myself! The shock was, when I got to thinking about this, that I could hardly wait until Easter because that's dealing with my death urge. But then it dawned on me what telling kairotic time was. Sometimes you're up and sometimes you're down, and sometimes, you know, you're just going all over the damn place. And a model for telling time just goes like this:  So it says, "Joe, so you're filled with the death urge, are you?" Well, it says something like, "Shit, Joe!" That's what it says. It says, "You're here (Born) right now." And I say, "I am not." And it says, "Yes, you are." And I say, "Who says so?" And then, of course, he discloses his name. It's that Jesus says, "Joe, your petty little life urges and death urges--they're quite beside the point. When I say you are to have the life urge, you get busy and have the life urge. And when I say it's now time for the death urge, you can wallow in the death urge." It's fantastic to me.

So it's sort of like this: this year I'm not ready for Christmas, but I'm getting Christmas anyway. That's what it says. And then it says to me, "You make a decision that this is where you are. You take care of your finitude right now, and then a little later we'll let you take care of your sin. You take care of the thrust for life in you now. A little later we'll deal with thanatos." You want to know what sanity is? That.

What's your Christmas story this year? Just anybody. Make it up right now. To yourself--don't let any of the rest of us in on it, just tell it.