

Three reflections from Sarah Nolan, Intern Fall 2013 to Spring 2014

Localize the Liturgy!

By Sarah Nolan

Every week, our little house church in Ventura County, CA practices a ritual ceremony, along with millions across the globe, that calls us to touch, taste, smell, see and “re-member” the life and work of a man who equated his body with bread and his blood with wine. Along with these central elements, other powerful symbols such as candles, water, flowers and oils make up these rituals that provide texture and life to the liturgy.

As we participate in liturgy, we are engaging in a cycle of reconnection and re-remembrance that draws us closer to God and ourselves, while at the same time pushing us out into the world and towards our neighbor. The ceremonial elements serve as reminders of and guides to this ongoing journey deeper into the divine and into the created cosmos. It is with this journey in mind that we must ask ourselves about what these ritual elements say about our how we relate to the world and, in turn, to God. Episcopal priest Julie Morris stresses the importance of knowing that the “Gifts of Creation” we bring to the altar represent an offering to God.

THE
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FARM
PROJECT



Recently our Abundant Table community decided to expand our understanding of reconciliation with the earth to go beyond sustainable agriculture in order to include reconciling the land and the people that are connected to the bread, wine and other symbols we use in liturgy. This past winter we planted our first small batch of wheat, just to explore what could be possible. Our journey to “localize the liturgy” is evolving into the Abundant Table’s “Homegrown Communion” or “Ground to Altar” challenge to the entire Episcopal Church and other worshipping

communities across the country. We are inviting congregations to find out the origins of the elements they use for their worship: where they came from, how they were made, who was part of the process.

Recognizing that the journey plays an important and essential role in the process of transformation, we are then asking those who accept the challenge to send us their stories of what they learned and how they attempted to “localize their liturgy.” Learning about where the most cherished elements of our religious practices come from is an act of unveiling the brokenness—in the food system, our worship, and our communities—so that we can move towards healing and wholeness, which is the power of the Eucharist. If we have no real connection with the gifts of our offering and elements of our liturgy, not only is there a brokenness in our food system, but a major disconnect in our worship.

You too, are invited to join us. Grow the ingredients for your communion bread and wine, learning about the land, the labor, the process, the people and the stories that become your gifts of bread and wine. Partnerships with other parishes are encouraged. Consider growing other items such as altar flowers and olives for holy oils. Consider using water from local rivers, streams, lakes or oceans for your baptismal fonts and holy water stoups. Let us know your stories. Share with us your visions. We want to lament, celebrate and conspire with one another as we continue our journey deeper into the divine and the created cosmos. E-mail your stories about localizing your liturgies to homegrowncommunion@theabundanttable.org and we'll add them to our collection!



(Right: "Tongues of Flame" Loquat-Mango Pie made for Pentecost liturgy at the ATFP.)

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To Earth You Shall Return...

by Sarah Nolan

The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life... It is impossible to contemplate the life of the soil for very long without seeing it as analogous to the life of the spirit. No less than the faithful of religion is the good farmer mindful of the persistence of life through death, the passage of energy through changing forms.

-- Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*

Remember that you are earth and to earth you shall return. These words may seem out of place liturgically as we enter into this new year of the Christian calendar marked by the season

of Advent. It is a phrase typically heard during Lent, yet it is through this reminder that we are given a gift--the gift of darkness, of the earth.

The poet Mary Oliver writes, "Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift." During the season of Advent we intentionally recognize the presence of darkness. However, we often spend more time focusing on the light that blooms out of the darkness, such that we fail to understand the gift of the darkness.

As a constantly failing farmer, I am ever more aware of the color of the earth upon which we walk and in which we plant our seeds. Last week the Abundant Table's farmer, Reyna, and I spent quite a bit of our weekly planning meeting putting our hands in the soil and inspecting its health. Healthy soil is dark: earth that is filled with micro-organisms from plants and other matter living and "dead" (think compost). It is in the darkness of this mini-ecosystem that life is forming, waiting to break forth.



In many ways, we could imagine that earth and darkness serve as the womb of God. A woman's womb is another mini-ecosystem that has the potential to foster life in the depth of darkness. In fact, the darkness is teeming with life that is giving more life. *This is the power of Advent: only in the darkness does the potential for light exist.*

Let us spend this Advent season welcoming the mystery of the darkness that holds the paradox in which the brokenness and death of our world turn into light and life. Let us remember the seed that is growing beneath rich dark soil, the human life that is emerging from the dark waters of the womb. Let us *remember that we are earth*, and actively await the coming of Immanuel (God with Us), who brings hope to the suffering of the earth because our Immanuel also grows from the dark soils of the earth and emerges from the dark waters of the womb.

Reflections on the Liturgical Calendar

by Sarah Nolan

On the Solstice I joined BCM and friends for an evening of pause and reflection upon the turning of the seasons and the welcoming of winter. Ched reminded us of the importance of developing an attunement with the natural seasons (as opposed to consumer or cultural timelines). The Equinoxes and Solstices are gifts that invite us to take the time to connect with the created cosmos, and to connect with our own journeys and the different seasons we experience personally.

The same kind of alternative rhythm is found in the Christian Liturgical Calendar. Walking closely with the natural seasons, the Liturgical calendar also challenges us to go deeper into the cycles of life, and creates space for pause and attention. I am neither an expert in the church calendar, nor a purist in its practice, but am still significantly formed and guided by its seasons that call us communally and individually to both reflection and action.



For the past week, I have been pondering the relation between Advent and Christmas. I prefer Advent and Lent to Christmas and Easter, for example. I wonder whether this might have something to do with the fact that we humans live a majority of our lives in expectation (Advent) and suffering (Lent). We are constantly anticipating (and craving) the coming of the Divine to break into our hurting world. We spend more time talking about the coming of the Risen Christ or the Beloved Community rather than experiencing it. I think this may be why the Christmas and Easter seasons are so short. They serve as reminders that God's radical love does break into our lives and communities... but often in momentary and unexpected ways.

God comes to us as the infant of a family suffering from displacement and forced migration. The great message of hope and deliverance is given to the nomadic (and likely dirty and

exhausted) shepherds. It is a young girl with a complicated story who carries the salvation of the world in her womb.

A few years ago, a dear friend shared with me the chorus to Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem":

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

We live in a broken world, which is why we need Advent and Lent. However, it is in these cracks in the system, the places of both the creative and the mundane resistance, in which Christmas resides.



This Christmas season (liturgical, consumer), I am challenged to spend time recognizing and celebrating these "cracks" in order to see the light that is breaking in. We may never know what impact our daily work holds, the power of perseverance in the midst of adversity, or the moment when we will recognize God's love in action. But when we do catch a glimpse, let us remember to let the light in and savor it. (*Left: Sarah and Elaine at the Advent Women's Retreat in Laguna Beach.*)