

Signs and Seasons of Spiritual Life

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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“During all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.” (Genesis 8:22)

“Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing [Jesus] asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, ‘When it is evening you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red”; and in the morning, “It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.” Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’” (Matthew 16:1-4)

As we make the transition from one season to another in our natural lives we have an opportunity to reflect on the changes of season that we experience in our spiritual lives. One big difference between our natural and spiritual seasons, of course, is that the world outside changes in more or less predictable patterns through the course of a year, whereas our spiritual seasons can change abruptly *without* following any predictable pattern. Still, knowing about them and what may cause them can help us to be prepared, and manage the changes with confidence and hope.

The first thing to know is that there WILL be spiritual changes in our lives, and while they won't all be positive they will all be useful if we think positively about them.

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We sometimes call these *alternations of state*, and the thing is, try as we might we can't avoid them! We are GOING to have these vacillating periods of “seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter,” and yes, “days and nights” throughout our lives. One moment we're going to feel the warmth of the Lord's love in our lives, and another we're NOT. One day we're going to see everything clearly as in bright sunshine, and the next day we're going to be completely in the dark. Or it may be that the variations affect us in different AREAS of our lives, one way in our jobs and another in our relationships, one way intellectually, another emotionally, and so on. The point is not to be discouraged when we vacillate; it's all part of the process of sorting ourselves out in preparation for eternal life. Nor should we allow ourselves to be discouraged when we see OTHER people, especially people we love, bouncing back and forth between negative and affirmative states. It's all part of the process.

One of the uses of darkness, for example, is contrast and comparison. If everything were bright and uniform, we would lose all our perspective and effectively go blind. One of the uses of cold is to provide a period of dormancy and consolidation after a time of growth. Imperfections, doubts and temptations also remind us of our inherent limitations and selfish natures, and so can lead us to appreciate the blessings we receive from the Lord when we are more consciously conjoined with Him. In any case the Lord always provides *compensations* during the cold and dark times, even as He protects us from too much spiritual intensity as we grow; for example, many

trees lose their leaves for winter allowing *more light* to shine through in the cold months, whereas the leaves in *summer* provide a refuge of shade from the heat of the sun. There are illustrations like this throughout the world of nature.

But let's look for a moment at what's behind these seasonal and sometimes daily changes. The simple fact of the matter is that we are all a mix of good and evil, with some awareness of the truth and an awful lot of ignorance mixed with misunderstanding, or just plain falsity. Whereas we are born with a "fallen" nature, completely absorbed in the things of self and the world, the Lord also provides us with good loves and true ideas that we begin to receive as if they were our own *right from birth*. In some ways, as surprising as it may seem, these goods and truths may be compatible with the evils and falsities, serving as means to bridge from one to the other. For example, a love of reward can motivate us to do something genuinely good, and even though it arises from a love of self it serves the use of setting us on the right path. The "trick" is to cross that bridge from self-interest to a love of service for its own sake, and that takes time.

Meanwhile, as many of you heard last Sunday, we are constantly under the influence of spirits and angels who reinforce and add to the loves and ideas we already "own." Bad or evil spirits play on our selfish desires and on our memories of dumb, wrong or embarrassing things we have done in the past, calling our attention to them and if possible making us *continue* to feel bad about them in spite of our best efforts to put them aside. Good spirits and angels, however, play on our happy memories and good intentions, doing their best to reinforce these and encourage us to build on them. And of course, being in the middle of all this we are pulled, as if in a tug-of-war, first one way and then the other – back and forth, or as if on a see-saw, up and down. We could even compare it to a football, soccer, field hockey or basketball game, with the whole team running first one way and then the other until somebody scores, which would correspond to the actual doing of some good or evil thing, the ball being the issue under consideration. (Maybe you could use this as your excuse for watching sports on TV: think of it as a real-time lesson about your own regeneration! ...but no, sorry, that doesn't count as going to church.)

As you think about it, though, be sure to notice that the ball is with either one team or the other, not both at once. There are two teams and only one ball. So as we heard in the third lesson today it is not possible for us to actually be in good and evil (or truth and falsity) at the same time. Rather what happens is that when good states prevail the selfish nature recedes or is suppressed, and when selfish states prevail the good recedes so that we're not conscious of it, we don't feel it as our own, and so we lose our sense of balance, freedom and control. In that case the only way we can regain control is to get help from outside of ourselves, either from other *people* who can inform and encourage us, or from the Lord Himself in the love and wisdom of His Word. But still, we have to put ourselves in a position to receive those outside influences: we have to *ask* for help and choose the right environments to get it, even when we don't feel like it.

Turning back now to our second lesson this morning recall how aggressively the Lord addressed the Pharisees and Sadducees about "the signs of the times." They approached Him in their usual negativity and asked Him for a sign – presumably a sign of His authority – from heaven, clearly referring to the heavens of this natural world, in other words, the sky – as if "a bolt out of the blue" would satisfy them. But in response the Lord cited the old adage, loosely translated "red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in morning, sailors take warning," saying they could predict the weather but they couldn't see what was going on in front of their own eyes in relation to His exposition of the Word. Then He went on to call them all hypocrites for abusing the Word.

Here we have another powerful lesson about the signs and seasons of spiritual life. It's a given, of course, that the Pharisees and Sadducees represent the evils of our own lives, that is, the inclinations we all have to challenge the Lord in His Word rather than doing as He teaches. But the symbolism here is quite specific, as the members of these two sects were both completely dedicated to the outward forms and appearances of religion apart from the internal issues involved, and their interest in these things was for the sake of their own authority over others – which they achieved by their intellectual skill. Therefore the Lord referred to the evening and morning sky, that is, states of waning and growing *light*. The concept of a *sign*, also, as distinct from a miracle, is that a sign speaks to the understanding, confirming some truth, but a miracle speaks to the will, moving a person to gratitude and love. But the Pharisees didn't really want proof of the Lord's authority; it was as He also told them in John's Gospel,

“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and they are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39).

So the Lord referred them to the “sign” of the prophet, Jonah, who after being miraculously rescued from death at sea finally went and preached as he was told to the people of Nineveh but then sat under a big plant and mourned when they repented because he still hated those people.

And then the Lord just walked away. “He left them and departed” (Matt. 16:4). The appearance, surely, is that the Lord abandoned them, but the truth is that *they* had rejected *Him*.

The lesson for us in all this takes us to the real heart of the issues of spiritual awareness. It is one thing to know the truth, and quite another to let it guide our lives. It is one thing to recognize our spiritual states and quite another to do something about them.

When it is winter in the natural world there's not much we can do about it except cope: stay inside, wear warmer clothes, turn up the heat, shovel the snow, and so on. We need time and money to get away from it. But when it's winter in our spiritual lives we have a choice, and it costs us nothing but our pride. The Lord can turn our winter into spring and summer easily if we will let the warmth of His love affect us – either through His Word or through the ministry of others whom He gives us for their fulfillment as well as ours.

When night falls in our understanding we don't have to just sit there in the dark, complaining about it; we can light a lamp, figuratively speaking, but even better, we can let the Lord turn that darkness into DAY simply by getting up and doing something useful, something good for someone else. And why does this work? – Because the light of day, that is, the light of truth, can only be received in the good of life, good that we can choose to do, again, even if we don't initially feel like doing it.

As it says in the book of Ecclesiastes, “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck what is planted... a time weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones,” etc. (Eccl. 3:1-8). Every season does have its purpose, if only for contrast, but the darkness does not overcome the light, rather, the Lord's light shines in the darkness (John 1:5), and we can receive that light any time we turn our hearts to good.

Nobody should ever feel guilty or ashamed about vacillating between day and night, between cold and heat, between summer and winter states. The Lord permits these vacillations to preserve our sense of identity, so that we can observe ourselves changing, however fitfully, and know that we are not being forced, not being *coerced* one way or the other, but submitting *ourselves* to the influences of our choice. So we read,

“...it is according to the laws of order that no one ought to be persuaded about truth in a moment, that is to say, that truth should be so confirmed in a moment as to leave no doubt whatever about it; because the truth which is so impressed becomes persuasive truth, and is devoid of any extension, and also of any yielding quality. Such truth is represented in the other life as hard, and as such that it does not admit good into it so as to become applicable. Hence it is that as soon as in the other life any truth is presented before good spirits by a manifest experience, there is soon afterward presented something opposite which causes doubt. *In this way it is given them to think about it, and to consider whether it be so, and to collect reasons, and thus to bring that truth into their minds rationally.* By this there is effected an extension in the spiritual sight in respect to that truth, even to its opposites; and thence it sees and perceives in the understanding all the quality of the truth, and thence can admit influx from heaven according to the states of the objects, for truths receive various forms according to the circumstances” (AC 7298:2).

Surprisingly, it is even *according to order* that “evil spirits are adjoined to people” (HH 293) and that angels also “protect what is false and evil in people” (AC 761). Why? – Because the Lord knows that of ourselves we are nothing BUT evil and so He uses even these extraordinary ways to preserve our sense of self. Still, that’s only half the story, only ONE SIDE of the great tug-of-war. For those same angels balance the influence of the evil spirits and provide their own good loves and thoughts as options for us as we face each day – almost as the players on an ethical team work WITH the players on the opposing team, playing by the rules even though they are most certainly playing to win.

The world of our spiritual lives is not one of our own making any more than is the world of our natural lives. But it IS a world that we can choose *and make our own* no matter what the weather is like outside. Let’s be mindful, therefore, of how we choose.

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Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis* 8:13-22
 Children’s talk on the Seasons of Life

Matthew 16:1-4 & 24:32-35
Arcana Caelestia #933: selections