

Ordinary Time

Jamaica Plain, January 12, 2003, Rev. Terry Burke

We seem to have moved from Christmas time and New Year's to simply – winter. The Christmas shopping sales are now post holiday sales. Almost all the lights are down from the homes on Metropolitan Avenue, near where I live. Thanks to the organizing efforts of Bob LaVallee, the New Hampshire trees are out of the sanctuary, and the Creche sets have been put away. All of our special services with candles and fire (Christmas Eve, burning of grudges, Epiphany) are over, and we're back with the regular Sunday service. Many people I talk to feel exhausted, as if many activities and responsibilities piled up like the snow over the holidays.

This is a time in the church year known as Ordinary Time –the time between big holidays, the time after Christmas and Epiphany in this case. The purple of Advent and the red of Christmas are replaced by the green of Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time is thought of as especially the time of the church, so it is appropriate that we should have our semi-annual meeting today.

It is in this Ordinary Time that our executive branch is gearing up for war. My colleague Carl Scovel recently heard Representative Barney Frank speak on the situation. Frank pointed out that war with Iraq will cost the United States hundreds of millions of dollars; at the same time President Bush has proposed a \$675 million tax cut. How defeating the evil Saddam Hussein will protect us from the threat of terrorism is not clear.

Another Unitarian Universalist colleague wrote in his newsletter that letting Saddam off the hook was the equivalent of appeasing Hitler at Munich in 1938, where Czechoslovakia was given to the Germans for the sake of peace. However, the analogy more appropriately would be, if in 1938, France and England decided to invade Nazi

Germany to topple Hitler. Whether you oppose or support a war against Iraq, I urge you to call the White House line at 202-456-1111 and let your thoughts be known.

In the midst of Ordinary Time, it helps our perspective to look at extraordinary times. Today in our readings we heard from two remarkable individuals of great moral courage. Victor Penzer and Nadia Mandelstam lived through the two greatest human disasters of last century, the Nazi Holocaust and the Soviet terror and Gulag.

The late Dr. Victor Penzer, after being involved with the resistance, survived the Holocaust in the death camp of Auschwitz. A Polish guard, at the risk of his own life, stole medicine for Dr. Penzer when he was dying of typhus. He preached at our church in 1985, on the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War Two. Dr. Penzer's message: "Willful extinguishing of human life is always murder, even if ordered by whatever authorities."

The other witness, Nadia Mandelstam, writes in her autobiographical work *Hope Abandoned*, (the book title is a pun on her name, which means hope in Russian) how she barely survived Stalin's terror and camps which destroyed her husband, the great poet Osip Mandelstam. Nadia Mandelstam memorized many of her husband's poems, and remembered them for decades so that they would survive. She writes of the tens of millions sent to camps as "politicals", or who were sent to camps because of their loved ones, or who never knew what happened to a partner who was arrested. Mandelstam writes, "No one who could see all these would ever want to kill."

Nadia Mandelstam and Victor Penzer, two witnesses to unspeakable human evil, have same response – DO NOT KILL!

For this Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Revised Common Lectionary of biblical texts, used by many mainline Protestants and Catholics, concerns the baptism of Jesus. Today's lesson from the first chapter of Mark describes the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan:

"And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased." In Mark's version of this story, it is Jesus who sees the Spirit descend upon him like a dove, and he is the one who hears the voice of God. It is an interior, spiritual event. I thought of this passage as I walked this Friday from the subway through the caverns of Downtown Crossing. Pigeons would swoop down within a few inches of the heads of passersby, like the dove of the Spirit. This Ordinary time, may we realize that the Spirit descends upon all, and that all people are children of God.

Author Scott Peck gives a good example of the sense that all people are children of God in an ancient story that he retells in his book, *The Different Drum*. A handful of elderly monks lived in a monastery in the middle of the woods. No one had joined their order in many years. The people in the nearby town had even forgotten that the monastery still existed. The monks were sad at the thought of the death of their community, but they could think of no solution.

One day a local rabbi was walking in the woods. The abbot took advantage of this opportunity to ask the rabbi his advice on their situation.

The rabbi said, "People seem to have lost faith. I don't have any advice for you. Still, I know this: one of your community members is the Messiah."

The abbot thanked the rabbi and told the brothers of the visitor's message. They all agreed that it was crazy. Which of them could be the Messiah? But then in their private moments they wondered? What if that old so-and-so was really the Messiah? And they started treating one another with newfound kindness and respect.

Families from the town occasionally picnicked in the woods. The aura of gentleness and good will from the monastery now drew them to it. Then, people from the town would go

and talk to the monks about spiritual matters. Eventually, some young men decided to join the monks' common life. After a time, the monastery was once more a thriving spiritual center.

On our winter pilgrimage, living together as church in Ordinary Time, may we treat one another as holy children of God. And may we remember the word of the rabbis in the Talmud, "When you kill a person, a whole world dies."