

Spending Our Time: An Examination of Our Academic Calendar
by Amy Julia Becker, MDiv middler

I spend my time studying God. That statement may seem normal to everyone reading this journal, but to the outside world, those of us in Theological Seminaries are at worst irrelevant and often merely a curiosity. Many of us at PTS forget how strange our lives appear. We share a common vocabulary that includes words like “Ords,” “Barth,” and “exegesis.” For that matter, we share words that hold little currency beyond our campus, words like faith, Jesus, and resurrection. And for those not preparing for ministry (that is, for the majority of the world around us), the fact that we would become so familiar with the history of the Church, the text of the Bible, and the theological underpinnings of the Christian faith seems odd, if not outright bizarre.

The strange nature of what we do is literally brought home to me. I do not live with fellow Seminarians. I live on a boarding school campus, in a dormitory. My husband is in charge of thirty boys aged fifteen to seventeen. Sometimes they, or their parents, or my husband’s colleagues, ask me outright. Other times I can imagine the question hiding behind their wrinkled brow: “You spend your time studying God?”

“Yes,” I reply with a smile. Their bemused or puzzled reactions sometimes betray further questions that they dare not speak out loud: “Couldn’t you be doing something else? Isn’t that a waste of time?” But I have chosen, gladly, to invest the limited number of minutes, hours, months, and years allotted to me in learning about God, in preparation for ministry. And, as with my credit card statement, the way I spend my time reflects the things I value most. I value learning, so I go to school and read lots of books. I value people, so I live with high school students and take walks with friends and have a date night with my husband. I don’t particularly

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value entertainment, so our television only flickers to life for an hour a week. Time, much like money, is a reflection of who I am.

Similarly, institutional time is a reflection, or ought to be, of who we are as a community. Here at the Seminary we are not merely students in school. Rather, we are students receiving a Theological Education in an institution with a stated mission. That mission statement begins, “Princeton Theological Seminary prepares men and women to serve Jesus Christ.” The statement concludes, “To these ends, the Seminary provides a residential community of worship and learning where a sense of calling is tested and defined, where Scripture and the Christian tradition are appropriated critically, where faith and intellect mature and life-long friendships begin, and where habits of discipleship are so nourished that members of the community may learn to proclaim with conviction, courage, wisdom, and love the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord.” From this mission statement it is clear that we value service, worship, Scripture and tradition, friendship, discipleship, and leadership. The way we spend our time as members of an academic community ought to reflect those values.

We are called to live with God in time. This life with God in time begins with the crucial recognition that we are not God. We are not eternal. We did not create time. We cannot control time. In fact, we are mortals with grave limitations on our time. Jesus underscores this point when he reminds us, “And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?” (Luke 12:25-26). Once we recognize the truth that we are limited creatures living within the bounds of time, life with God in time involves allowing that time to come under God’s rule. We conform our lives in time to God’s values and priorities rather than to our own desires for instant gratification and easy schedules. This broad idea—that we are called to live with God in time—

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applies to every level of our lives, both as individuals and as a community. It affects our minutes, hours, days, weeks, and years.

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At PTS, we “spend” time worshiping God every day. Chapel, this twenty-five minute insertion (and it was an insertion, beginning in 1930¹) into the academic day affects the timing of every class. In contrast to other academic communities, we are offered a slice of time each day to stop taking notes and offer praise. This practice accords well with the stated values and purposes of our mission. Despite this willingness to interrupt the class schedule with time for worship, our annual calendar does not reflect our status as a particularly Christian institution with a particular mission. Instead, our yearly calendar asks us to conform ourselves to the pattern of a secular academic community.

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Our community at PTS should be bound to the life of the Church, and the Church has long diverged from the rest of society in its understanding of time. In the increasingly secular Western world, the New Year begins with parties and kisses and champagne on January 1st; for the Christian Church, it begins with Advent four weeks before Christmas. Advent has marked the beginning of the Church Year since the 8th century², and it is a time of mourning and hope. It looks back with joy to the coming of Christ 2000 years ago, and it looks ahead with hope that Jesus will come again to right that which is wrong with the world. Outside the Church, the Advent season is not acknowledged. Rather, early December marks the beginning of winter sports, the ideal time to make charitable contributions, the time to start shopping. As Edward Horn writes, “God chose the time for time and eternity to meet, and time can never be the same again. The liturgy of the Christian church recognizes this fact and seeks to relate all time to the

¹ Catalogues of the Officers and Students of the Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, 1930-1931.

² Edward T. Horn III, *The Christian Year* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 54.

redemptive purposes of God.”³ While the Gregorian calendar begins with January 1st, and moves forward in twelve roughly equal parts, the Church Year proceeds from Advent to tell the Christian story. Our celebration of Christmas proclaims that Christ has come into the world; at Easter, we announce Christ’s death and resurrection; and on Pentecost, we celebrate God’s gift of the Holy Spirit.

The PTS calendar reflects a commitment to academic norms, graduation dates, and American traditions. In fact, the PTS calendar looks remarkably similar to that of the secular boarding school where I live. In both places, the first semester runs on an impractical schedule. It stretches out, halting and skidding through the late fall and early winter like a car stuck in rush-hour traffic. Both our boarding school and PTS celebrate Thanksgiving with a very long weekend, and we scatter from both campuses for the weeks preceding and following Christmas. It is tempting to think that at the Seminary, we take so much time “off” at Christmas because we truly are committed to celebrating the Incarnation of Christ. Yet the conformity of our calendar to those other academic institutions (not to mention the culture at large) around us, suggests that the primary motivation for “Christmas vacation” arises as much from the way American culture treats the end of December as from any ecclesial concerns. We do not, of course, resume classes as soon as we have celebrated Christmas. Along with the rest of the country, we do not begin studying again until we have celebrated the New Year.

Second semester in secular institutions and at PTS also looks largely the same. Winter is prematurely interrupted by the suspension of classes in March. In both PTS and the boarding school where I live, the second major feast of the Church Year, like Christmas, gains recognition on the calendar. Both nod their proverbial heads in the direction of the Christian heritage

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³ Horn, 8.
⁶ *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1977), 13.

common to old East-Coast schools. Each school suspends one day of classes on Good Friday. (This suspension at PTS, however should not be taken as a given. For many of the past thirty years, PTS has not officially recognized Good Friday.) In both cases, the rhythm of the semester hardly skips a beat when Easter arrives. But theologians and pastors agree that Easter is at the heart of the Christian faith. As the Anglican *The Book of Common Prayer* puts it, “The sequence of all the Sundays of the Church Year depends upon the date of Easter Day.”⁶ It is not only in a literal sense that all the other Sundays depend upon the date of Easter Day. Without Easter, Sunday worship would never have come into being. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14). Easter was the earliest Christian celebration, and on Easter Day we rejoice in the good news of the Gospel, that Jesus Christ is risen again. Christ’s defeat of sin and death, God’s power over death, the Spirit’s gift of new life, for all these acts and more we celebrate on Easter. Of all the seasons in the Christian year, Easter is the most worthy of our time, our attention, and our worship.

The Church anticipates Easter through Lent, the 40 days of penitential anticipation beginning with Ash Wednesday. Lent crescendos into Holy Week, where, beginning with Palm Sunday, the Church reflects the events recorded in the Gospels about Jesus’ last week on earth. Holy Week includes Maundy Thursday, a day which usually is recognized through the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and sometimes by washing one another’s feet. Maundy Thursday received its name from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning commandment. John 13:34-35 contains Jesus’ words, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” The wider academic community has no reason to ponder the significance of this commandment. For those of us at PTS, however, who

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are being prepared to serve Jesus Christ, spending time to consider the command to love through service has particularly significant application.

The Seminary has long struggled to allow Easter a place of prominence within its calendar, but Easter is hard to pin down. Its date reminds us of time's fluidity. It is calculated in correspondence to the Jewish Feast of Passover, because the Gospels report that Jesus suffered crucifixion and death during this feast; therefore, the date of Easter comes from the Jewish calendar which accords to the lunar cycle. Easter Sunday finds its place on the calendar as the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, and it may occur any time between March 22 and April 25. For good reason, then, the Seminary has trouble maintaining consistency in scheduling and observing this fluctuating Holy Week.

It was not until 1939 that PTS recognized Easter within its yearly calendar at all. In that year, both Thanksgiving and Easter appeared for the first time, and both occasions warranted three days away from classes. Easter Recess continued (with Spring Recess usually occurring a few weeks earlier) until the early 1970s, when the Easter Recess slipped off the calendar altogether. The PTS Catalogue then records thirty years of tension. Sometimes Good Friday shows up as a statement of fact; sometimes it appears as Good Friday Recess. In a rare reversion to old times, 1995 includes an Easter Recess. For the past three decades, however, Holy Week has gone largely unnoticed as far as the way we spend our time as a community. This is not to say that chapel services ignore Holy Week. Certain professors cancel class for part of the week as well. On an institutional level, however, we do not spend our time in conformity to the Church calendar, and we miss an opportunity to reflect with our time the tradition we claim to value.

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and offers it to God through Christ who has redeemed it... It is the church's way of 'redeeming the time.'"⁷

Dean Armstrong offers two explanations for why we do not pause for Holy Week. First, we need a fifteen-week semester in order to qualify for federal loans. Fifteen weeks includes Reading Periods and Exams, but not vacation days. Secondly, we need to finish our semester early enough for PTS graduation to be held in the Princeton University chapel without interfering with the University's own graduation. Significant as both these concerns may be, we have reversed our priorities. We acknowledge both the Incarnation and the death and resurrection of our Lord in a way that mirrors that of other academic communities, rather than the faith and worship of the Church. The celebration of Christ's resurrection clearly should trump the logistical concerns of graduation. To spend our time with a greater emphasis on worship, preparation and celebration during Holy Week would require change in our second semester schedule. We could modify the schedule in any number of ways: by simply extending the semester by one week (and having a late graduation or graduation on our own campus); we could take Wednesday through Friday off and make up those days at the end of the term; we could revise the schedule for the entire year and start first semester in August and second in mid-January. My purpose here is not to advocate one of these options over another, but merely to suggest that our calendar should reflect the significance of Holy Week to our lives as individuals and as a community.

Holy Week is inconvenient. It floats from the end of March to the end of April. It disrupts orderly schedules. It reminds us that we are mortals. It reminds us that grace disrupts our orderly lives. In its disruption it also invites us to stop, and worship God. At Eastertime, the secular world moves forward without much acknowledgement of Christ risen from the grave. There are

⁷ Horn, 12.

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pastel rabbits and candy-shaped eggs around, but the holiday industry has not succeeded in wresting this day from the Church. To pause our theological studies in order to celebrate the Lord of life would set us apart from the secular academic world, and it would remind us to spend our time on that which we value most, however inconvenient it might be.

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