“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.”
Ecclesiastes 3:1

— Year-Round Stewardship: A Resource for Reflection —

William C. Green

“All occasions invite God’s mercies,” wrote the poet John Donne, “and all times are God’s seasons.” Not so with stewardship. That’s something we do in the fall, motivated to raise support for next year’s church budget. No wonder “stewardship” so often yields meager results. We seek a harvest without having planted the seeds. Fall is no time for planting.

“The one who sows sparingly, will also reap sparingly,” says Paul, “the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2 Corinthians 9:6) Only if stewardship tends to sowing can it lead to reaping. If the church’s budget is better called a mission spending plan, the church’s stewardship work is best called a mission sowing plan. Understood as such, “stewardship” reaps a harvest that includes but goes far beyond dollar support for next year’s expenses. No more than a farmer can the church do its work indifferent to the seasons of the year.

A “season” is etymologically a time of “sowing seeds.” The word comes from a Latin word meaning “act of sowing.” Unlike the farming year, each of the seasons of the church year is also a time of reaping: a time when “gifted by God, we offer ourselves in praise.”* Coming from more than gratitude alone, stewardship praises God as Lord of the harvest, the One whose love and faithfulness assure sowing and reaping. The harvest is not just future bounty but daily blessing--a richer quality of life right now. Our own “sowing” anticipates abundance “beyond anything we can ask or imagine,” the promise of God with us enabling us “both to will and to work for his good pleasure,” confident that every need shall be satisfied. (Ephesians 3:20, Matthew 1:23, Philippians 2:13,19 NRSV) “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.”

So as a mission sowing plan what are the seeds planted, and how is God’s abundance expected, each season of the church year? Knowing that “all times are God’s seasons,” what are the sowing and reaping that constitute Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost? Stewardship that knows and shows God’s mercy at each of these times reaps a harvest of generosity that will not fail come fall--or wither during the driest summer of low church attendance and lower giving.

Understood as seasons of stewardship the church’s liturgical year can show how “all times are God’s seasons.” Along with the lectionary and Sunday bulletin themes, the church year can motivate year-round stewardship growth and commitment, restoring “giving” to its rightful place at the heart of all seasons of Christian experience.

**ADVENT: Expectation**

Stewardship is about managing the abundance that God has made ours--and not just “ours” but everyone’s. This abundance is no less than life itself, the gift of God in which all share. How do we understand this gift? that abundance? In Christian understanding this is expressed in terms of the Advent or coming of Christ--the expectation that in everything we know and face goodness and mercy are waiting to be born anew, made real again in and for us and others. This is the light that was in the world but which the world knew not, says John. (1:10) Amid the deepest shadows of evil and suffering, we expect that God’s light shall pierce the gloom, revealing love and justice to which we had been oblivious or “blind.”

Is this what we expect? The quality of our expectations determines the quality of our action. So do we fear the worst or expect the best? The quality of giving hangs in the balance, awaiting our answer to the question of Advent: Do we believe that in the spirit of the coming Christ, even amid the most challenging circumstances, hope and assurance, power and possibility are on the way, waiting to happen again? Nothing squelches good giving more than misgiving about what we face. Nothing blocks generosity so well as anxiety about what lies before us. Nothing checks the discernment of abundance better than a fear of scarcity—worry about not having enough.

During the season of Advent, what is sowed is anticipation of goodness and mercy. What is reaped is morale and trust: the “blessed assurance” that overcomes common fears of scarcity. “Gifted by God” with the expectation of abundance, “we offer ourselves in praise,” living out this expectation in our own giving.

**CHRISTMAS: Incarnation**

“...and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.” (Matthew 1:23) Stewardship looks at all that is and says, “This is not just a given. It’s a gift.” That is the perception of “incarnation,” the heart of Christmas in light of which all we feel and face is no longer just what we make of it, but what God makes of it—the One who in Jesus becomes “flesh of our flesh, bone of our bones,” part of the world as we know it. What God makes is good. And so it is, as Martin Luther put it, “God can draw straight with a crooked line, and ride a lame horse.” Whether what we feel or face is beautiful or ugly, tragic or fortunate—or anywhere in between, all this is the grist of grace, the cradle of Christ, the means whereby God again becomes real for us. In the light of Bethlehem, everything betokens God-with-us: everything acquires the quality of “gift.”

Is this how we experience life? As truly a gift—or just a given? During hard moments of discouragement, or even despair, can we like the great Scottish Christian, Samuel Rutherford, say in effect, “Jesus Christ came into my prison cell last night, and every stone flashed like a ruby”? Can we say with the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God”? Can we say with St. Francis, after a long, uneventful journey, “I experienced a miracle. Nothing untoward happened.”

In the birth of Jesus creation itself is seen as redemption. In all that is, including everything we feel and face, precisely there is a gift waiting to be recognized as such, the saving presence of God, deeper and wider than all that is contrary. Living out of that sense of life, we give accordingly, no longer handling what we have as ours alone, but as something of God—something in the sharing of which divine goodness is made known all over again.

During the season of Christmas, what is sowed is a sense of life as the gift of God-with-us. What is reaped is joy: relief and delight that, like laughter or tears, demands to be shared—gladness that spills over into giving. “Gifted by God” with the very presence of the Lord, “we offer ourselves in praise,” giving as we have received

**EPIPHANY: Manifestation**
The visit of the Magi to Jesus, and his later baptism in the river Jordan, are held to mark the appearance (epiphany: manifestation) of Christ to the Gentiles, that is, the world. Baptism and mission are joined at their source in Jesus in whom God’s self-sharing is seen as the redemption of all creation.

Epiphany is an excellent context in which to understand that we are stewards not just of our resources or God’s. More fundamentally, we are stewards of God’s own act of giving as we know this in Jesus. Giving for us means participation in the mission of God’s stewardship. As with Christ himself, our own baptism means that we are not made to find fulfillment in the enclosure of our own lives, among our own kind. Rather, we are sent (Latin, “missio,” from which we get our word “mission”) to share in the self-giving of Christ to others. And in Jesus this mission, God’s mission, is manifest not as idealism seeking to “meet needs” but as realism making known the all-inclusive abundance of God’s self-giving love, the redemptive reality of healing and wholeness at the heart of life.

How do we understand our own giving? As sharing what we have, to make up for the deficit of what others lack? As overcoming “scarcity”? Or as enabling others to experience that in which we all share: the divine bounty of grace and goodness; the redemptive love of God awaiting recognition in all the circumstances of life?

The self-giving of Christ we are sent to share is nothing that happens between “haves” and “have-nots,” whereby the “neediness” of others is alleviated. That sort of paternalism makes of giving an elitist, exclusive benevolence, often given to calculating the blessing gained or bestowed by our acts of giving. Rather “self-giving” establishes our presence alongside others with whom, together, we participate in what God’s own giving makes possible: the blessing of healing and wholeness waiting to happen again in us, through us, and for us all.

During the season of Epiphany, what is sowed is an understanding of stewardship as the manifestation of God’s own self-giving which we are sent to share with others. What is reaped is an understanding of baptism as the motivation of both stewardship and mission--”baptism” seen as our incorporation in the redemption of the world, the healing and wholeness to which our giving testifies, and in which our giving enables us to participate. “Gifted by God” with God’s own self-giving love, “we offer ourselves in praise,” showing and sharing the amazing grace at the heart of life.

LENT: Repentance

Originally a time to prepare candidates for baptism, Lent became a period of penitence for those who have been baptized, a time of spiritual discipline in preparation for the celebration of Easter. At root, penitence, like repentance, concerns a fundamental turning away from self-reliance to trust in God, a change of mind and life direction evoked by the good news of Jesus Christ.

At heart, stewardship is about where we place our trust. It is less about possessions than possessiveness. Our capacity to love is hampered by our need to have. This is an issue of control: how much must I maintain to feel secure? Understood this way, stewardship is a spiritual discipline that loosens our grip on what we have for the sake of what we love. Loving and trusting God in the spirit of Christ, we live and give more freely and openly, less anxiously, less selfishly. So it is that in his classic work, Being and Having, the French thinker, Gabriel Marcel, says, “there is neither freedom nor ‘real life’ without an apprenticeship in ‘depossession.’” This is less a matter of giving up possessions than giving up an attitude--turning over to God trust that had resided in our own ability to regulate and control what we love and care about. With this turning over, giving itself becomes more natural, virtually inevitable.

An ancient rabbi wrote, “We are born with our fists clenched and die with our hands wide open.” The plain facts of life and death confirm God’s will and point to God’s way for us. In
effect, we have to find a way to hold onto life with open hands. That is the Lenten discipline of stewardship: learning how to hold what we have less tightly, without clutching, more openly. The lesson is summed up well by Andre Gide, who wrote: “Complete possession is proved only by giving. All you are unable to give possesses you.”

How are “possessiveness” and “control” issues in our own lives? During the season of Lent, what is sowed is an awareness of the tension between loving and “possessing,” enjoying and controlling, being and having. What is reaped is a truer sense of giving as repentance—understood not morbidly, as turning against oneself, fists clenched, but hopefully, as turning toward God, hands open. “Gifted by God” with freedom and confidence we could not grasp with closed hands, “we offer ourselves in praise,” knowing that in giving we receive what in possessiveness we lose.

EASTER: Resurrection

Writing seventy-five years ago about the future of Europe, the great German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, gave unwitting witness to the truth of both Good Friday and Easter. “Hatred is once more the decisive and driving force in a world which can only be healed in the long run by a superabundance of love, mercy, and good will!” Impossible to conceive without Good Friday—blunt testimony to the decisive power of hatred—Easter turns the tables and gives the last word to life and love. In the resurrection of Jesus the truth of the world is reborn: justice and goodness shall prevail, outwitting and outlasting the most crucifying powers arrayed against them. Easter says you can put truth in a grave, but it won’t stay there.

Stewardship is what happens when we believe this. It is the generosity that flows from a sense of the “superabundance” of life to which Jesus’ resurrection testifies. In the light of Easter fears of scarcity and loss are overcome: we are “born anew into a living hope...an inheritance that is imperishable.” (1 Peter 1:3) Never need we fear that who we are, what we have, and how we love are not enough—inadequate given what is necessary, perishable commodities that must be protected. “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves,” says Paul, “but our sufficiency is from God, who makes us sufficient...(and whose) Spirit gives life.” (2 Corinthians 3:6)

No uncertainty or hardship we face, no problem or challenge is greater than the power of God. Beating at the heart of life, God’s love is stronger than death itself, making possible more than all we can ask or imagine. Released from the anxiety that often constricts the way we live and give, we grow in the joy that makes us more open to others, minded to share, eager to give. How can we keep to ourselves the energy unleashed by the assurance summed up by Paul when he declared, “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

How do we understand “resurrection”? Is this but a promise for the future, or also assurance in the present? During the season of Easter, what is sowed is the very present hope made possible by the victory of Christ over death and evil. What is reaped is an outflow of joy and generosity undeterred by fears of scarcity or inadequacy. “Gifted by God” with this Easter faith, “we offer ourselves in praise,” letting our giving testify to the unstoppable power of God’s great love.

PENTECOST: Power

Associated originally with the Jewish festival that began when the first fruits of the harvest were presented to God, Pentecost for Christians is a celebration of the “first fruits” of the resurrection: the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is the power of God made known in Jesus—“the power of the power of life itself,” as Frederick Buechner puts it. Known by its fruit, the Holy Spirit is manifest in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)
Too often the stewardship work of the church tries to turn on the lights of greater giving when the power is off. New methods of enlisting support, new programs to motivate financial commitment, new ways of doing a fall campaign—all these efforts falter and ultimately fail without the energy that inspires giving in the first place: the joy of the Spirit, God’s power made ours. Giving that is not “pentecostal” is merely adequate and often meager. Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit.

In the secular world, *morale* is called the key to better giving. In the church “morale” is called Spirit, without which the challenge of giving becomes a plea for support, largely unheeded. Spiritual vitality is the precondition of financial vitality. The number one stewardship task of the church is to build morale: to enhance a sense of God’s Spirit, making sure the atmosphere and attitude of the local congregation express and nurture an experience of God’s power.

This means that stewardship is hardly the monopoly of one committee. It is the responsibility of every committee, indeed the very heart of the church’s ministry. The quality of Sunday worship, the excellence of the education program of the church, how well the church enjoys and celebrates its life together, how well the church presents and promotes understanding of its own mission as well as the wider mission, how effectively faith can be shown to strengthen life at home, on the job, in the community—all these are issues bearing on an experience of the presence of God. Where that experience is thin, giving is thinner, and any emphasis on “stewardship” simply depletes further the limited energy of the congregation.

*How strong is the power that “turns on the lights” in your congregation? How vibrant is a sense of God’s presence?* During the long season of Pentecost, what is sowed is an awareness that the goodness and mercy of God are a very present power at work in the world and in each of our lives...right now. What is reaped are “fruits of the Spirit,” among which is generosity—giving founded and grounded in firsthand knowledge of the love of God. “Gifted by God” with a sense of divine presence, “we offer ourselves in praise,” living for the glory of God as people who know the richness of life at its best.

Stewardship is not a program. It is not another of the many projects and activities making up the church’s life. It is a way of life. It defines how we understand who we are and what we have; it motivates and molds what we do. Just as there are seasons in the calendar year, so are there seasons in the church year, times that color and shape our experience of God. More sensitive to the rhythms and moods of these seasons, we can become wiser in the different ways we experience the fullness of life in the spirit of Christ. “Gifted by God” with the assurance of this abundance, “we offer ourselves in praise,” reaping and sowing a harvest of generosity beyond anything we dreamed possible.

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SEASONS OF STEWARDSHIP

Suggestions for bringing the ideas on the preceding pages into the life of your congregation.

Advent

A Progressive Prayer

First Sunday
   “O God of gifts, today we anticipate your gift of abundant hope.”

Second Sunday
   “O God of gifts, today we anticipate your gifts of abundant hope and peace.”

Third Sunday
   “O God of gifts, today we anticipate your gifts of abundant hope, peace, and joy.”

Fourth Sunday
   “O God of gifts, today we anticipate your gifts of abundant hope, peace, joy, and love.”

Christmas

   “O God of gifts, today is the day of your gift to us, Jesus Christ. At Christmas we come
   as stewards who know how blessed it is to receive, and not only to give.”

--In the church year, Christmas is the shortest season–just two weeks long. Try not following the
commercial Christmas season, often starting before Thanksgiving, which can make you glad
when Christmas is finally over. Don’t do anything Christmas-related until one or two weeks
before the holiday. You may find that this allows you to:
    Do less and enjoy it more.
    Buy fewer things and have less money anxiety.
    Agonize less over gift choices and appreciate the recipient more.
    Focus more on relatives and friends than on arrangements and preparations.

--Make gift tags available to church member to put on their Christmas gifts:

      To:
      Receive this gift and remember that God is the giver of every good gift.
      From:

Be sure to make these tags early in the holiday season so that people can have them for the
wrapping of their gifts.

Epiphany

--How is our own identity “manifest,” made known, as Christians and as stewards? “If you were
indicted for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” (an adage). If
“mission” means being sent, how in the world do we praise God and participate in God’s generosity? Begin church council or consistory meetings with fifteen minutes of reflection and discussion on questions like these.

Lent

--Begin a discipline of daily or weekly prayer based on your experience of temporarily changing some habit upon which your lifestyle relies. See how these experiences add to you knowledge and appreciation of your life, the lives of others, and the world around you, rather than seeing them as detracting from what you’re accustomed to.

Some suggestions:

If you usually drive to work and your town has public transportation, take the bus or train instead for a week.
Don’t use credit cards for a week. See what it’s like to use cash or a debit card for all transactions and purchases.
If you watch TV every night, don’t turn it on for one night. See what else you can come up with for relaxation and entertainment.
If you enjoy shopping for fun, try something else instead for the period of Lent. Go to a movie or a concert, go bowling, take a walk around the neighborhood, ride a bike.

–Keep coming back to the following thought to ponder as you try the discipline suggested above during Lent:
Think how happy you’d be if you lost everything you have right now–and then got it back again. Emphasize how “repentance” places distance between ourselves and what we often rely on, not to reject those things, but that we might receive them back as gifts, not just givens, to be enjoyed in the spirit of Christ.

Easter

–Prepare bulletin board displays including drawings, posters, photos, newspaper clippings, etc., highlighting sign of “new life” in your church and community.

–Begin all church meetings with people taking turns sharing how it is in personal experience we have been “born anew in a living hope.” (1 Peter 1:3)

Pentecost

–Take the nine expressions of “the fruit of the Spirit,” devoting several weeks each to showing how these are embodied in the work of the church. How are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control characteristic of the life of your congregation? Blend this emphasis into church newsletters and Sunday bulletins; challenge Sunday School teachers to include attention to the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s power made ours right now in the spirit of Jesus.