

Amy Peeler
Esau McCaulley, SERIES EDITOR

Ordinary Time



The Season of Growth
Fullness of Time series



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I Green



For the past several years, I've been on a mission to find green shoes. Priests have few opportunities for self-expression in our uniform liturgical dress. Shoes and earrings are really my only options for creativity. Because this season is the longest of all, I've accrued quite a few green earrings, but until recently the shoes had eluded me. That is, until I discovered a great treasure in my local thrift store: a decent pair of green tennis shoes, in a brand that even my high school daughter considered cool. The light green of the shoes complements the vibrant green of my stole and chasuble, and the style conveys the casual coolness of summer. I like them so much that I am truly excited to wear them for multiple weeks of the year.

The color green—the color of this ordinary season—visually reminds participants of growth, of fresh buds and lush grass. It signifies life and growth corresponding to

the weeks we read about the life of Jesus, the growth of the church, and the discipling work of the Holy Spirit. Depending on location, green might be the prominent hue outside as well, in the trees and in the fields. The connection with the greens of nature allows worshipers to consider the signs of growth and new life in their own hearts and congregations.

TRUE COLORS

I was intrigued to learn from my elementary school son a few years ago, thanks to his inspiring teacher, that leaves are not naturally green. Leaf colors come from pigments, and as we might remember from our own teachers, the green color in leaves comes from the pigment chlorophyll. Other pigments make leaves orange, yellow, or red, depending on the variety of the tree. Leaves always have pigments in them that manifest as other than green, but we cannot see these colors until the fall. Then, due to a change in temperature and a decrease in sunlight, leaves stop making chlorophyll. Although green is the color in which the leaves are born and the color they display for the majority of their lives, it is not their inherent hue. Instead, it is when the leaves begin to change in the fall, just as Ordinary Time is reaching its

end in the Northern Hemisphere, that the leaves reveal their distinct individual colors. They were present all along but not visible. We might say that all summer they've clothed themselves in something that is not their own. The radiance of the sun creates chlorophyll, which overlays their underlying pigmentary identity. Only as the rays grow less direct and the temperature cools does the chemical process cease, and then we see the variety of what their colors are without the sun. As the leaves get closer to their own end, when they fall to the ground and decompose—their own death, as it were—we see their underlying color. Conversely, as they are closer to birth and more exposed to the sun, the source of life, we see them in green.

The life cycle of a leaf resonates with our life in Christ in several ways. In one of the best-known baptismal formulas in the New Testament, Paul tells the Galatians that they have been clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:27). This is fitting language for baptism because, at certain times in the church, baptism was conducted in the nude, an evocation of the rebirth it displays. After emerging from the water, the baptizand was wrapped in new clothes.¹ Having shed their former garments of slavery, they now wear the royal mantle of God's family (Galatians 4:7).

Consider how differently you navigate the world when you are in stained sweatpants as opposed to a tailored suit. When I'm dressed very casually in public spaces, often in clothes used to run or lift weights, I feel my body posture change; it becomes drawn in and apologetic for my grime. On the other hand, when dressed in professional and smart attire, I become straight backed and hold my head high, ready to do good work in the world. Clothing is not only about personal feelings but also can change the dynamics of interaction. Fairly or not, people often respond to us differently based on how we are dressed.

If these things are true for clothing that will fade away, how much more so is this the case for our permanent embrace by the living Lord. Even though Paul is using the imagery of clothing to communicate his point, that metaphor does not capture the full power of the change he describes. To be baptized into Christ is not only external but also exerts an internal change. Paul asserts that when we are baptized, we are filled with Christ's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Because of this holistic reality, when we are clothed with Christ, we begin to live like him. In other words, this is not just about how we feel—it is an actual and supernaturally-rendered change. We grow in the fruit of the Spirit as our

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hearts and minds are renewed. The closer we are tethered to the reality of our baptism, the better we remember the presence of our new clothes, the more like Christ we stay. To be clothed with Christ should change how we think about ourselves. Not because we deserve it, but because of God's grace, we've been clothed with the honor of Christ. We can hold our heads high. To be clothed with Christ also affects how we receive one another. We meet each other as we would encounter Christ, and so utmost honor is due to those brothers and sisters who bear his name and don his royal garments.

In churches that utilize the liturgical colors during Ordinary Time, believers can consider the verdant green in the sanctuary as a visual reminder of this truth about their lives. They are clothed with the life of Jesus Christ in baptism. As they respond to the One who is the radiance of God (Hebrews 1:3) by the power of the Holy Spirit, they too will more frequently and more vibrantly and verdantly display his life, in how they consider themselves and in how they consider one another.

The foliage of deciduous trees silently yet vibrantly proclaims another truth about gospel life. Leaves do not cease to be the color that they are, but for the long period

of spring and summer, they respond to the light of the sun and are clothed with green. So, too, we might say that members of the church are a beautiful variety of reds and yellows and oranges, different beautiful bodies and personalities and giftings. The congregants in Galatia did not cease to be Jews or Greeks, males or females, but they were enveloped by Christ as they would put on lavish robes. Our natural yellows and oranges and reds—or, in the language of Galatians 3:28, our maleness and femaleness, as well as our ethnicities—are not lost. They are still there, a vital part of who God created us to be, and because they are created by God, they are beautiful and good. Nevertheless, much like works, they are insufficient on their own to lead to life. If our natural selves are all we see, we are tipping toward death, not because it is bad to be Jew or Gentile, male or female, but because the world that God created good is currently marred by sin and stands in need of redemption. When, however, through faith, we are freed from sin and death, in Christ we become more fully who God created us to be. Our different hues are not eliminated but incorporated. We do not lose our particularity when we are baptized into Christ. Instead, we become more fully human as we grow

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into his image, who is the template for all humanity as *the* image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15). As Irenaeus said, the glory of God is a human fully alive.²

When we put on Christ, we have a new ordinary, an ordinary in which we can be the men and women, Jews or Gentiles who grow into the blessings of God. We are rooted in the confidence of knowing our value as created in God's image and also rooted in the confidence of knowing our beauty as made new in Christ. It is also true that in Christ we are all clothed with his life, all clothed with green. Hence, in addition to our diversity, we all share a unity. We can expect our fellow Christ-confessors to treat us with the honor due to him as we offer the same respect to them as we join together in our various vibrancy, united in the verdant life of Christ.

TRUE FREEDOM

In addition to a new life now, being baptized into Christ opens us to a new future to which we can look forward. As those baptized into Christ, we become the free children of God looking forward to the blessing of an eternal inheritance (Galatians 3:18, 29; 4:7).³ Those familiar with the pairings in Galatians 3:28 may notice that

I left out one pair: the enslaved and the free. This is intentional. If Ordinary Time is the season of growth, it is the time in which the good of God's creation grows into greater maturity in Christ. In Christ, men become more fully the men they are meant to be, and women become more fully the women they are meant to be. The beautiful ethnicities and cultures that make up the nations who worship God are amplified in Christ.⁴ Unlike these things that make a person who they are, namely, the God-given embodiment of sex and ethnicity, it is not the case that slaves become more fully slaves when they are baptized into Christ. Sex and ethnicity are blessed gifts of God. Slavery and ownership are not. There is no way to find more good in a system in which one human owns another, because there is no good in that system to begin with.

Readers might immediately counter that Christians become slaves to the God who willingly took the form of a slave (Philippians 2:5-11). This is true, but the distinction is radical. To willingly choose to be a slave to God, who is Creator and not part of creation, is entirely different from being enslaved to another human. Slavery has no part in God's creation, nor does it ever receive God's blessing.⁵ Paul's letter to Philemon builds on the ideal of

freedom in Israel's Scriptures to show that the New Covenant ideal in the church is also the obliteration of human slavery. There, Paul urges Christians to treat one another as siblings and not as property (Philemon 16).

In Galatians itself, Paul makes clear that the pair “slave and free” is different from the others. To clarify this point, Paul spends time talking about slavery both before and after verse 28. Hence, for those who are currently enslaved when they are baptized into Christ, their slave status is not amplified; rather, it is radically changed. In Christ, those who are slaves get the benefits of the free. Instead of a lifetime of slavery with nothing left to them at the end, no hope for a future, they instead get an inheritance from God. Slaves are freed. Slaves are adopted. Slaves become children. Slaves become heirs. Reflecting on this aspect of the true green of freedom in Christ provides a powerful connection to the holidays of freedom celebrated during Ordinary Time in America: Juneteenth and Independence Day. Freedom in Christ is a perfect and enduring liberty that the imperfect national freedom, for which we can be both grateful and also honest about its exclusions, can only ever serve as a shadow to a greater reality.

The difference in the way the slave/free pair works out in Paul's argument points to the freedom present in the other pairs as well. In Christ, any enslaving practice that arises out of our identity as we live it out in a sinful world is also obliterated in Christ. If aspects of our ethnicity or gender enslave us to our own sinful desires, or if they are used by others to enslave us to their limitations that run contrary to the freedom of God's kingdom, these aspects should not be a part of our new and true life in Christ. Racism and sexism enslave both the perpetrator and the victim. They have the hue of brimstone, not the vibrancy of life.⁶

Viewing this long season through this verdant lens reminds me to have patience and hope. Just as it takes time for plants to grow and change, God's work on a corrupted and willful creation takes a long time. It takes patience to yield as God molds us more fully into the image of Christ. God's steady work in this process also gives us hope. God will cause all things to grow into maturity.

When we see the green leaves and green grass outside the church and the green vestments and decorations inside, we are invited to cultivate our lives to be rooted more deeply in our baptism into Christ. Having been

enveloped by him, our individual colors are still beautifully present, and over them we are surrounded by his abundant and eternal life. In those robes, we may walk with the confidence of freedom and the deference of honoring others as we would honor Christ himself. He is the source and aim of our life. This verdant season sets our new, true, and glorious ordinary existence before our eyes, as it grows week by week. It might not be a bad idea to clothe ourselves in green for this season, all the way down to our shoes.

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