

Project ZION Podcast: Extra Shot Episode 26
Common Grounds: Jason Eyre

Karin: Welcome to Common Grounds, where we are having conversations about the liturgical or Christian calendar. We are currently in *Ordinary Time*, or the season after Pentecost. *Ordinary Time* is roughly June through November, and it begins with Trinity Sunday (the week after Pentecost) and concludes with Reign of Christ (or sometimes it's called Christ the King Sunday which is the week before Advent begins.) While Ordinary Time has no major festivals or holy days to celebrate, it is so important for our spiritual formation because during Ordinary Time, we focus on deepening our discipleship as we follow the Lectionary, or scripture readings, which tell about the ministry and message of Jesus.

So today, we are going to talk a little bit about how the seasons and holy days of the liturgical calendar contribute to discipleship formation, or more specifically, how it affects our relationship with the Divine, as well as how we interact with others. Today, our guest is Jason Eyre. Jason lives in southern Utah and participates in the Community of Christ in southern Utah and many of the Project Zion podcasts that are recorded are in response to requests that people have. The Common Ground series on the liturgical calendar was a request by Jason, so we're excited to be talking to you today. Welcome, Jason!

Jason: Well thank you, Karin. It's a pleasure to be here and it's fun to visit with you online.

Karin: It's a little different, isn't it, than being in the same place? So why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself.

Jason: Sure, I'm in my mid-40's. I live in southern Utah, as you mentioned before. I live in a little town called Panguitch. It's near Bryce Canyon. I've lived here for a couple years. Prior to that, I lived in Nashville for about 8 years, and prior to Nashville, I grew up in southern Utah. I grew up in the LDS faith, and served a mission in the Eugene, Oregon area, which is pretty close to you guys up in the Northwest, and gave me a great exposure to that part of the country. I currently work in technology. I work with my local school district here and help our students with their Chrome books and making sure that at least the young people in my area have access to the best that's available to them.

Karin: So you mentioned you grew up in the LDS faith. We connected because you asked about the liturgical calendar, and that became part of the Project Zion Podcast as the Common Grounds series. So how did you connect then with Community of Christ? Can you tell us just a little bit about how your faith journey has taken you in this direction?

Jason: Sure, so I'd been pretty active most of my life in the LDS church. When I went to church, I usually went to all three hours. In about 2007 or 2008, I got a calling in the LDS church to be the ward clerk, and that meant I needed to take care of the financial matters of the ward - probably similar to what I think they call the bishop in Community of Christ in some ways, but not necessarily ministries associated with it.

What happened is that I needed to attend all the meetings the leaders attend in the morning, which is about 2 hours before the 3-hour block, and then after the block, I needed to stay and count the tithes and do those types of things. So what happened is church went kind of from a few hours of spiritual formation to almost my second job.

Living in Nashville, the church was a couple blocks from work. It was the same drive, and I just found that my spirituality was really starting to get lower, and I requested to be released from that calling and let my temple recommend expire so I could try to get back and focus on spirituality.

As I've grown in life, as things have changed, I've learned to value things like diversity, and so many things that aren't necessarily that present in today's LDS church. It was really, a couple years ago, there were three apostles in the LDS church who passed away within a few weeks of each other. They were all people that I had grown up looking up to and definitely had a big impact on my life, and I was really excited to think that some of these people who had been there for 20 or 30 years had finally moved on, and that this would be a chance for the LDS church to really open up and call people from all over the world, and really have a Quorum of Apostles if you will, that reflected the diversity of the world.

The next General Conference came, and for LDS people, that next General Conference is when they fill any openings that have come in the quorums. They called 3 gentlemen - these gentlemen probably lived within a 30 mile radius of Salt Lake City. And were about as not diverse as possibly could happen. It just really caused me to reflect.

Then what kind of made that a one, two punch was the exclusionary policy for LGBT individuals came about a month later, and after that time - and I'd moved back to Panguitch at that time, and I was serving as a stake clerk which is a technology position, so I had access to those manuals that would have had those policies and I had access to the LDS website that was reserved just for the leadership, so I went and read that policy firsthand. And it was one of the most disappointing days of my life. So kind of that one, two punch really left me feeling wounded.

Throughout this time I had been listening to Mormon Stories, and some of the LDS podcasts that I don't think the LDS church would consider that healthy, but for me, was just a great way to cope with some of the challenges and the struggles...and it probably helped move it along as well. But I found myself in a place where I really felt that my spiritual life was in shambles. Things had really been taken from me, in a church that, although I did a lot of sleeping in church and I was not the model spiritual person, I found that I was coming home from church feeling angry and bitter and hurt. That was just not what church should be. So my spiritual life kind of becomes shambles at that point, and I started swearing a lot with my inner conversations, and started thinking I would probably tend toward becoming atheist.

During that time, I just sort of starting doing reflections. I travel with my work because I'm in a very rural place and I need to go between schools, and it gives me a lot of time for reflection in

some of God's most beautiful country that exists, and with that reflection, I realized that I really didn't feel like I was an atheist or an agnostic person, and that I needed to put my spiritual life back together. I wasn't quite sure what to do about that or how to go about that, and one of the podcasts that John Dehlin did during that time talked about a Mormon Spectrum website. I think it was a Sunstone group that had a "many ways to Mormon" type campaign, so I started looking to see what was near me.

I live in a fairly isolated place, especially by midwest standards and by west coast standards, because I'm a couple hours from the major cities. I did find a Community of Christ congregation in St. George, which is 2 hours from me. So I decided I would use that and join their Facebook group. So I joined their Facebook group and was introduced to a young lady named Emily Rose, and Nancy Ross and some of the members of the St. George congregation. Emily shared with me that there were other podcasts that some members who had started that congregation actually did, and I started listening to their podcasts and found them to be really interesting. It was great because Emily was on one of her podcasts and what happened was that led me to not just Community of Christ, but also the Project Zion Podcast.

What I found was that the Project Zion Podcast was such a safe and enjoyable place for me to learn about Community of Christ, to feel welcome, to feel that community really...it also was a great way to be introduced to the Enduring Principles, to the worth of souls, to ... any time you are transitioning between faiths or doing things like that, you have a whole new set of terms and concepts to learn about - and even though there is definitely a lot in common between Community of Christ and the LDS faith, at least back in Kirtland and a little bit in Nauvoo - it was amazing how different things were described in different ways, and I found that the Project Zion Podcast did a great job with that.

So that's kind of in a nutshell the story of my faith transition, of what brought me to Community of Christ and I have been happy. I do have to drive a ways to reach some of the congregations. I still visit St. George from time to time. Last month has been particularly difficult for me, and on weekends when the house church in Orem hasn't met, I've actually gone down to St. George and have enjoyed having just as much community and love and fellowship as well.

Karin: What then, I'm just wondering as you talk about your transition and listening to the podcasts and finding the Project Zion Podcast, what brought you to the point that you decided to request a podcast on the liturgical calendar? That would not have been a part of your LDS upbringing, so what brought that about?

Jason: Sure, so as I started going to house church up in Orem, Carla Long is one of the pastors there and I recognized Carla from the podcast. One week, Brittany Mangelson came and visited our congregation from the Salt Lake congregation, and I started putting faces with these names that I knew and when I met Carla, I said "Carla, I do have one strange question." Having lived in the south, I know there is this thing called Lent - and this was probably around November/December, so I knew it was coming. And in St. George, on the Facebook group, they would talk about Advent, and I couldn't tell you what that meant other than something was

coming, and I assumed it was the birth of the Savior. So I asked Carla, "Coming from an LDS background, I just don't understand - I didn't know to call it the liturgical calendar - I don't understand what Lent is. I don't understand what Advent is, and what these different processes and seasons are." I knew just from movies and pop culture that Jesus had fasted in the wilderness - well I knew that from the Bible - but I knew there were some faiths that do things. And living in the south, during Lent, there was just so much happening at some of those different churches in the Bible Belt. And Nashville is the buckle of the Bible Belt, and they would have a lawn full of crosses and all these things that I just really...I just had no clue. So I asked Carla about it, and she said "well, I know an expert." And that's when you started doing the Common Grounds...and it's been wonderful for me.

Karin: Well, I appreciate that. I'm not an expert. I am however enamored by learning and when I first encountered the liturgical calendar, like you, I wanted to learn more about it. I have really learned to live the seasons and holy days of the calendar in my own life. And you've talked a little bit about what it means to try to put your spiritual life back together after feeling that you didn't have that during your faith transition...so does the liturgical calendar and learning about the seasons and holy days, does that affect that putting back together of your spiritual life?

Jason: Very much so. I think the one thing that I didn't understand until I started regularly attending house church was that the services follow a liturgical calendar. There is actually a set of lessons almost, and manuals, and so, there was one week when I noticed that the St. George congregation and the Orem house church were having very similar discussions. I was able to, I think it was Blair White who is one of the other pastors in Salt Lake, had said "well we use this calendar, and you can find it anywhere, so I did go online and found I think it was an Episcopalian one, but it was great because ...and I've always been impressed that Community of Christ is ecumenical and it's just so different to live in a world where I can embrace other faiths and embrace the good and the love that everybody has and not have to be so snarky towards them, if you will. But I was just amazed that I could look at all these other churches and see that this was a very similar study schedule.

As I started looking at that a little closer and following that through the year, it dawned on me that this is kind of our way of understanding Christ's life by looking at it through his life a week at a time. I've never ever in my life studied that way, even as an LDS missionary I had a study guide that was very topically organized and based on gospel principles, and was based on very set things, but I never followed along with Christ on the journey, if you will. And I've really found the model in this type of an experience to be both leading me closer to Christ and leading me closer to following Him and feel closer to Him by experiencing things with Him, but also by being able to do it with other people in my community or in other faiths around me as well.

Suddenly, some of those messages - in Panguitch, there's only a Catholic church and a Baptist church, but as I travel up to Provo, I pass some other churches, especially if I go the back way through some of the small towns, but it's neat to see that the messages on the marquee can mean something to my faith as well, even if it's on someone else's church marquee.

Karin: So in Community of Christ, obviously community is in the name of "Community of Christ" and we talk about living our discipleship in community, but you make an excellent point that this living our discipleship when we immerse ourselves in the calendar is the greater story - the greater Christian community - and we recognize our place in that greater picture of disciples. So as you've observed this, and participated in it, it sounds like it's been very refreshing to you, and very meaningful in your discipleship. Is there any particular season or holy day that stands out to you, or that you find yourself drawn to particularly? You're kind of laughing as I said that, so...

Jason: Well I'm laughing because here we are in Ordinary Time, and I can't think of anything uneventful as Ordinary Time. The other challenge I have is that I haven't necessarily been all the way through the calendar yet, but if I may share...with Lent, I really ... I live in a mixed-faith marriage, and I really didn't want to rock my family's world. One of the things I've liked being a part of Community of Christ is that I don't feel like I have to proselyte to everyone around me. The Community of Christ tries not to proselyte active Mormons and move them away from their faith, and that really put me at an extra safe place. Because of that, with Lent, I decided to do fasting for Lent, but I had to do something that wouldn't necessarily show off a lot, if you will. I wasn't trying to do it for show, it was really for me, and so I decided to give up Oreo cookies.

I have to tell you that I had no idea that that was a daily ritual for me...that's not necessarily a plug for that food product for anything like that, and I doubt our podcast is in that big of a market or circulation, but I do have to tell you that with Easter, my favorite thing is Peeps, and this year they introduced Oreo cookies with Peeps frosting, and I was just like "I don't think I'll ever get to try these because they pull these the day after Easter" and it was very refreshing when I listened to the episode on Lent that I actually learned that the Sundays were days that you break the fast, and so, every Sunday I had the Oreos with the Peeps frosting in them (laughter). It was amazing what type of a spiritual impact, because I really had a chance - I had those God moments almost every day when I looked in the pantry after dinner and went to grab my Oreos - and I did substitute other non-Oreo cookies - it was a pretty specific fast - I didn't give up cookies, I can't give up sugar or I'd probably wither away because I'm so attuned to it (laugh). But it turned out to be a wonderful spiritual experience for me and I'm going to say that up to this point, speaking from a spiritual perspective, I really gained a lot from Lent, and even when I had my Oreos after dinner tonight, I reflected back on that it's not one of those seasons where I need to give something up right now.

Karin: Well, you talked a little bit about that each week, you were following the life and ministry of Jesus -- those scriptures that we used each week and part of the Lectionary, and the calendar follows that story as we go through. It's a three-year cycle of scripture, but each year we go through the same calendar. We'll go through Matthew and Mark and Luke and then we get a little bit of John as well. But each gospel writer tells the story of Jesus a little bit differently, just like each of us respond to it, as we hear it, a little differently. So as you've begun to experience this, and I love your Oreo Peeps story for Lent, you are in a mixed-faith marriage, so have you

talked to your family at all about what this means for you, this experiencing the liturgical calendar in this way?

Jason: You know what, I haven't really had the chance to go through that too much. I did have the unique experience because with where I work at the school, and my kids go to the school so we're on the same schedule, and we were able to go up to Salt Lake for spring break. It was a natural time - my kids know I go to another church, but they knew nothing about it - so I did have the opportunity for my wife and kids to join with Easter. It was a very different experience for them because there was a breakfast before, and a one-hour worship service, and then an Easter egg hunt afterwards. That got me off the hook for so many things we had missed in our hometown being out of town that week. But it did give my kids a whole different view of Easter, coming more from the lectionary and more from the Community of Christ perspective. It was definitely more of an energetic and exciting service than my kids, or even I. was used to.

Karin: So I'm wondering as we move into Advent, if you'll need to take another family vacation and head up to Salt Lake for a weekend in there (laughter) to experience some of that as well.

Jason: That's a great idea.

Karin: So when you look ahead at what's coming, you said you'd looked at the calendar online and you're familiar with what the seasons are, are you anticipating or curious about any particular season or holy day that's coming up?

Jason: Well, I'm interested to see what's taught and how things are learned on Pentecost. I'm interested to experience Advent through the lectionary and see it from a different perspective. And I'm still just trying to get my head around it, too. It is something that is so different from the way I was raised, and really the culture and traditions of my former faith, and I find that it's wonderful to have new cultures and exciting traditions to embrace. Especially ones that feel so hands-on and put me in the story in certain ways.

Karin: So the liturgical calendar, as well as following the lectionary and having scriptural foundation, the calendar also has symbolism. Each season has symbols associated with it and colors associated with it. In *Community of Christ Sings* you will see that the seasons have particular hymns that are sung. There are Advent Hymns, Lenten Hymns. There are so many different ways to experience it. If you were going to, since you work for a school system, if you were going to plan let's say an Advent service how would you describe that to kids who had never experienced anything like that before?

Jason: Well, and again I am still pretty new to this so you are going to get the new person's perspective and learning it from scratch, which is probably how kids would learn it as well. I do think it would be important to go back and show how it reflects Jesus' life and show how, like you said, there are symbols and colors which are definitely things that little kids can relate to especially when they are younger. Colors can be so much more exciting and vibrant than us old folks. But I think the other real essence with this is to use it to teach somehow that they can live

Christ's life in their life as well. I know in the LDS faith they call it trying to be like Jesus. But actually think about specific events and those types of things and I think that it can be very powerful for kids to act things out as well in a role-play or imaginary type environment. And of course they always have the pictures at the end of the lesson they can color and those types of things too. That's a tradition I'm quite familiar with.

Karin: All the fun things. Absolutely.

Karin: So Jason We really appreciate that you are willing to have this conversation about the liturgical calendar and particularly why you had requested the podcast series about it. Is there anything else that you would like to share about how the calendar and perhaps even the rest of the Project Zion podcast has affected your faith journey thus far?

Jason: Sure. The calendar is helping me to rebuild my spirituality with taking a look through a new lens and really a new focus. The PZP I've appreciated because it is not just a bunch of online sermons or a bunch of world conference talks or things like I probably would have seen from at least the mainstream LDS church. But it is actually very personal. It actually brings people into it and shares their stories. It was great to learn about Josh and Brittany Mangelson, and the Pomeroy's, and so many other people that I've met. On the Project Zion Podcast I've also enjoyed the spiritual formation series they've been doing and the church has become something that's not this set of agenda that has to follow everything in this exact order, which is very structured and what I'm so used to. It's been very neat to experience instead of an opening prayer an opening meditation. It's been exciting to really branch out into all different types of ways. I can't think of the lady in MN who is going through divinity school at the Lutheran church...

Karin: Katie

Jason: Yes, it is so fun to have Katie Langston. It's really nice to have Katie's perspective on things as well because she has been a seeker before and she's kind of gone in a little different direction but yet since this is an ecumenical experience it's been wonderful to have her bring on and have sometimes she has taped recorded sermons and things she has learned on her experience and bring to the Project Zion Podcast as well and I've enjoyed that it's not just one little focus but it's a rounded ecumenical experience.

Karin: So Jason I feel really grateful to be a little bit connected to your journey as you continue in your own discipleship in your formation in your connection with the divine and we look forward to more conversations as you complete your first full cycle of the liturgical calendar maybe we can come back and revisit and see how that went for you and where you are then.

Jason: That would be wonderful.

Karin: So, again I want to thank you for your time and for requesting a series on the liturgical calendar. And I'm Karin Peter. I've been talking with Jason Eyre. This is Common Grounds, part of the Project Zion Podcast and we thank you for listening.

Transcribed by Amy Henriksen Foulger and Robin Linkhart