

In Season

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I live in a place with four distinct seasons, and since I also live in the country, I've slowly internalized the rhythms of land and weather. Faith in Christ has its seasons, too, when God's spirit nudges me into a different rhythm.

Since I'm a gardener, summer is my favorite season, and our town's farmers' market is my favorite summer destination. If I don't grow a certain vegetable at my own place, I know I can find it at the market when it's in season. And I can find some surprises, too: French radishes, Brandywine tomatoes, purple eggplants as slender as my daughter's wrist.

More than just food, though, I love to visit with the various market vendors, some of whom have become good friends. I buy fair-trade coffee, bread, and free-range eggs from the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ, Catholic nuns with a convent in the area. Bob—in his trademark overalls—beckons me over to investigate his perennials. Kenny pulls a chicken from his cooler—so fresh it was clucking last night. I stop to shake hands with a new vendor, a hog farmer, and purchase a pork roast which, until just recently, roamed a field just fifteen miles from my house.

There's a movement afoot to "buy local." Farmers' markets are springing up everywhere. Buying local, in-season food has many benefits: it's fresher, more nutritious, and often less expensive. It promotes values such as hard work and self-reliance and comes with a story and a handshake. Most important, buying locally supports family farmers,

who tend to use more environmentally friendly methods to raise their crops and livestock; after all, sustaining their land is the only way they'll stay in business. Investing in local food sources is better for my community and the environment.

More than just jumping on the latest bandwagon, though, I believe that buying local food is part of my faith walk, a way to practice Christian stewardship and compassion in practical ways. There was a season early in my Christian life when I was just learning to walk in step with the Spirit. Now, after years on the path of discipleship, I feel as though God is calling me into a different season, as if to say, "Marianne, you've got firm footing and a foundation of faith. Now turn and look at my world. I'll take care of you—meanwhile, be my ambassador."

Remember the story of Jonah? At the end, the recalcitrant prophet is mourning his minor misfortunes (a dead vine and probably a sunburn) while God's compassionate gaze is on the city of Ninevah, which he has spared from his wrath. I think God is still gazing compassionately on his world, which is still mired in sin and injustice, and he is asking me to do the same.

The world still needs compassion, and our global food supply illustrates that. Lately it's become obvious that the vast food distribution systems we have relied on for years are only feeding some of the people some of the time. In America, millions—many of them poor—struggle with obesity and chronic lifestyle illnesses like type 2

diabetes. Highly processed food has led to a new phenomenon: people who are both overfed and undernourished, as Michael Pollan writes in his book *In Defense of Food*.

In poor countries like Haiti, starving people have resorted to eating patties made chiefly of mud and to rioting for food. Not surprisingly, the United Nations has declared a world food crisis, but inequalities like these are not new. God accused the wicked in Jeremiah: "They have become rich and powerful and have grown fat and sleek. Their evil deeds have no limit; they do not seek justice. They do not promote the case of the fatherless; they do not defend the just cause of the poor. Should I not punish them for this?" (5:27-29, TNIV).

I don't think God's priorities have changed, but mine have. Re-evaluating my use of God's resources—including food—is a new and challenging season for me. I've never had a bandwagon mentality—it's probably my Midwestern self-reliance. But I'm learning that my own bent toward individualism is not a biblical way to live—indeed, not even a natural way to live. God created this ecosystem: I am part of the human family, as well as God's family, and he has placed us all here together on this particular planet. How I live, the resources I use, and the food I eat in my particular corner of the planet matters, because it affects the lives of people God cares about, particularly the poor and helpless. □

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