

Church Bells

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. Eccl. 3:1

Our Lady of Guadalupe Church is within earshot of my house. I heard them singing the song *Alabare* during one of their festivals, but not like we Presbyterians sing it. And now Our Lady has purchased new bells. They're much louder than *Alabare's* amplification.

The old ones tintinnabulated to death several years ago. The new ones are trying to make up for those years of silence. Several weeks ago they began ringing at six in the morning whether neighbors wanted to set the alarm clock or not. This was not appreciated by some. Cheri and I didn't mind. We rather like church bells ringing every hour of the day, even though these didn't ring out the hour exactly. At six in the morning they rang nine times. At seven they rang twelve. By six p.m. they rang out 19 times.

People from the neighborhood who did not like the bells called in the City for a meeting with the priest. They reached an agreement that goes like this. No bells before eight a.m. At eight the bells play one verse of Amazing Grace, and they do so rather well. Then they ring out every hour from nine a.m. until six p.m., always with the wrong number of rings. Cheri and I like it even though we can't set our watches by the ringing.

In A.D. 400, Paulinus of Nola introduced church bells into the Christian church. In 604, Pope Sabinian officially sanctioned their usage. By the early Middle Ages church bells were common in Europe, first in northern Europe, reflecting Celtic influence, especially that of Irish missionaries.

Bells have been used and are used as a call to prayer and as a call to worship. Our Lady of Guadalupe rings the bells five minutes before all its services on Sunday and Saturday evening. Church bells have also been used to announce weddings. And had they never been used to announce funerals, we'd never have the line from John Donne, "*Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*"

It's the ringing of the hour of the day that I appreciate. We live in a world that works at home, works on Sunday, eats lunch at one's desk, and doesn't always take vacations for fear of getting behind. We can go to the pharmacy or supermarket or out to make copies at midnight. Not all public schools observe the same calendar. And some of us retirees don't even know what day it is. Ecclesiastes may say "*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven,*" but seasons and hours no longer separate numerous human-scheduled activities. So, I like hearing the hour ring out. It's an auditory reminder that we're all in this thing together. No matter how hectic and confused we humans allow our lives to become, God's times and seasons proceed as always.

When I was a kid growing up, Roswell had a town siren. It blew at 8:00a.m. and 5:00p.m. during the work week – the start and finish of the work day. If it blew at any other time, it was to announce an emergency. I've missed that sense of community. – D.J.