



Seasons of the Church Year

Why is the church decorated in purple during Lent? Why is Christmas always on December 25, but Easter is on different dates all the time? What is Ordinary Time? These and other basic but often unanswered questions in the liturgical life of churches are answered in this one-session study.

Introduction

Our lives are ruled by a variety of calendars: the annual calendar that runs from January through December, a school calendar that marks semesters and summer vacations, the agricultural calendar that cycles around seasons of planting and harvesting, the fiscal calendar that guides the ebb and flow of financial matters.

LITURGICAL

The word *liturgical* is derived from the root word *liturgy*, which means “the work of the people” and indicates the ordering of congregational worship.

Churches may plan activities and events around all these different calendars. But the most important calendar in the life of the church is the liturgical calendar. The liturgical calendar highlights the seasons in the church year, seasons that revolve around the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return of Jesus Christ. The liturgical calendar shapes our lives as the people of God.

Everything in the church—from weekly Sunday worship to special, seasonal celebrations—focuses first and foremost on Jesus Christ.

The liturgical calendar includes Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time. The church also observes other days, such as the Baptism of the Lord, the Transfiguration of the Lord, the Ascension of Jesus, Trinity Sunday, All Saints’ Day, and Christ the King Sunday.

Advent

The season of Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. *Advent* means “coming” or “arrival.”

Advent anticipates not only the birth of Jesus but also the coming of Christ at the end of time, to fulfill God’s intention for creation and to bring “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1) into being.

When the celebration of Advent first began, the focus was on the coming of Christ in the future more than on the birth of Jesus. Early liturgical calendars placed Advent at the end of the church year rather than at the beginning for this very reason.

Many churches mark each of the four Sundays in Advent around the theme of Hope, Peace, Love, or Joy. The order of presentation may vary within congregations, but the biblical focus of each Sunday remains consistent. We read from the prophet Isaiah, who told of the Savior who would bring hope to God’s people in a time of oppression (Isa. 2:2–4; 11:1–9). We recall the role of John the Baptist, calling for people to repent of their sins in preparation for the coming of the Messiah (Matt. 3:1–11). We are reminded of God’s steadfast love for us in a world that is unsettled and ever changing (Mark 1:1–8). We reaffirm that God is engaged in the workings of creation, for God is with us—Emmanuel (Matt. 1:18–25).

MESSIAH

Messiah: one of the names of Jesus; the Jewish word for the promised and expected One who will deliver the people from oppression. Another name for Jesus—Emmanuel—literally means “God with us.”

The church faces the ongoing challenge of celebrating Advent as its own season and not rushing too quickly into Christmas. The time of repentance and preparation is necessary before we welcome the Savior into our lives and into the world.

Christmas

Christmas is not simply one day in the church year; it is a season initiated on the day in which we celebrate the birth of Jesus. The twelve days of Christmas actually extend until Epiphany begins on January 6.

Nobody knows the exact date of Jesus' birth. December 25 was the day of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year as well as a holiday celebrated by non-Christians as the "birthday of the sun." In 336 CE, the church in Rome officially proclaimed December 25 as Christmas Day. Through the centuries following, the celebration of Christmas on December 25 became recognized and accepted by churches outside of Rome.



The celebration of Christmas used to extend for twelve days. During the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and later when the Puritans settled in the New World, this lengthy celebration was frowned upon. Christians were allowed to celebrate the birth of Christ on one day only: December 25.

Details about the birth of Jesus are found in only two of the Gospels: Matthew and Luke. The accounts are quite different in focus, although they are often blended together when retold in art, music, and story. In their wonderful variety, the Gospel accounts illuminate the God who sends his only Son into the world in order to reveal an astounding, divine love, which knows no bounds.

Epiphany

The day of Epiphany falls on January 6, marking the end of the Christmas season.

Epiphany refers to the "appearance" or "manifestation" of a king. Epiphany is the time when we celebrate the wise men bringing their gifts to Jesus.

Hymns and paintings make us think that there were three kings who came to visit Jesus. Yet nowhere in the Bible are these visitors referred to as kings, and nowhere does it say that there were three. There were three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but it was quite possibly an entire caravan of travelers who brought these gifts to Jesus.

The focus of Epiphany should not be on the wise men but on Jesus. For this reason, many churches celebrate the Baptism of the Lord on the Sunday closest to Epiphany. It is at the time of Jesus' baptism that God declares in a loud voice from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). The manifestation, or revelation of the divine nature, of Jesus is the focus of Epiphany.

The account of the wise men is found only in Matthew (2:1–12). The baptism of Jesus is included in Matthew (3:13–17), Mark (1:9–11), and Luke (3:21–22).

Lent

Lent is often considered a somber season. The word *Lent* actually means "spring," the season of new life. Our practices during Lent encourage us to prepare for the new life we find in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The biblical account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness sets the stage for Lenten reflection. The temptation (Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13) takes place after Jesus' baptism and his forty days in the wilderness. During those forty days, Jesus fasted and prayed as a preparation for going public with the gospel message.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, forty days before Easter. Sundays are not included in the countdown, as Sunday is a day of resurrection. The ashes placed on the forehead on Ash Wednesday come from the palm branches of the previous year's Palm Sunday. The ashes recall that God formed humankind out of dust (Gen. 2:7) and that to dust we shall return (Gen. 3:19).

Lent is a time of spiritual reflection, a time when we think deeply about what it means to be a follower of Christ. Whereas in Advent, we are preparing for the joyful event of Christ's birth and coming again, during

Lent we recognize the challenges of being a disciple when we know that this journey leads to a cross.

Lent began as a season to remember the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the whole world. During the early centuries, the corporate life of Christians was the focus. New converts engaged in study of the Scriptures, prayer, and worship as they prepared for baptism and being welcomed into the church.

The emphasis gradually shifted from corporate church life to self-examination. The sixteenth-century Reformers objected to the way Lent had become so individualized. It remains our challenge to examine our personal spiritual journey while staying true to the calling of the church to address issues of hunger, poverty, justice, and the like.

Holy Week

Holy Week begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In many churches, Palm Sunday is referred to as Palm/Passion Sunday. The passion refers to the suffering of Jesus, which will take place before the week is through. The joyous shouts of "Hosanna" quickly turn into "Crucify!" Combining Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday is a clear declaration of how quickly the joy of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem turns into a time of agony and despair.

Holy Week began as a one- or two-day fast prior to the celebration of Easter. By the fourth century, the churches in Jerusalem had lengthened this commemoration into a week.

PASSION

Passion comes from the Greek word *pascha*, which means "suffering." *Hosanna* means "save now!"

Maundy Thursday begins the quick movement through Jesus' final hours of earthly life. Except in the Gospel of John, the Last Supper occurs on the night of the Passover meal (in John, it takes place on the night before Passover). In the view of the early church, Christ completed the Passover feast. God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt, and now God, in Christ, has delivered us from our slavery to sin and brought us into the promised land of new life.

Jesus gives the disciples a final commandment or mandate: "I give you a new commandment, that you

love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34).

Jesus initiates the Last Supper. He takes the bread and tells the disciples, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he offers the cup: "Drink from it, all of you" (Matt. 26:26, 27). Every time we celebrate communion, we remember this final supper and renew our commitment to following the commandment of Jesus Christ.

John's Gospel also tells of the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus (John 13:1-17). Some churches choose to hold a foot washing on the night of Maundy Thursday.

PASSOVER

The Passover is the central point of Jewish history, recalling the final plague sent upon the Egyptians, when the angel of death passed over the homes of the Hebrews and spared their lives.

The account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus causes us to wonder why Good Friday is called "good." *Good* may come from the contraction *God's*, making this God's Friday. It is good that God loves us with such unending love. Although many have a difficult time picturing the gruesome death of Jesus, we cannot turn away from the cross, for without it there can be no resurrection to eternal life.

Easter

"Christ is risen!" "Christ is risen indeed!" So dawns the day of Easter, the highest holy day in the Christian church. Other seasons of the church year developed as the centuries moved forward, but the resurrection was celebrated from the beginning.

Easter does not fall on the same secular calendar date every year as does Christmas. The formula for determining Easter was adopted by the council of Nicaea in 325 CE. Using the lunar calendar, Easter is set on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox (the time when the sun passes over the equator, and day and night have equal length). Easter can fall anywhere from March 22 until April 25.

The season of Easter lasts for fifty days. The Jewish festival of The Great Fifty Days kicked off the harvest season two days after Passover, culminating with a great celebration fifty days later. Easter was set to coincide

with this festival. Whereas Lent had been a time for new converts to the Christian faith to study and prepare, on Easter they were baptized and received into the church as full members.

Although only two Gospels give details of the birth of Jesus, all four Gospels provide a multitude of details about Jesus' death and resurrection. The Gospels—and the entire New Testament—were written through the lens of resurrection faith.

Pentecost

Pentecost comes from the Greek word for “fiftieth.” Fifty days after the resurrection, Pentecost arrives in a mighty display of wind and fire (Acts 2:1–42). The new believers are gathered in one place, and the Holy Spirit fills the house with “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” (Acts 2:2). Tongues of fire appear above each believer, and they all begin to speak in various languages.

The nonbelievers who witness all the noise and commotion are astonished. Some think that the Christians are drunk so early in the day. Others cannot believe their ears—how can it be possible that they are hearing words spoken in their many native languages?

Peter takes the lead and explains to all present that they are not drunk, nor is this some trick. The prophet Joel has predicted all that is happening: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17).

Pentecost is often celebrated as the birthday of the church. Pentecost initiates a formal sense of community among the followers of Christ.

Ordinary Time

Ordinary Time is the longest season of the church year, comprising many of our ordinary, non-holy days. But that is not why it is called Ordinary Time.

The word *ordinary* comes from the word *ordinal*. An ordinal number refers to the numerical position of an object: first, second, third, and so forth. Ordinal numbers were used to mark the Sundays that linked one major

liturgical season to another. For instance, there is the First Sunday after Easter, the Second Sunday of Pentecost, and so on. Ordinary Time includes all the special days of the church year that aren't designated by an entire season as well as the times that fall between seasons. Some examples are Trinity Sunday, which marks the shift from Pentecost into Ordinary Time, and Christ the King Sunday, which separates Ordinary Time from the beginning of Advent.

Liturgical Colors

The tradition of using colors to designate seasons of the church year has been around for centuries. At first, colors were chosen because of their value. Purple dyes were more expensive than other colors, and purple was used only on the most expensive cloth. Purple was the color used by royalty. Hence, purple became the liturgical color used for the holiest seasons of the church year, Advent and Lent, in preparation for the holy days of Christmas and Easter.

Red initially symbolized blood and the martyrs, but it also came to represent the flames of the Holy Spirit and so became the color used for Pentecost.

In recent years, some churches have adopted blue as the color for Advent, in order to separate this season from Lent. Following Palm Sunday, the sanctuary is stripped of color. On Good Friday, the cross may be draped in black. Congregations use white for Easter (both the day and the season) and for All Saints' Day, Christ the King Sunday, Christmas (both the day and the season), the Transfiguration of the Lord, Trinity Sunday, as well as Sundays in which the sacrament of Communion is celebrated.

One should be conscious of other cultures when using liturgical colors. Whereas white indicates joy in many areas, in certain Asian countries it is used as a sign of mourning.

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