Time for God

An Introduction to Living the Christian Year
The Christian Year
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What Time Is It?

It’s a simple question. And if you have a clock, watch, or smart phone nearby, it seems easy enough to answer. As I glance at a clock this Tuesday afternoon, for example, it’s 2:28PM. Simple, right?

Perhaps. Or maybe there’s more to it. If time is not simply a daily reality, but a weekly, monthly, and yearly one as well, then there are actually many ways to tell time. Think for a moment about all the annual “calendars” shaping our lives each year. There’s the universally observed astronomical calendar with its four seasons (unless you live in Arizona, then there are two seasons: hot and hotter); the academic calendar (which typically runs from fall to spring); the IRS calendar (which demands all who wish to remain in their good graces to observe its major holiday: April 15th); the consumer calendar (with its infamous “Black Friday” eating its way through more and more of November); the athletic calendar (where your favorite team’s schedule may be the center around which the rest of your schedule orbits); and
so on. The fact is there are many ways we tell and practice
time. Whether we like it or not, we all “inhabit” a number of
different calendars, even when we’re not aware of it.

Whichever calendars tend to influence you the most, one
thing remains true for everyone: **the way we inhabit
time powerfully shapes our lives.** If you are a
teacher or a student, maybe the academic year is the most
powerful calendar shaping your life. You’re keenly aware of
the excitement (or anxiety) a new school year brings: new
faces, new challenges, the high-pressure class photos!
Maybe you work in finance, or you just love a smokin’ deal,
and the consumer calendar plays an increasingly important
role in your life. As Thanksgiving approaches, you find
yourself thinking less and less about family and turkey, and
more and more about all the great deals you’re going to
get. Or if you’re a huge fan of college basketball, two
words are probably enough to convince you of the power
of the athletic calendar: March Madness. An otherwise
typical month takes on sacred significance, full of emotional
highs and lows, celebrations and disappointments – all driven by the exciting dynamics of competition and performance.

The fact that these calendars (and many more) influence us is not a bad thing. There’s good in all of them and to a degree their influence is unavoidable. But if you’re a follower of Jesus, and if the way we inhabit time has the power to shape our lives in significant ways, it’s worth asking:

What if we had a calendar inviting us every year to rehearse the most true, most beautiful, most powerful story ever told?

Or better yet, what if something like this already exists and was actually created a long time ago by faithful folks who loved Jesus and wanted to make him the center of everything, including time itself?
The Christian Year

It goes by different names. Some call it the Christian or church year. Others might call it the liturgical calendar. Whatever we call it, millions of people observe it every year.

So what exactly is the Christian year? Simply put, according to author Adolf Adam, the Christian year is the “commemorative celebration throughout a calendar year, of the saving deeds of God accomplished in Jesus Christ.” It’s a way to use time to remember and celebrate the gospel throughout the year, every year. For the majority of people in our culture, Christmas and Easter are a pretty big deal. For those who follow Jesus as Lord, Christmas and Easter are not primarily about opening presents (which is always awesome), hunting for eggs (which is actually kind of weird if you think about it), or even time with family. For
the church, Christmas and Easter are primarily about remembering and celebrating two of the most important events in the history of the world: the birth and resurrection of our Savior.

But wait a second… isn’t there more to the story of Jesus than his birth and resurrection? Why don’t we celebrate that stuff too? Well, many Jesus-followers throughout the centuries have and still do to this day (though without the hyper-commercialized accoutrements that dominate our cultural commemorations). Depending on your church-background, it may surprise you to know that the Christian year has existed for nearly two thousand years. Within the first few centuries AD, communities of Jesus-followers began developing a calendar patterned after the story of Jesus. Over the years, it’s taken different forms and has undergone some development and change; and while some practice it a little differently than others, the basics are generally agreed upon.

The purpose of this booklet is twofold: 1) to introduce and explain the Christian year to you if you are unfamiliar with it; and 2) to invite you to inhabit the saving story of Jesus in a way perhaps you never have before: by observing the Christian year. Why? The ultimate goal is simply to use time itself to embody the gospel story so that we might know, love, trust, and serve its author and hero better and better. It’s about heart transformation. It’s about following and becoming more like Jesus. It’s about increasing our capacity to love God and love others.
When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.

[Eugene Peterson]
Introducing Time for God

What’s In It?

This guidebook is divided into five sections, each corresponding to one of the five seasons of the Christian year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. Each section will include the following:

- Relevant dates and special days
- An explanation of the season as it relates to the gospel story and its significance for following Jesus today
- Suggested “sacred practices” intended to engage your whole being (not just your head)
- Suggested prayer prompts
- Suggested daily Scripture

Guidelines for the Guidebook

If you’re still reading this and have ANY intention of living the Christian year – whether it evokes passionate excitement, moderate interest, or mild curiosity – here are four important things to keep in mind to help guide you through the process:

Decide to commit. Either you will commit to taking this seriously or you won’t. Either way, please remember: the extent to which living the Christian year will shape you is completely up to you. Obviously, the Holy Spirit is the one who changes hearts and transforms lives. But if the Holy Spirit is like a wind which “blows wherever it pleases” (John 3:8), we are like boaters whose job it is to
raise the sails. The wind may blow, but if we don’t do our part, we probably won’t get too far. If you’re going to try this, it might help to tell someone you’re doing it or write it down somewhere. The important thing is to decide to commit.

**Don’t be a legalist.** This guidebook is a tool designed to deepen your walk with Jesus. Neither this guidebook in particular nor living the Christian year in general is required for salvation or even necessarily the best tool for growing up in Christ! Therefore, take it seriously, but remember it’s just a tool, nothing more. If you miss a day of Scripture reading here or there, it’s okay – just move on to the next day. The goal is not to check everything off the list. The goal is to get caught up in the gospel story and thus to let its central figure transform you.

**Do the sacred practices.** *Time for God* is not (simply) a Bible reading plan. It’s a holistic introduction and invitation to living the Christian year. Doing the “sacred practices” will be inconvenient at times. They’ll be easy to skip over or not give much thought to. But these sacred practices have the potential to be the most shaping aspect of this whole process. Give them some thought. Be creative. Have fun. And do them. You won’t regret it!

**Don’t be a lone ranger.** Face it, we are individualists. It would be easy to let living the Christian year be something you do *privately*, detached from your day-to-day relationships. Resist that temptation! Our relationships shape us in deep ways, often more than anything else in our lives. Here are few simple ways to include others in your journey:
• Partner up! Similar to how you might have a running partner if you were training for a marathon, find a Christian year partner. This person could be a spouse, family member, friend, community group member, etc. Whoever it is, connect with someone else who is doing it and check in regularly to reflect on the process.
• Reflect with your community group. Talk to your CG leader about discussing how things are going with the group. It’s okay if not everyone in the group is participating in living the Christian year. They can still participate in conversation.
• Share with your pastor! As you experience things throughout this process (a deepening prayer life, new insights regarding the gospel, the challenges and joys of the sacred practices), keep your pastors updated. They will love it.
Advent Season

(November 29 – December 24)

Important Dates

November 29 - First Advent Sunday
December 6 - Second Advent Sunday
December 13 - Third Advent Sunday
December 20 - Fourth Advent Sunday
December 24 - Christmas Eve
Happy New Year! Yep, you read that right. A whole month before our culture traditionally celebrates the New Year with midnight kisses and office parties, the Christian calendar invites us to start our year differently – with the season of Advent. During the time of year when the voice of consumerism rings loudest (Why wait? Buy now! This deal won’t last!), spurring our hearts toward instant gratification, more debt, and busy schedules, another voice invites us to something different: Wait. Be patient. Slow down. Something good is coming. Prepare your heart.

Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas, wherein each Sunday is considered an “Advent Sunday.” The word Advent means “coming” and is all about looking ahead to the coming of God in Christ for the salvation of the world. Advent is a season of waiting, anticipating, longing, preparing. As followers of Jesus, we inhabit this time in two important ways. First, we remember his first coming, toward which the whole Old Testament story points. We remember folks like the prophet Isaiah with his profound vision of a suffering servant who “was pierced for our transgressions… crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). We remember the young, virgin Mary who courageously embraced her odd yet glorious task of carrying the Son of God in her womb (imagine explaining that one to your
fiancé) (Luke 1:26-38). We remember John the baptizer, who boldly told God’s people to get ready because salvation was about to show up (Luke 3). When we recall these folks and the roles they and many others played to prepare the way for the arrival of God’s messiah, we are invited to prepare ourselves for Christmas. In other words, **Advent reminds us that the coming of Jesus into history is SUCH good news that it deserves a whole season of preparation and anticipation.**

If one way we inhabit Advent is by focusing on his first coming, the other way focuses on his second coming. The sad truth is that there are things in this world that aren’t the way they’re supposed to be. Sin, death, evil, and all the pain and brokenness that happen as a result do not belong in God’s world. Yet here they are. For many of us, this time of year brings that pain to its sharpest point. However, as followers of the crucified and risen Messiah, we know that Jesus will come again. Imagine a world without hunger, poverty, economic injustice, violence, and corrupt governments. That’s what God is going to do when he shows up and brings his Kingdom in full; he’s going to make everything the way it’s supposed to be. During Advent we are invited to join the ancient church who cried out, “Maranatha!” which is Aramaic for “Come, Lord!” **Advent is a time to long with hopeful expectation for the day when Jesus appears to make all things right and all things new. It’s a time to confess our frailty, cry out in**
pain, plead for God to bring his perfect justice, and trust that a time is coming when the whole world will be put right, when those deep bruises on our hearts that never seem to go away will finally be healed.

Sacred Practices

During the weeks leading up to Christmas, consider adopting a new practice or habit that in some way embodies the heart of Advent. Feel free to choose from this list of suggested practices, or come up with one on your own!

• **Fast** – People often associate fasting or “giving up something” with the season of Lent, not Advent. But one way to cultivate a posture of anticipation and longing could be by letting go of something for four weeks. There are all sorts of things you could fast from: your daily latte, Facebook, TV, sugar, household chores (joke), etc. If you fast from some sort of food or drink, DO NOT do it for dietary reasons. That’s not fasting, that’s going on a diet (which is fine, just don’t call it fasting). **The point of fasting during Advent is to consistently redirect the desire for whatever you’re fasting from to God in prayer.** This is why fasting and prayer should always go hand-
in-hand. Every time you have the urge to look at Facebook (if that’s what you’re fasting from), turn the gaze of your heart to God instead, thanking him for the crazy fact that through Jesus, he considers you his friend. When you feel like you need some chocolate (if that’s what you’re fasting from), thank Jesus for being everything you need and more. Make a habit of letting Christ be where you turn to satisfy your longings. When your desire intensifies, pray more intensely. Let the Holy Spirit transform your rhythms of desire into rhythms of prayer. That’s how fasting works. (*Certain forms of fasting are not for everyone. If you have specific questions about it, feel free to ask one of your pastors.)

- **Advent Wreath** – This is a very common tradition both in the home and in public worship. It involves a “wreath” designed to hold four candles. The first candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent, often during a meal. That initial candle may continue to be lit by itself once a day (again, perhaps during a meal) throughout the week until the next Sunday when a second candle is also lit. This practice continues, adding one candle every Sunday, until all four candles are lit. Often times a larger fifth candle, which sits in the middle of the wreath and is called the “Christ candle,” is lit on Christmas Eve, thus concluding the season of Advent. Why the candles? Progressively
lighting candles throughout these four weeks slowly builds anticipation for Christmas. The increasing brightness of the light is a visible and active way to prepare our hearts for “the true light... coming into the world” (John 1:9). In addition, Scripture and prayer are often included with the lighting of the candles. For example, every Sunday when a new candle is lit in your home, you could read a short passage of Scripture about the coming of Jesus or offer a prayer thanking God for Jesus. You could also incorporate gifts, giving something small to someone (a friend, spouse, child, etc.) every Advent Sunday, anticipating the ultimate gift of Jesus. (*Slow-burning candles are recommended.)

• **Retreat** – Advent is notorious for being the busiest season of the year. It’s a time when we not only are expected to *Buy! Buy! Buy!* but also to *Do! Do! Do!* Christmas parties, Christmas shopping; time with friends, time with family. It’s usually good stuff. Just lots of it packed into a short period of time. **Practicing retreat** honors the heart of Advent by embracing stillness, depth, and patience during a season marked by noise, superficiality, and
hurry. It means hitting the pause button by making time in your schedule to listen and reflect. It will look different for different people. For some it may involve taking a ten minute walk every day simply trying to listen to God’s quiet voice. For others it might mean taking a several-hour block of time once a week at a coffee shop, at a nearby park, in your back yard, on a lake – it doesn’t matter so much where. Maybe some are able to take one full day away during Advent, whether it’s at a retreat center or on a mountain. For some it will involve reading. Others writing. Still others, sitting in quiet reflection. It should always involve prayer. Whenever, wherever, or however you do it, be sure to put it in your calendar or it probably won’t happen.
Suggested Prayer Prompts

Use these prompts to guide your time of prayer. Rather than thinking of these as scripts that restrict or limit your prayers, think of them as conversation starters between you and God. Let them guide your heart and mind as you pray. Oh, and as you pray, don’t forget to listen.

Dear God...

Why is it so difficult for me to slow down?

What are the things in my heart that keep me from trusting you?

What am I currently desiring more than you? Why?

Please teach me how to pray.

Expose the distractions in my heart and mind.
Suggested Scripture Reading

The book of Isaiah was incredibly important to Jesus, which is probably why he quoted from it so often! The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) record Jesus quoting from Isaiah more than any other book in the Old Testament, with the exceptions of Deuteronomy and the Psalms. Isaiah is a great voice to listen to during Advent, because he often points toward God’s coming messiah. As you read the words of the prophet, whether he’s inviting you to “prepare the way for the Lord” (Isa. 40:3) or describing the suffering servant by whose wounds “we are healed” (Isa. 53:5), allow these words of Scripture to kindle a growing sense of anticipation during this Advent season.

11/29 - Isaiah 40:1-14
11/30 – Isaiah 40:15-31
12/1 – Isaiah 41:1-16
12/2 – Isaiah 41:17-29
12/3 – Isaiah 42:1-9
12/4 – Isaiah 42:10-17
12/5 – Isaiah 42:18-25
12/6 – Isaiah 43:1-13
12/7 – Isaiah 43:14-28
12/8 – Isaiah 44:1-5
12/9 – Isaiah 44:6-23
12/10 – Isaiah 44:24-28
12/11 – Isaiah 45:1-10
12/12 – Isaiah 45:11-25
12/13 – Isaiah 46
12/14 – Isaiah 47
12/15 – Isaiah 48
12/16 – Isaiah 49:1-7
12/17 – Isaiah 49:8-26
12/18 – Isaiah 50
12/19 – Isaiah 51:1-16
12/20 – Isaiah 51:17-23
12/21 – Isaiah 52:1-12
12/22 – Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12
12/23 – Isaiah 54
12/24 – Isaiah 55
Christmas Season

(December 25 – January 5)

Important Dates

December 25 - Christmas Day
God with Us

Finish this sentence: “On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me .... “ Even if you can’t do it, you’re probably aware that this is a line from a classic song that seems to always show up this time of year. But have you ever wondered, “Why in the world does this song talk about ‘twelve days’ of Christmas? I thought Christmas was only one day, maybe two if you count Christmas Eve.” Well, according to the Christian calendar, Christmas isn’t simply a day, it’s a whole season! Our culture has taken what was traditionally twelve days of marveling at the wonder of the incarnation of Christ and reduced it to a mere day or two. What a shame! It’s in the midst of this reduction that the Christian year says, “No! The event of God’s Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14) is too beautiful, too mysterious, too wonderful to reduce to one day.” Advent was about preparing for the light. Now it’s Christmas. The light has come, and we stand in awe.
Most people in our culture have at least a vague notion of Christmas being about the birth of Jesus. But Christmas isn’t simply about the birth of someone important. It’s about God, the creator of heaven and earth, entering our world as one of us. It’s about the one through whom we were created becoming a creature himself. It’s about the uncreated, eternally begotten Son of the Father wrapping himself in humanity. And it’s about all this happening because God is love. Theologians call it the incarnation, which means “in-the-flesh” and is a fancy way of describing the mysterious event whereby the Son of God himself became a human being and appeared “in-the-flesh.” The apostle Paul described it this way:

[Jesu]s who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself... (Philippians 2:6-8).

Christmas is a season that should be entered with a sense of mystery, awe, and wonder. How in the world can Jesus be both fully human AND fully divine? I have no idea. But I’m grateful. If Jesus had only been divine, he wouldn’t
have been able to relate to us, to understand what it’s like to be human, to suffer temptation, and ultimately to show us how to be truly human. And if Jesus had only been human, he wouldn’t have been able to accomplish for us what only God could do by defeating sin, death, and evil on the cross; he wouldn’t have been able to show us who God is and what he’s like. During Christmas, we celebrate the God who is close, the God who intimately identifies with our humanity, and the God who reveals himself in Jesus. It’s a time to sing with one voice so that the whole world can hear: “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!”

Professor and author Laurence Stookey puts it well:

Christmas is the enfleshment of God, the humiliation of the Most High and divine participation in all that is painful, ugly, frustrating, and limited. Divinity takes on humanity, to restore the image of God implanted at creation but sullied by sin. Here is the great exchange Christmas ponders, that God became like us that we might become like God. God accepted death that the world might accept life. The Creator assumed temporality to redeem creation from futility.

Merry Christmas!

[By the way, it was twelve drummers drumming.]
Sacred Practices

During this season, consider adopting a new practice or habit that in some way embodies the heart of Christmas. The important thing here is to NOT let Christmas simply be a one-day celebration. So whatever you do, spread it out over the entire Christmas season. Feel free to choose from this list of suggested practices, or come up with one on your own!

- **Stay in Christmas Mode** – It’s tempting once the 26th comes to “be done” with Christmas. After all, according to our cultural tradition, Christmas is over. Now it’s time to move on. So one way of inhabiting the season of Christmas could be by adopting one or more of the following suggestions to keep you in Christmas mode. (*These suggestions are adapted from a great book called Living the Christian Year by Bobby Gross.)*

  - Keep your tree and decorations up until the end of the season on January 6.
  - If you’ve been lighting candles for Advent, keep doing it throughout the Christmas season.
  - Host a leftovers party on December 26 for friends or neighbors.
  - Save some of your gift-giving for some of the twelve days.
  - Plan one or two special activities with your children or friends.
  - Have a “twelfth night” party on the evening of January 5.
Reflect on the Incarnation – One way of entering Christmas season could be by scheduling time to intentionally reflect on the incarnation. There are several ways you could do this:

* Immerse yourself in the birth-narratives of Matthew (1-2) and Luke (1-2). You could study them as historical accounts; enjoy them as stories; pray along with Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon; imagine yourself as a character in the story. Journal your reflections. (Philippians 2:5-11 is also worth reflecting upon.)

* Collect and listen to songs about the incarnation throughout the twelve days and write your reflections in a journal (For a great compilation album full of songs about the incarnation, check out this link: https://cardiphonia.bandcamp.com/album/songs-for-the-incarnation).

* Read a classic work of theology about the incarnation. You can do this on your own, but it’s always more fun with a reading partner! (Recommended reading: On the Incarnation by Athanasius; Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis; Basic Christianity by John Stott.)
Suggested Prayer Prompts

Use these prompts to guide your time of prayer. Rather than thinking of these as scripts that restrict or limit your prayers, think of them as conversation starters between you and God. Let them guide your heart and mind as you pray. Oh, and as you pray, don’t forget to listen.

Dear God…

Please show me how much you love me.

I don’t understand ______________ about you or about what it means to follow Jesus. Please help me understand.

If you’ve much closer than I think, why is it that you feel so far away?

Please fill me with wonder and awe about the incarnation.

What things are distracting me during this Christmas season? What things are pulling me away from you?

How might you want to shine your light in and through me this season?

Whom might you be inviting me to pray for or talk to?
Suggested Scripture Reading

12/25 – Matt 1:1-17
12/26 – Matt 1:18-24
12/27 – Matt 2:1-12
12/28 – Matt 2:13-23
1/1 – Luke 1:57-80
1/2 – Luke 2:1-21
1/4 – Luke 2:41-52
1/5 – Philippians 2:5-11
Epiphany Season

(January 6 – February 9)

Important Dates

January 6 - Epiphany
January 10 - First Epiphany Sunday
January 17 - Second Epiphany Sunday
January 24 - Third Epiphany Sunday
January 31 - Fourth Epiphany Sunday
February 7 - Fifth Epiphany Sunday
Discovering and Displaying Jesus

Have you ever been in need of light? Maybe you’ve stumbled around in a room, stubbing your toe on a table-leg while searching for a light-switch or flashlight. If so, then you know the relief and joy that comes with light (and the frustration of darkness!). If Advent is about preparing for the light, and if Christmas is about the coming of light, then Epiphany is about that light shining brightly for the whole world to see. Historically, three events in particular are given special emphasis during Epiphany: the visit of the wise men from the East (Matt 2:1-12); the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:13-17); and the turning of water into wine (John 2). *Epiphany* means “manifestation” and is about God revealing himself through the life, teachings, and miracles of Jesus.
So if this is what Epiphany is about, how exactly do we inhabit this season? By *discovering* and *displaying* Jesus. If you have committed to living the Christian year, you may be thinking, “Wait, I’ve already discovered Jesus. That’s why I’m doing this Christian year thing.” But *isn’t it possible that there are ways in which Jesus wants to grow, even challenge some of our assumptions about who he is and what it means to follow him as a disciple? Actually, *isn’t it probable?* This is precisely what Philip Yancey suggests in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, when he writes.

The more I studied Jesus, the more difficult it became to pigeonhole him. He said little about the Roman occupation, the main topic of conversation among his countrymen, and yet he took up a whip to drive petty profiteers from the Jewish temple. He urged obedience to the Mosaic law while acquiring the reputation as a lawbreaker. He could be stabbed by sympathy for a stranger, yet turn on his best friend with a flinty rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan!” He had uncompromising views on rich men and loose women, yet both types enjoyed his company… Two words one could never think of applying to the Jesus of the Gospels: boring and predictable (23).

As we seek to inhabit Epiphany, we’re invited to discover Jesus in new and fresh ways. To be surprised, humbled, and delighted by him – as well as confused and frustrated at times.
But we are not only invited to discover Jesus during Epiphany; we are also invited to display him. Imagine for a moment that a painful and deadly plague broke out and began to spread around the world. It infected everyone. You. Your friends. Family members. Neighbors. Coworkers. And imagine that there was no cure… until you discovered one. After successfully administering the cure to yourself, what would you do? Would you hide it and not tell anyone? (Of course not!) Would you sell it to the highest bidder? (I hope not.) You’d share it with everyone you know. You’d use every relationship, every communication platform at your disposal to get the word out so that everyone could be saved. Epiphany reminds us that Jesus is like that cure. He’s the one everyone needs. He’s the one through whom God wants to heal the whole world. Jesus tells his followers not only to “come and see” but also to “go and tell.” Through our lives, words, and actions, Epiphany invites us to become a living display of Jesus. As Bobby Gross puts it in his book, Living the Christian Year,

*The one who summons us to himself sends us out on his behalf. The one who shows himself to us asks us to make him known to others. The one who declares, “I am the light of the world,” says to us, “You are the light of the world”* (84).

**Sacred Practices**

During this season, consider adopting a new practice or habit that in some way embodies the heart of Epiphany. Feel free to choose from this list of suggested practices, or come up with one on your own!
• **Do Something to Rediscover Jesus** – It’s so easy to remake Jesus in our own image, to assume he thinks like me, acts like me, votes like me. But the more we get to know Jesus, the more we realize how gloriously unpredictable he is and we’re reminded that the goal of knowing him is to be remade into his image (not the other way around). Here are some ways you might consider rediscovering Jesus this Epiphany season.

* Read one of the four gospels in one sitting. It doesn’t take as long as you think! Or consider reading a gospel a week for four weeks. However you do it, pay extra close attention to Jesus as you read. Notice the stuff he says, what he does, how he he treats people. What upsets him? What upsets others about him? Make yourself a student of Jesus. It might help to write your observations in a journal as you read.

* Read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) once a week for five weeks (there are five weeks in Epiphany). That may sound daunting, but reading it is actually quite easy. The hard part is living it! Ask God as you read to help you become more like Jesus, who perfectly practiced what he preached.

* Identify someone in your life whom you respect, who loves Jesus, and whose life resembles his in visible ways. Offer to buy them coffee or a meal, then as you’re together, ask them to talk about their walk with Jesus.
• Ask them how they’ve cultivated a close walk with him. What spiritual disciplines do they practice? What have their challenges been? What doubts and questions have they had? What people, books, and experiences have had the biggest influence on their faith?

• **Do Something to Display Jesus** – Most parents are quick to talk about their children. Some people jump at the chance to discuss politics. Others could talk about sports all day long. It’s a fact of life that the stuff we enjoy talking about is usually what we love. If that’s true, why can it be so difficult to talk about Jesus with others? One way to inhabit Epiphany is to intentionally do something that encourages displaying Jesus to others. The following ideas are adapted from the book *Living the Christian Year* by Bobby Gross:
* Ask Jesus to increase your compassion for those far from God and for greater courage to speak to them.

* Read a book to sharpen your thinking about sharing your faith (Check out one called The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission by John Dickson).

* Choose a few friends or coworkers or family members to pray for during Epiphany.

* Become alert to openings in your everyday conversations where you can mention Jesus in a natural and interesting way.

* If someone seems open, suggest going for coffee and some conversation about spiritual matters – be prepared to really listen to their experiences, beliefs and questions.

* Invite a neighbor to come to a social activity with your Community Group or to a Sunday morning worship gathering.

* Give a friend a thoughtful book on Jesus or the Christian faith (here are a few recommended books: The Jesus I Never Knew by Philip Yancey; Who Is This Man? by John Ortberg; The Reason for God by Tim Keller)
Suggested Prayer Prompts

Use these prompts to guide your time of prayer. Rather than thinking of these as scripts that restrict or limit your prayers, think of them as conversation starters between you and God. Let them guide your heart and mind as you pray. Oh, and as you pray, don’t forget to listen.

Dear Lord…

In what ways does my understanding of you need to be challenged?

These are some of the things that I love about you… These are some things that confuse me…

Why is it so hard for me to talk about you with others?

Please burden my heart for those who are far from you.

What’s an area of my life that sorely needs to look more like you?

Thank you for the example of your life.
Suggested Scripture Reading

The Gospel of Mark presents an incredibly compelling portrait of Jesus. It’s the shortest of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and yet often provides the most vivid detail. As you read the saving story of Jesus during Epiphany, allow its central figure to surprise, challenge, and comfort you.

1/6 – Mark 1:1-13
1/7 – Mark 1:14-28
1/8 – Mark 1:29-45
1/9 – Mark 2
1/10 – Mark 3:1-19
1/11 – Mark 3:20-35
1/12 – Mark 4:1-20
1/13 – Mark 4:21-41
1/14 – Mark 5:1-20
1/15 – Mark 5:21-43
1/16 – Mark 6:1-13
1/17 – Mark 6:14-29
1/18 – Mark 6:30-56
1/19 – Mark 7:1-23
1/20 – Mark 7:24-37
1/21 – Mark 8:1-26
1/22 – Mark 8:27 – 9:1
1/23 – Mark 9:2-13
1/24 – Mark 9:14-29
1/25 – Mark 9:30-50
1/26 – Mark 10:1-12
1/27 – Mark 10:13-31
1/28 – Mark 10:32-52
1/29 – Mark 11
1/30 – Mark 12:1-27
1/31 – Mark 12:28-44
2/1 – Mark 13
2/2 – Mark 14:1-12
2/3 – Mark 14:27-42
2/4 – Mark 14:43-52
2/5 – Mark 14:53-72
2/6 – Mark 15:1-15
2/7 – Mark 15:16-32
2/8 – Mark 15:33-47
2/9 – Mark 16
I’m interested in the experience of sacred time, in our ability to feel the intersection of time and eternity at special places in the year... Sacred time is what makes the Church Year a genuinely transformative practice. [Christopher Hill]
Lenten Season

(February 10 – March 26)

Important Dates

February 10 - Ash Wednesday
March 20-26 - Holy Week
March 20 - Palm Sunday
March 24 - Maundy Thursday
March 25 - Good Friday
March 26 - Holy/Silent Saturday
Dust and Ashes

Besides Christmas and Easter, Lent is probably the most widely known part of the church calendar. *What are you giving up for Lent?* isn’t an uncommon question to hear during this season – even for those who consider themselves only nominally religious. Lent kicks off with Ash Wednesday and (depending upon your tradition) continues all the way through Holy Week.

Up to this point, we’ve been celebrating Jesus as the light of the world. We prepared our hearts at Advent, marveled at the incarnation during Christmas, and enjoyed both discovering and displaying Christ during Epiphany. But with the season of Lent comes a slight shift in tone. As the gospel of John tells us, Jesus came as the light of the world and “though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him… his own did not receive him” (1:10-11). As Jesus’ followers grew in number, so did his enemies. Jesus’ message of God’s coming Kingdom and his central place within it, corroborated by his miracles, felt too threatening to the religious establishment. Arguments ensued, tensions rose, plans to kill Jesus were made. Lent leads us to the cross. It reminds us that in order to receive eternal life, Jesus had to endure excruciating death. Before celebrating Easter, we must first pass through Good Friday.
The last week of Lent is called “Holy Week” and commemorates the week leading up to Jesus’ death on the cross. It begins with Palm Sunday, which is the Sunday directly preceding Easter and kicks off Holy Week, recalling the scene where Jesus enters Jerusalem like a king, riding on a donkey. Its label derives from the palm branches used by those who were cheering him upon his arrival. Maundy Thursday commemorates Jesus’ last supper with his disciples. Notice that when Jesus wanted his disciples to remember him, he didn’t give them a lecture, he gave them a meal. He also washed their feet. This leads us to the most important day in Lent. On Good Friday, we remember the day Jesus was executed on a Roman Cross. This humiliating and excruciating death would have looked like
an utter defeat to everyone around. But for those of us on this side of Easter, we know it was actually the means by which God accomplished cosmic victory. It was the supreme act of self-giving love with God as the giver and us as the recipients. The death (paired with the resurrection) is the cosmic hinge upon which the redemptive history of the world turns. Good Friday of course leads to Holy or Silent Saturday, which commemorates the silent day between Jesus’ death and resurrection.

So how do we inhabit Lent? By remembering two things: our frailty and our failings. First, our frailty. As the Psalmist prays, “You turn people back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust you mortals’” (90:3), Lent reminds us of the inevitability of death. It reminds us that the source of life lies outside of ourselves (opposed to some popular spiritualities today). It reminds us that we are not the Creator, we are the creatures. We are utterly and completely dependent upon God. Therefore, Lent invites us into a posture of humility.

Lent also reminds us of our failings. The gospel story leads us to the cross not simply because we are weak and frail, but because we are rebels. The sin and evil that Jesus defeated on Calvary is not simply an external reality – it lives within us. Lent reminds us of our moral culpability, the rebellion that lives in each of our hearts. In the Old Testament, ashes were often a sign of repentance, which is
why some Christians will begin Lent (on Ash Wednesday) by using ashes to mark a cross on their forehead. Lent invites us to walk with Jesus to the cross, remembering that it’s precisely because of our sin that he gave his life. It invites us to into a healthy posture of repentance and confession.

For many, all this talk of dust and ashes may seem a bit too gloomy. But recognizing our frailty and failings is not only massively freeing, it’s also incredibly important for understanding the gospel. It’s freeing because it means we can stop pretending that we have it all together, because let’s be honest – we don’t. It’s important for understanding the gospel because the very reason God sent Jesus was to rescue us from our sorry state. The world doesn’t need good advice. It needs good news! It needs to know that despite our weak and rebellious hearts, God’s love came down and accomplished victory over everything that distorts and destroys. Embracing the heart of Lent (i.e. recognizing our frailty and failings) enables us to understand and experience the depth and breadth of God’s love for us, which is ultimately what the cross of Christ reveals.

**Sacred Practices**

During this season, consider adopting a new practice or habit that in some way embodies the heart of Lent. Feel free to choose from this list of suggested practices, or come up with one on your own!
• **Fast** – While watching the morning news a couple years ago, there was one particular segment that caught my attention. The topic was widespread smart-phone addiction. The anchor was advocating that people should take some time to “detox” from their phones. While nothing explicitly spiritual was said, what the news anchor inherently sensed is that it’s healthy to take time going without something good in order to become someone better. Sadly, many Christians have forgotten that God’s people have been doing this for thousands of years! Remember, not only did Jesus himself fast (Matthew 4:2), but he expected his disciples to fast as well (Matthew 9:14-17). And after he was gone, they did (Acts 13:1-3)! This is not to say that fasting is a requirement for following Jesus, but it should be normal. And Lent is a great time to do it. In her book *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites*, Lynne Baab defines Christian fasting
as, “the voluntary denial of something for a specific period of time for a spiritual purpose.” Many people are turned off by fasting because it seems too ascetic, too restricting. But it’s actually designed to free us up to create space for God. The point of fasting during Lent is to expose our dependence on temporal things and rediscover our utter dependence upon God. Author Marjorie Holmes writes, “In a more tangible, visceral way than any other spiritual disciplines, fasting reveals our excessive attachments and the assumptions that lie behind them…. Fasting brings us face to face with how we put the material world ahead of its spiritual Source.” This is why many people choose to fast. If you’re interested in doing it, here’s a list of potential things you could give up for Lent (adapted from Living the Christian Year by Bobby Gross):

- Eating desserts and sweets
- Buying expensive cups of coffee
- Drinking alcoholic beverages
- Purchasing books
- Watching television
- Reading books and magazines
- Wearing colorful jewelry or using makeup
- Listening to music or watching movies
- Eating over-packaged, over-processed foods
- Shopping
- Using Facebook

• Observe one of the special days during Holy Week
If your church doesn’t do anything special for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, or Holy Saturday (also called Silent
Saturday), consider attending another church service during one of these days. Or consider doing something like participating in a Christian Seder for Maundy Thursday or committing to silence on Silent Saturday (though you might want to run that by anyone you happen to live with first).
Suggested Prayer Prompt

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24).

Suggested Scripture Reading

2/12 – Matthew 21:23-27 3/6 – Matthew 27:45-56
It's hard to do, living inside the church calendar. Our surrounding society gives us so many different calendrical cues. It tells us that the opening day of baseball season, not Easter, is the most important day of spring. It tells us that the days on which stores have great sales are the real red-letter days. Ironically, we don't always get a lot of help living into the calendar that the early church developed. [Lauren F. Winner]
Easter Season

(March 27 – May 14)

Important Dates

March 27 - Easter Sunday
May 5 - Ascension Day
May 15 - Pentecost Sunday
If you’re into NFL football, then you know that Superbowl Sunday is unquestionably the most important day of the NFL calendar. It’s what everyone anticipates and what everyone remembers. Easter Sunday is the Superbowl of the Christian calendar. After a long season of Lent, prayerfully pondering our frailty and failings, Easter shockingly and joyfully reminds us that the death and burial of Jesus is not the end of the story. Jesus rose from dead. And history would never be the same.

Like Christmas, our culture has done an effective job of reducing Easter to a one day celebration. But according to the Christian year, it gets a whole season. And it should! The resurrection of Jesus meant that his death on the cross actually wasn’t a tragic end to an otherwise promising messianic career (which is how everyone would’ve seen it in that day); rather, it was God’s surprising victory over the forces of sin, death, and evil. The resurrection of Jesus was
God’s NO to the world’s claim that pain, death, evil, injustice, hate, loneliness, and despair win in the end. The resurrection of Jesus was God’s YES to the deepest longings in every human heart for love, beauty, justice, purpose, belonging, hope, and peace. It signaled the dawning of a new creation, the inauguration of God’s coming kingdom. It’s actually quite difficult to find words to communicate its significance for the world and our lives. It changed everything for Jesus’ original followers, and we’re invited to let it change everything for us too. We’re invited to let his resurrection power establish victory in our lives over the things that hold us captive. And we’re invited to look forward to the day when our feeble and decaying bodies will be replaced with everlasting, resurrected bodies. We’re invited to experience the sentiments of Madeleine L’Engle, who summed up her feelings about Easter this way: “It is almost too brilliant for me to contemplate; it is like looking directly into the sun; I am burned and blinded by life.”

The season of Easter runs seven weeks long, and though Easter Sunday is the most important day, two other days deserve special mention. Ascension Day falls on the fortieth day (or the sixth Thursday) of Easter. It commemorates the day that Jesus, after several post-resurrection appearances to over five hundred of his followers (1 Corinthians 15:6), ascended to the right hand of God the Father. Ascension Day reminds us where Jesus is (heaven) and what he’s doing (ruling the world). It also reminds us of the mission he gave his disciples before leaving, which is now our mission:
All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

We are called to go, make, baptize, and teach. This is our mission. However, we’re not able to faithfully accomplish this mission on our own. We need help, or a helper. This leads us to the other day worth mentioning.

Pentecost Sunday occurs on the last day of Easter and commemorates the day recorded in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the community of Jesus-followers. The Holy Spirit is the proverbial fuel that drives the engine of the church. Pentecost appropriately concludes the season of Easter, sending the church into a period of time that will take us all the way to the next Advent. This roughly five-month stretch is called “ordinary
time” because it is “ordinal” (i.e. numbered), not because it’s boring or mundane. With Pentecost sending us into ordinary time as God’s Spirit-empowered people, we are invited to move boldly into the world seeking to embody the self-giving love of God to those around us – family, friends, neighbors, co-workers… until we reach Advent. Then the whole journey begins again.

Sacred Practices

During this season, consider adopting a new practice or habit that in some way embodies the heart of Easter. Feel free to choose from this list of suggested practices, or come up with one on your own!

• **Feast** – If Lent is often characterized by fasting, Easter should be characterized by feasting. To prolong the Easter celebration past one mere day, consider adopting a weekly food-related rhythm. You could have a different group of
friends over for dinner once a week. Or you could go out to eat with friends every Sunday during Easter after worship. Easter is a celebration. And what better way to celebrate is there than with food!

• **Enjoy God’s Creation** – If Easter is a celebration of life, why not commemorate it by enjoying God’s creation, which teems with life (even in the desert!)? You could schedule several hikes throughout the season of Easter with friends or on your own. You could go for walks at a nearby lake or park. You could schedule a special trip to the mountains or the Grand Canyon. Let God’s creation remind you that one day he will do to the whole of creation what he did to Jesus on Easter morning – he’ll breathe new life into it.

• **Add Something to Your Easter Worship** – Most churches celebrate Easter Sunday. But not all do a sunrise service or an Easter Vigil (held the Saturday night before Easter Sunday). In addition to your typical Easter Sunday worship, consider attending some other worship service at a nearby church.
Suggested Prayer Prompts

Dear Jesus...

Help me to understand the depth of meaning behind your resurrection.

Where in my life do I need to move from death to life?

Thank you for defeating death and for the hope of eternal life.

Please remind me that you have ascended to heaven and are in control, which means I don’t have to be.

Please help me to listen to the voice of your Spirit.
Suggested Scripture Reading

The themes from these passages of Scripture include Resurrection, Ascension, the Holy Spirit, and faithful living. Enjoy soaking in these rich texts this Easter season.

3/37 – Matthew 28:1-10
3/28 – Matthew 28:11-20
3/29 – Mark 16:1-8
3/30 – Mark 16:9-20
4/3 – John 20:1-10
4/4 – John 20:11-18
4/5 – John 20:19-31
4/6 – John 21:1-14
4/7 – John 21:15-25
4/8 – Romans 8:1-17
4/9 – Romans 8:18-30
4/10 – Romans 8:31-39
4/11 – Acts 1:1-11
4/12 – Acts 1:12-26
4/14 – Acts 2:14-41
4/15 – Acts 2:42-47
4/16 – Galatians 1:1-10
4/17 – Galatians 1:11-24
4/18 – Galatians 2:1-10
4/19 – Galatians 2:11-21
4/20 – Galatians 3:1-14
4/21 – Galatians 3:15-22
4/22 – Galatians 3:23 – 4:7
4/23 – Galatians 3:8-20
4/24 – Galatians 4:21-31
4/25 – Galatians 5:1-12
4/26 – Galatians 5:13-26
4/27 – Galatians 6:1-10
4/28 – Galatians 6:11-18
4/29 – Philippians 1:1-11
4/30 – Philippians 1:12-26
5/1 – Philippians 1:27-30
5/2 – Philippians 2:1-11
5/3 – Philippians 2:12-18
5/4 – Philippians 2:19-30
5/5 – Philippians 3:1-14
5/6 – Philippians 3:15-21
5/7 – Philippians 4:1-9
5/8 – Philippians 4:10-23
5/9 – Titus 1:1-9
5/10 – Titus 1:10-16
5/11 – Titus 2
5/12 – Titus 3
5/13 – Philemon
5/14 – 2 John
5/15 – 3 John
Almost more than anything else I’ve done since becoming a Christian, trying to live inside church time has formed me in the Christian story. Which is to say, almost more than anything else, living inside church time has formed me in Jesus’ story. Jesus drew my attention to himself, and the church calendar has kept it fixed there – on him. Church time has offered me the chance to reprise and reiterate Jesus’ life every year. [Lauren F. Winner]