

# THE LITURGICAL YEAR

Advent **Year A**, **2010-2011**; Nov 28 - Dec 24, 2010

Advent Season (Nov 28 - Dec 24, 2010)

Christmas (Dec 25, 2010 - Jan 5, 2011)

The Twelve Days of Christmas (Dec 25, 2010 - Jan 5, 2011)

Epiphany (and Ordinary Time until Lent) (Jan 6 - March 8, 2011)

Shrove Tuesday or *Mardi Gras* (March 8, 2011)

Ash Wednesday (March 9, 2011)

Lent (March 9 - April 23, 2011)

Holy Week (March 17 - April 23 [24], 2011)

Maundy Thursday (April 21 2011)

Good Friday (April 22, 2011)

Easter (April 24, 2011)

Pentecost (June 12, 2011)

Ordinary Time (June 13 - Nov 26, 2011)

# The Season of Advent

## Anticipation and Hope

Dennis Bratcher

☉The Colors of Advent ☉ The Spirit of Advent ☉Evergreens and The Advent Wreath  
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Advent is the beginning of the Church Year for most churches in the Western tradition. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, which is the Sunday nearest November 30, and ends on Christmas Eve (Dec 24). If Christmas Eve is a Sunday, it is counted as the fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas Eve proper beginning at sundown.

### The Colors of Advent

Historically, the primary sanctuary color of Advent is **Purple**. This is the color of penitence and fasting as well as the color of royalty to welcome the Advent of the King. Purple is still used in some traditions (for example Roman Catholic). The purple of Advent is also the color of suffering used during Lent and Holy Week. This points to an important connection between Jesus' birth and death. The nativity, the Incarnation, cannot be separated from the crucifixion. The purpose of Jesus' coming into the world, of the "Word made flesh" and dwelling among us, is to reveal God and His grace to the world through Jesus' life and teaching, but also through his suffering, death, and resurrection. To reflect this emphasis, originally Advent was a time of penitence and fasting, much as the Season of Lent and so shared the color of Lent.

In the four weeks of Advent the third Sunday came to be a time of rejoicing that the fasting was almost over (in some traditions it is called Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin word for "rejoice"). The shift from the purple of the Season to pink or rose for the third Sunday Advent candles reflected this lessening emphasis on penitence as attention turned more to celebration of the season.

In recent times, however, Advent has undergone a shift in emphasis, reflected in a change of colors used in many churches. Except in the Eastern churches, the penitential aspect of the Season has been almost totally replaced by an emphasis on hope and anticipation.

In many churches the third Sunday remains the Sunday of Joy marked by pink or rose. However, most Protestant churches now use blue to distinguish the Season of Advent from **Lent**. **Royal Blue** is sometimes used as a symbol of royalty. Some churches use **Bright Blue** to symbolize the night sky, the anticipation of the impending announcement of the King's coming, or to symbolize the waters of Genesis 1, the beginning of a new creation. Some churches, including some Catholic churches, use blue violet to preserve the traditional use of purple while providing a visual distinction between the purple or red violet of Lent.

This does not eliminate any sense of penitence from the Season. With the focus on the Advent or Coming of Jesus, especially in anticipating His Second Advent, there remains a need for preparation for that coming. Most liturgical churches incorporate confessional prayers into the services of Advent that relate to a sense of unworthiness as we anticipate His Coming. It is appropriate even in more traditional services of worship to incorporate confessional prayers as part of the anticipation and preparation of the Season.

With the shift to blue for Advent in most non-Catholic churches, some churches retain pink among the Advent colors, but use it on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. It still remains associated with Joy, but is sometimes used as the climax of the Advent Season on the last Sunday before Christmas.

Red and Green are more secular colors of Christmas. Although they derive from older European practices of using evergreens and holly to symbolize ongoing life and hope that Christ's birth brings into a cold world, they are never used as liturgical colors during Advent since those colors have other uses in other parts of the church year (see [Colors of the Church Year](#)).

## The Meaning of "Advent"

The word **Advent** means "coming" or "arrival." The focus of the entire season is the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Advent, and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his Second Advent. Thus, Advent is far more than simply marking a 2,000 year old event in history. It is celebrating a truth about God, the revelation of God in Christ whereby all of creation might be reconciled to God. That is a process in which we now participate, and the consummation of which we anticipate. Scripture reading for Advent will reflect this emphasis on the Second Advent, including themes of accountability for faithfulness at His coming, judgment on sin, and the hope of eternal life.

In this double focus on past and future, Advent also symbolizes the spiritual journey of individuals and a congregation, as they affirm that Christ has come, that He is present in the world today, and that He will come again in power. That acknowledgment provides a basis for Kingdom ethics, for holy living arising from a profound sense that we live "between the times" and are called to be faithful stewards of what is entrusted to us as God's people. So, as the church celebrates God's inbreaking into history in the Incarnation, and anticipates a future consummation to that history for which "all creation is groaning awaiting its redemption," it also confesses its own responsibility as a people commissioned to "love the Lord your God with all your heart" and to "love your neighbor as yourself."

## The Spirit of Advent

Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, of longing. There is a yearning for deliverance from the evils of the world, first expressed by Israelite slaves in Egypt as they cried out from their bitter oppression. It is the cry of those who have experienced the tyranny of injustice in a world under the curse of sin, and yet who have hope of deliverance by a God who has heard the cries of oppressed slaves and brought deliverance!

It is that hope, however faint at times, and that God, however distant He sometimes seems, which brings to the world the anticipation of a King who will rule with truth and justice and righteousness over His people and in His creation. It is that hope that once anticipated, and now anticipates anew, the reign of an Anointed One, a Messiah, who will bring peace and justice and righteousness to the world.

Part of the expectation also anticipates a judgment on sin and a calling of the world to accountability before God. We long for God to come and set the world right! Yet, as the prophet Amos warned, the expectation of a coming judgment at the "Day of the Lord" may not be the day of light that we might want, because the penetrating light of God's judgment on sin will shine just as brightly on God's people.

Because of this important truth, especially in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Season of Advent has been a time of fasting and penitence for sins similar to the Season of Lent. However, a different emphasis for the season of Advent has gradually unfolded in much of the rest of the church. The season of Advent has come to be celebrated more in terms of expectation or anticipation. Yet, the

anticipation of the Coming of the Messiah throughout the Old Testament and Judaism was not in connection with remembrance of sins. Rather, it was in the context of oppression and injustice, the longing for redemption, not from personal guilt and sin but from the systemic evil of the world expressed in evil empires and tyrants. It is in that sense that all creation groans for its redemption as we witness the evil that so dominates our world (Rom 8:18-25).

Of course, there is the problem of longing for vindication from an evil world when we are contributors to that evil. This is the power of the images of Amos when he warns about longing for the "Day of the Lord" that will really be a day of darkness (Amos 5:18-20). Still, even with Amos' warning the time of Advent is one of expectation and anticipation, a longing for God's actions to restore all things and vindicate the righteous. This is why during Advent we as Christians also anticipate the Second Coming as a twin theme of the season. So, while some church traditions focus on penitence during Advent, and there remains a place for that, the spirit of that expectation from the Old Testament is better captured with a joyous sense of expectancy. Rather than a time of mourning and fasting, Advent is celebrated as a time of joy and happiness as we await the coming of the King. (see [Can We Sing Christmas Carols During Advent?](#))

There will be time enough during the rest of the journey through the Church Year to remember our sins. It begins in Epiphany when we hear about the brotherhood of the Kingdom, and realize our failure to effect it. Then as we move toward and through Lent we realize that the coming of Jesus served more to lay bare our own sin than it did to vindicate our righteousness. There will be time to shed Peter's bitter tears as we realize that what started with such possibility and expectation has apparently ended in such failure.

It is only as we experience that full cycle, beginning with unbridled joy in Advent that slowly fades into the realization of what we have done with and to the Christ, that the awful reality of Good Friday can have its full impact. And in that realization we can finally be ready to hear the Good News on Resurrection Sunday! That is the journey that the disciples took. And so there is value in taking the same journey beginning with the anticipation and joy of Advent!

So, we celebrate with gladness the great promise in the Advent, yet knowing that there is also a somber tone as the theme of threat is added to the theme of promise. This is reflected in some of the Scripture readings for Advent, in which there is a strong prophetic tone of accountability and judgment on sin. But this is also faithful to the role of the Coming King who comes to rule, save, and judge the world.

Because of the dual themes of threat and promise, Advent is a time of preparation that is marked by prayer. While [Lent](#) is characterized by fasting and a spirit of penitence, Advent's prayers are prayers of humble devotion and commitment, prayers of submission, prayers for deliverance, prayers from those walking in darkness who are awaiting and anticipating a great light (Isa 9)!

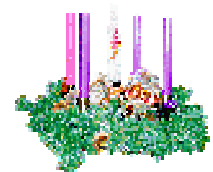
The spirit of Advent is expressed well in the parable of the bridesmaids who are anxiously awaiting the coming of the Bridegroom (Matt 25:1-13). There is profound joy at the Bridegroom's expected coming. And yet a warning of the need for preparation echoes through the parable. But even then, the prayer of Advent is still:

Come, O Come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel!

## Evergreens and The Advent Wreath

The beginning of Advent is a time for the [hanging of the green](#), decoration of the church with evergreen wreaths, boughs, or trees that help to symbolize the new and everlasting life brought through Jesus the Christ. Some churches have a special weekday service, or the first Sunday evening of Advent, or even the first Sunday morning of Advent, in which the church is decorated and the Advent wreath put in place. This service is most often primarily of music, especially choir and hand bells, and Scripture reading, along with an explanation of the various symbols as they are placed in the sanctuary.

**The Advent wreath** is an increasingly popular symbol of the beginning of the Church year in many churches as well as homes. It is a circular evergreen wreath (real or artificial) with five candles, four around the wreath and one in the center. Since the wreath is symbolic and a vehicle to tell the Christmas story, there are various ways to understand the symbolism. The exact meaning given to the various aspects of the wreath is not as important as the story to which it invites us to listen, and participate.



The **circle of the wreath** reminds us of God Himself, His eternity and endless mercy, which has no beginning or end. The **green of the wreath** speaks of the hope that we have in God, the hope of newness, of renewal, of eternal life. **Candles** symbolize the light of God coming into the world through the birth of His son. The **four outer candles** represent the period of waiting during the four Sundays of Advent, which themselves symbolize the four centuries of waiting between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ.

The **colors of the candles** vary with different traditions, but there are usually three purple or blue candles, corresponding to the sanctuary colors of Advent, and one pink or rose candle. One of the purple candles is lighted the first Sunday of Advent, a Scripture is read, a short devotional or reading is given, and a prayer offered. On subsequent Sundays, previous candles are relighted with an additional one lighted. The pink candle is usually lighted on the third Sunday of Advent. However, different churches or traditions light the pink candle on different Sundays depending on the symbolism used (see above on [Colors of Advent](#)). In Churches that use a [Service of the Nativity](#), it is often lighted on the fourth Sunday of Advent, the final Sunday before Christmas.

The **light of the candles** itself becomes an important symbol of the season. The light reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world that comes into the darkness of our lives to bring newness, life, and hope. It also reminds us that we are called to be a light to the world as we reflect the light of God's grace to others (Isa 42:6). The progression in the lighting of the candles symbolizes the various aspects of our waiting experience. As the candles are lighted over the four week period, it also symbolizes the darkness of fear and hopelessness receding and the shadows of sin falling away as more and more light is shed into the world. The flame of each new candle reminds the worshippers that something is happening, and that more is yet to come. Finally, the light that has come into the world is plainly visible as the Christ candle is lighted at Christmas, and worshippers rejoice over the fact that the promise of long ago has been realized.

The **first candle** is traditionally the candle of **Expectation** or **Hope** (or in some traditions, Prophecy). This draws attention to the anticipation of the coming of an Anointed One, a Messiah, that weaves its way like a golden thread through Old Testament history. As God's people were abused by power hungry kings, led astray by self-centered prophets, and lulled into apathy by half-hearted religious leaders, there arose a longing among some for God to raise up a new king who could show them how to be God's people. They yearned for a return of God's dynamic presence in their midst.

And so, God revealed to some of the prophets that indeed He would not leave His people without a true Shepherd. While they expected a new earthly king, their expectations fell far short of God's

revelation of Himself in Christ. And yet, the world is not yet fully redeemed. So, we again with expectation, with hope, await God's new work in history, the second Advent, in which He will again reveal Himself to the world. And we understand in a profound sense that the best, the highest of our expectations will fall far short of what our Lord's Second Advent will reveal!

The **remaining three candles** of Advent may be associated with different aspects of the Advent story in different churches, or even in different years. Usually they are organized around characters or themes as a way to unfold the story and direct attention to the celebrations and worship in the season. So, the sequence for the remaining three Sundays might be Bethlehem, Shepherds, Angels. Or Love, Joy, Peace. Or John the Baptist, Mary, the Magi. Or the Annunciation, Proclamation, Fulfillment. Whatever sequence is used, the Scripture readings, prayers, lighting of the candles, the participation of worshipers in the service, all are geared to unfolding the story of redemption through God's grace in the Incarnation.

The **third candle**, usually for the Third Sunday of Advent, is traditionally Pink or Rose, and symbolizes **Joy** at the soon Advent of the Christ. It marks a shift from the more solemn tone of the first two Sundays of Advent that focus on Preparation and Hope, to a more joyous atmosphere of anticipation and expectancy. Sometimes the colors of the sanctuary and vestments are also changed to Rose for this Sunday. As noted above, in some churches the pink Advent candle is used on the fourth Sunday to mark the joy at the impending Nativity of Jesus.

Whatever sequence is adopted for these Sundays, the theme of Joy can still be the focus for the pink candle. For example, when using the third Sunday to commemorate the visit of the Magi the focus can be on the Joy of worshipping the new found King. Or the Shepherds as the symbol for the third Sunday brings to mind the joy of the proclamation made to them in the fields, and the adoration expressed as they knelt before the Child at the manger. If used on the fourth Sunday of Advent, it can symbolize the Joy in fulfilled hope.

The **center candle** is white and is called the **Christ Candle**. It is traditionally lighted on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. However, since many Protestant churches do not have services on those days, many light it on the Sunday preceding Christmas, with all five candles continuing to be lighted in services through **Epiphany** (Jan 6). The **central location of the Christ Candle** reminds us that the incarnation is the heart of the season, giving light to the world.

## Celebrating Advent

Advent is one of the few Christian festivals that can be observed in the home as well as at church. In its association with Christmas, Advent is a natural time to involve children in activities at home that directly connect with worship at church. In the home an Advent wreath is often placed on the dining table and the candles lighted at meals, with Scripture readings preceding the lighting of the candles, especially on Sunday. A new candle is lighted each Sunday during the four weeks, and then the same candles are lighted each meal during the week. In this context, it provides the opportunity for family devotion and prayer together, and helps teach the Faith to children, especially if they are involved in reading the daily Scriptures.

It is common in many homes to try to mark the beginning of Advent in other ways as well, for the same purpose of instruction in the faith. Some families decorate the house for the beginning of Advent, or bake special cookies or treats, or simply begin to use table coverings for meals. An **Advent Calendar** is a way to keep children involved in the entire season. There are a wide variety of Advent calendars, but usually they are simply a card or poster with windows that can be opened, one each day of Advent, to reveal some symbol or picture associated with the Old Testament story leading up to the birth of Jesus. One unique and specialized Advent calendar that can be used either in the home or the sanctuary is a **Jesse Tree**. (We have available an online Advent calendar with devotionals for each day

of Advent as well as Christmas through Epiphany Day: [NazNet's Advent and Christmas Celebration](#)). All of these provide opportunities to teach children the significance of this sacred time, and to remind ourselves of it as well.

In congregational worship, the Advent wreath is the central teaching symbol of the season, the focal point for drawing the congregation into the beginning of the story of redemption that will unfold throughout the church year. For this reason, members of the congregation are often involved in lighting the Advent candles and reading the appropriate Scriptures each Sunday. While in some churches it is customary for this to be done by families, it can also be an especially good opportunity to demonstrate the unity of the entire community of Faith by including those without families, such as those never married, divorced, widowed, elderly who live by themselves, or college students away from home.

## Small Things and Possibility: An Advent Reflection

We live in a world in which bigger and better define our expectations for much of life. We have become so enamored by super size, super stars, and high definition that we tend to view life through a lens that so magnifies what we expect out of the world that we tend not to see potential in small things. But as the prophet Zechariah reminds us (Zech 4:10), we should not "despise the day of small things," because God does some of his best work with small beginnings and impossible situations.

It is truly a humbling experience to read back through the Old Testament and see how frail and imperfect all the "heroes" actually are. Abraham, the coward who cannot believe the promise. Jacob, the cheat who struggles with everybody. Joseph, the immature and arrogant teen. Moses, the impatient murderer who cannot wait for God. Gideon, the cowardly Baal-worshipper. Samson, the womanizing drunk. David, the power abusing adulterer. Solomon, the unwise wise man. Hezekiah, the reforming king who could not quite go far enough. And finally, a very young Jewish girl from a small village in a remote corner of a great empire.

It never ceases to amaze me that God often begins with small things and inadequate people. It certainly seems that God could have chosen "bigger" things and "better" people to do His work in the world. Yet if God can use them, and reveal Himself through them in such marvelous ways, it means that He might be able to use me, inadequate, and unwise, and too often lacking in faith that I am. And it means that I need to be careful that I do not in my own self-righteousness put limits on what God can do with the smallest things, the most unlikely of people, in the most hopeless of circumstances. I think that is part of the wonder of the Advent Season.

I am convinced that one of the main purposes of the incarnation of Jesus was to provide hope. While most people today want to talk about the death of Jesus and the Atonement of sins, the early Church celebrated the Resurrection and the hope it embodied. It was a proclamation of a truth that rang throughout the Old Testament, that endings are not always endings but are opportunities for God to bring new beginnings. The Resurrection proclaimed that truth even about humanity's greatest fear, death itself.

Both the season of Advent and the [season of Lent](#) are about hope. It is not just hope for a better day or hope for the lessening of pain and suffering, although that is certainly a significant part of it. It is more about hope that human existence has meaning and possibility beyond our present experiences, a hope that the limits of our lives are not nearly as narrow as we experience them to be. It is not that **we** have possibility in ourselves, but that **God** is a God of new things and so all things are possible (Isa 42:9, Mt 19:26, Mk 14:36)

God's people in the first century wanted Him to come and change their oppressive circumstances, and were angry when those immediate circumstances did not change. But that is a short sighted view of the nature of hope. Our hope cannot be in circumstances, no matter how badly we want them or how

important they are to us. The reality of human existence, with which the [Book of Job](#) struggles, is that God's people experience that physical existence in the same way that others do. Christians get sick and die, Christians are victims of violent crimes, and Christians are hurt and killed in traffic accidents, bombings, war, and in some parts of the world, famine (see [The Problem of Natural Evil](#)).

If our hope is only in our circumstances, as we define them to be good or as we want them to be to make us happy, we will always be disappointed. That is why we hope, not in circumstances, but in God. He has continually, over the span of four thousand years, revealed himself to be a God of newness, of possibility, of redemption, the recovery or transformation of possibility from endings that goes beyond what we can think or even imagine (Eph 3:2). The best example of that is the crucifixion itself, followed by the resurrection. That shadow of the cross falls even over the manger.

Yet, it all begins in the hope that God will come and come again into our world to reveal himself as a God of newness, of possibility, a God of new things. This time of year we contemplate that hope embodied, enfleshed, incarnated, in a newborn baby, the perfect example of newness, potential, and possibility. During Advent, we groan and long for that newness with the hope, the expectation, indeed the faith, that God will once again be faithful to see our circumstances, to hear our cries, to know our longings for a better world and a whole life (Ex 3:7). And we hope that as he first came as an infant, so he will come again as King! (See [The Second Coming](#))

My experience tells me that those who have suffered and still hope understand far more about God and about life than those who have not. Maybe that is what hope is about: a way to live, not just to survive, but to live authentically amidst all the problems of life with a Faith that continues to see possibility when there is no present evidence of it, just because God is God. That is also the wonder of Advent.

## Music for Advent

### Traditional Songs for Advent

(Full lyrics for these can be found at various places online, such as [The Cyber Hymnal™](#))

Christ, whose glory fills the skies  
Come, thou long expected Jesus  
Comfort, comfort ye, my people  
Creator of the stars of night  
Day of wrath! O day of mourning, Part 1 (English translation of *Dies Irae*)  
Go, labor on! Spend and be spent  
Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding (English translation of *Vox clara ecce intonat*)  
Hark! The glad sound  
Hark! The voice eternal  
High o'er the lonely hills  
Hosanna to the living Lord (for the first Sunday of Advent)  
Let all mortal flesh keep silent (English translation of Σιγησάτο παρα σαρκ βροτεία)  
Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates (for the first Sunday of Advent; two versions)  
Lift up your heads, rejoice (for the third Sunday of Advent)  
Light of those whose dreary dwelling  
Little children, Advent bids you (for the fourth Sunday of Advent; Second Advent)  
Lo! He comes, with clouds descending  
Lord Christ, when first thou came to men (two versions)  
O Come, Divine Messiah  
O come, O come, Emmanuel! (English translation of *Veni, veni Emanuel*)



O Day of God, draw nigh  
O North, with all thy vales of green  
O very God of very God  
O Savior, rend the heavens wide  
O Word, that goest forth on high  
On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry  
Rejoice, rejoice, believers!  
Savior of the nations, come! (English translation of *Veni Redemptor gentium*)  
Sleepers, wake!  
The advent of our King  
The day is surely drawing near (for the fourth Sunday of Advent; Second Advent)  
The King shall come when morning dawns  
The Lord will come and not be slow  
The world is very evil (English Translation of *Hora novissima*)  
Thy kingdom come! on bended knee  
Thy kingdom come, O God  
Wake, awake, for night is flying  
Watchman, tell us of the night  
When shades of night around us close

### Modern and Contemporary Songs for Advent

(Full lyrics for some of these can be found at various places online, such as [The Cyber Hymnal™](#); others are fully copyrighted and can be obtained only from publishers)

At the coming of the Lord  
Be Immanuel in me  
Before the starry universe  
Breath of heaven (for the fourth Sunday of Advent)  
Child of wondrous love  
Come, our Lord (also a song for Eucharist)  
From David's city  
Have mercy  
Hear the prophets talking  
I need a silent night (for the third or fourth Sunday of Advent)  
Immanuel, Immanuel  
Light a candle  
People look east  
Prayer for God's presence  
Prepare us  
The Advent candle shines with hope  
There's a voice in the wilderness crying  
This is my song (tune *Finlandia*; for the fourth Sunday of Advent)  
To a maid engaged to Joseph (for the third or fourth Sunday of Advent)  
Veiled in darkness Judah lay (for the fourth Sunday of Advent)  
We have a hope  
Welcome to our world (for the fourth Sunday of Advent)  
When will the Savior come?

## Advent Songs Sung to Christmas Tunes

(Full lyrics for these can be found at various places online, such as [The Cyber Hymnal™](#))

The King shall come when morning dawns (using tune *Antioch*, Joy to the World)  
Watchman, tell us of the night (using tune *Mendelssohn*, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing)  
The people that in darkness sat (using tune *Christmas*, While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks)  
Lo, He comes with clouds descending (using tune *Regent Square*, Angels from the Realms of Glory)  
Of the Father's love begotten (using tune *W Zlobie Lezy*, Infant Holy, Infant Lowly)

## Instrumental

(Music and arrangement scores for these are fully copyrighted and can be obtained only from publishers)

Gabriel's Oboe

# The Christmas Season

## Dennis Bratcher

Among all the festivals and holidays of the Christian Church year, Christmas remains the most observed and most popular. Of course, much of that popularity, especially in the West, is due to the commercial promotion of the holiday. In many Protestant churches through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Christmas was noted but not really celebrated. While observed in some church liturgies, there was very little in the way of gift giving and family celebration that marks the season today. In fact, until relatively recently, in the middle to latter nineteenth century, Christmas was a regular work day. In many areas of the world today, it remains a comparatively insignificant holiday even among Christians. Still, the Christmas story captures the heart in a way that transcends all the commercial hype.

The degree to which the holiday is valued in Christian culture sometimes goes beyond the other most Holy Day of Christianity, Easter or Resurrection Sunday. There is something about human nature that would rather focus on the birth of babies than on the torture and death of accused criminals! Especially for the young, the story of Christmas with all the images of angels and a young mother, of shepherds and a stable, of wise men and royal intrigue make the season captivating. Perhaps that is part of the intent of the different ways the story is told in the Gospel accounts, as well as the preservation of so many traditions in the Church surrounding this holiday.

Historically, Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth to a young maiden from Galilee. Theologically, Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ, the self-revelation of God to the world in human form for the reconciliation of humanity to Himself. All the details of the various accounts concerning Jesus' birth revolve around that central truth (see [The Meaning of Christmas](#) below).

While we most often think about Christmas as a single day, it is actually a season of the year. In its popular sense, it extends four weeks before Christmas Day and for two weeks after. However, the time before Christmas is a special season called [Advent](#), comprising the four Sundays before Christmas Day.

While the entire season of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany can be seen together, they each have distinctly different roles in the Church year. The term "Advent" means "coming" and is a season of expectation and hope, the time of waiting for the coming of the Messiah that is celebrated at Christmas. This time of waiting symbolizes the waiting throughout the Old Testament for the new act of God that would bring deliverance to his people. For Christians this season of expectation also symbolizes the waiting in anticipation for the Second Coming of the Christ when he will return and restore all things (see [The Season of Advent](#)).

Contrary to advertising campaigns that tout Christmas as beginning with Advent (or Halloween!), the actual Christmas Season in most Western church traditions begins at sunset on Christmas Eve, December 24, and lasts through January 5. Since this time includes 12 days, the season of Christmas is known in many places as the [Twelve Days of Christmas](#). January 6 is usually celebrated as [Epiphany](#), although it carries different significance in various church traditions. Due to different calendars in use in various eras and locations of the church, some cultures and church traditions celebrate Christmas on January 6 (in the older Julian calendar still used as the religious calendar in Eastern Churches, January 6 corresponds to December 24 on our modern calendar).

## The Origin of Christmas and Epiphany

The origins of the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany, as well as the dates on which they are observed, are rooted deeply in the history of the early church. There has been much scholarly debate concerning the exact time of the year when Jesus was born, and even in what year he was born. Actually, we do not know either. The best estimate is that Jesus was probably born in the springtime, somewhere between the years of 6 and 4 BC. The lack of a consistent system of timekeeping in the first century, mistakes in later calendars and calculations, and lack of historical details to cross reference events has led to this imprecision in fixing Jesus' birth. This suggests that the Christmas celebration is not an observance of a historical date, but a commemoration of the event in terms of worship.

As important as Christmas is in our modern religious culture today, the actual celebration of this holiday as a central part of the church year is a relatively recent phenomenon. Most historians agree that the celebration of Christmas did not begin until about the fourth century, although they are not certain exactly how or why Christmas began as a Christian festival.

The most commonly accepted conclusion is that Christmas originated in Roman culture that celebrated the winter solstice on December 25 (the solstice is the point where the sun's ecliptic, or apparent path in the sky, is at its furthestmost northern and southern point, occurring by our calendar around June 22 and December 22; in the northern hemisphere, we note these days today as the beginning of Summer and Winter). This was a pagan celebration of the birth of the sun (*Natalis Solis Invicti*) as it once again began its annual journey back north from its southernmost point through the heavens. This marked the change of seasons that promised springtime and renewal of the earth. Christians were reluctant to participate in the pagan festivals, yet the cultural and social pressures to participate were enormous. By the early fourth century, Christians began celebrating the birth of Jesus at this time, so it is likely that Christmas was as an alternative to the pagan observance of the winter solstice.

Because of the differences in calendars in use at that time, the Eastern Church celebrated the Incarnation on what is January 6 on our western calendars (although on their calendars this corresponded to December 24), also as an alternative to pagan solstice festivals. Today, most of the Eastern churches (with the exception of Russian Orthodox) follow the Western practice of celebrating Christmas on December 25. However the Western churches also adopted the January 6 date and used it to observe what is now called [Epiphany](#). In effect, the Eastern churches adopted December 25th from the West and the western churches adopted January 6 from the East, and now both are observed in both traditions, although with different emphases.

## Christmas Traditions

The traditions surrounding the celebration of this season are almost as numerous as the people who celebrate it. Through the years, the holiday has been adapted to local customs, culture, and history and so has produced an amazing variety of Christmas traditions around the world. Some, such as the giving of gifts or the use of a star, arose directly or indirectly out of the biblical nativity stories. Some, such as the legends of Saint Nicholas, have their origin in church history, historical fact that became legendary as it was embellished in story. Others, such as the use of evergreens and the yule log, have pagan origins but were transformed into distinctively Christian traditions. Others, such as the use of a crèche or caroling, arose first as local traditions in certain countries or regions that became widely adopted. And still others, such as, reindeer, elves, the North Pole, etc., have largely secular origins and are only loosely associated with the holiday in popular imagination or marketing techniques.

## The Origin of "Xmas"

The abbreviation of "Xmas" for Christmas, long reviled by many conservative and Low Church Christians, is not nearly as blasphemous as many contend. Rather than a sacrilegious removal of "Christ" from Christmas and replacing him with an unknown, as some claim, the "Xmas" abbreviation has a long history in the church. In Greek, the language in which the New Testament was first written, "chi" (χ or X), which is almost identical to the Roman alphabet "X," is the first letter of the word "Christ" (χριστός, or as it would be written in older manuscripts, ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ). In fact, the symbol of the fish in the early church came from using the first letter of several titles used for Jesus (Jesus Christ Son of God Savior) that when combined spelled the Greek word for fish (ιχθυσ, *ichthus*).

In the early days of printing when typesetting was done by hand and was very tedious and expensive, abbreviations were common. The church began to use the abbreviation "X" for the word "Christ" in religious publications. From there, the abbreviation moved into general use in newspapers and other publications, and "Xmas" became an accepted way of printing "Christmas" (for a more detailed explanation see [The Origin of "Xmas"](#)).

## The Biblical Nativity Narratives

Even though Christmas is the most popular and most celebrated of the Christian Holy Days, it is interesting that it does not play such a central role in the biblical traditions or the Gospel accounts. Nativity narratives are conspicuously absent in both Mark and John who begin their Gospels with the ministry of John the Baptist, some 30 years after Jesus' birth. This helps explain why John the Baptist and his ministry is usually the focus of one Sunday during Advent (usually the second Sunday). Nativity narratives are only present in Matthew and Luke. But even there, the story is not told as a single narrative in either Gospel, but rather each emphasizes different aspects of what we have come to celebrate as the Christmas story.

Matthew tells the story from the perspective of Joseph, and his deliberations about what he should do with his pregnant wife-to-be. The story unfolds with reassurance from God's messenger that God is at work in this extraordinary circumstance. It is Matthew who introduces the Isaiah quotation from which we get the title Emmanuel for Jesus (see [Immanuel in Isaiah and Matthew](#)). However, Matthew gives us no details about the actual birth of Jesus, only a few events leading up to the birth, and than an account of what happened "after Jesus was born" (Matt 2:1).

It is only in Matthew that we learn of the visit of the Magi ("wise men") and the miraculous star in the East that led them to Jesus. It is popular imagination, and perhaps the need to construct a concise story that can fit into a crèche (the traditional manger scene), that places the Magi at the Bethlehem

stable. It was probably much later, perhaps as much as two years, when they actually visited the Christ child. And it is likewise legend or tradition that assumes three Magi, probably from the fact of three gifts. However, the biblical narrative never says how many Magi came.

Only Matthew recounts God's warning to Joseph, telling him to flee to Egypt with Mary and the child to escape the wrath of Herod. He also tells of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents in Bethlehem as the deranged Herod sought to eliminate any competition for his throne. Matthew also again tells of messenger from God that directs the Holy Family to settle in Nazareth

Most of the nativity narrative with which we are most familiar from Christmas plays and public Scripture readings come from Luke's Gospel. Luke's account is much different than Matthew's. It is told from the perspective of Mary, and her struggle to come to terms with this astonishing event. Luke actually begins his narrative with the miraculous birth of John the Baptist and the disbelief of his father Zechariah. The entire narrative places two women, Elizabeth and Mary, at the center of the story. A messenger of God, in Luke's account named Gabriel, also plays an important role announcing the births of both John and Jesus.

Only Luke incorporates the blessing of Elizabeth on Mary that became part of the "Hail Mary" prayer of the Roman Catholic Rosary. Likewise, it is only Luke who tells the nativity narrative through the beautiful songs of Mary (the *Magnificat*), Zechariah (the *Benedictus*), and Simeon (the *Nunc Dimittis*), and the praises of Anna. It is Luke who places the entire story in the context of Roman taxation and tells of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It is again largely legend and tradition that has made "no room at the inn" an important feature of the story. This detail and mention of the manger occupies only a single verse in the story, and is never referred to again in the New Testament beyond Luke 2. From Luke we learn of the visit of the shepherds, and the messengers of God proclaiming Jesus' birth. Again, it is tradition that has the angels singing in the heavens; Luke only tells us that they were "praising God." Finally, Luke tells us of the return of the Holy Family to the temple eight days after Jesus' birth for his official naming and ritual circumcision.

These differences suggest that even though the early church knew many details of Jesus' birth, the Gospel writers were not too concerned with making those details the center of the Gospel story. That should provide us a large caution in considering the role we allow these events to play in the life of the Church. A careful examination of both Matthew and Luke reveals that the differing details they include are not for the purpose of constructing a nativity narrative for its own sake. Rather, those varying details are incorporated into the larger narrative for specific reasons that have to do with the overall theological structure and communication of each Gospel (see [The Synoptic Problem](#)). That does not mean that we must abandon the celebration of Christmas! But at the very least, it should lead us to ask questions of the significance of this season in the cycle of the Christian Church Year.

## The Meaning of Christmas

What is the true meaning of Christmas? It is a perennial question. It is a question heard often during the Christmas season year after year, from pulpits, TV personalities, newspaper writers, and just ordinary people bewildered by the hectic pace of the season. It seems a little strange that as popular as this season seems to be, we should continually have to ask that question. The meaning of Christmas seems to be forever in danger of being obscured by all the commotion and promotion of the season. Perhaps we continue to ask the question for fear that the answer will be lost, or already is lost, in the shuffle.

So, the search for the true meaning of Christmas is a recurring one. And yet, too often the answers we provide, even from the church, are more sentimentality, comfortable traditions, or "warm fuzzies" than they are any deep reflection on the significance of the Incarnation for humanity. As much as those things are a part of the season, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" is not the meaning of the season.

It is not about the "spirit of giving" or the quest for global peace, or the importance of family, or the beauty of a snow-decorated "silent night."

Certainly we can immediately say that Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus. But exactly why is that fact so significant beyond the affirmation of a historical fact or a creedal confession? How does, or how should, the meaning of Christmas impact our lives on a daily basis as the people of God?

Perhaps for an answer, we need to return to the biblical narratives, apart from all the traditions that we have heaped around them to make them more entertaining and more coherent to modern ways of thinking. At the heart of the nativity narratives in both Matthew and Luke, is a simple fact: amid the struggle of a people who had longed for 500 years for God to act in the world in new ways, God came to be with them in a way that totally identified himself with us, as human beings. Amid the most unlikely of circumstances, to the most unlikely of people, God became a human being to reconcile all peoples to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19).

I think that the true meaning of Christmas is about possibility in the midst of the impossible. It is not the kind of possibility that comes from a confidence in our own skill, knowledge, ability, or a positive mental attitude. It is possibility that comes solely from the fact that God is God, and that he is the kind of God who comes into our own human existence to reveal himself and call us to himself. It is a possibility that is so surprising at its birth that we are caught unaware, and so are left with wonder at the simplicity of its expression in this infant child. It is a possibility that is easily symbolized by a helpless infant that has nothing of its own by which to survive; yet an infant that, because he is Immanuel, God with us, will forever change the world and all humanity. It is this same God who has promised to be with us, with his people, with the church and with us individually, as we live as his people in the world.

It is not just hope, as if it were wishful thinking that things will get better when they cannot. It is hope incarnated into flesh, a hope that can be held in a mother's arms, a hope that expresses a reality that will live beyond endings and death itself. It is the hope, the possibility, that springs from impossible and insignificant beginnings, infused with the power of God through the Holy Spirit, that will blossom into a light to the nations.

It is this possibility, this God, that we celebrate at Christmas. And we do so with a confidence born, not of our own desire for it to be so, but from the birth of a child over 2,000 years ago, a child who was the Son of God!

#### Note:

\* The Rosary prayer, aptly named "Hail Mary" from its first words, has a long history in Roman Catholic tradition. In its present form, it dates to about the 15th century:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

# The Season of Epiphany

Dennis Bratcher

In western Christian tradition, **January 6** is celebrated as **Epiphany**. It goes by other names in various church traditions. In Hispanic and Latin culture, as well as some places in Europe, it is known as **Three Kings' Day** (Span: *el Dia de los Tres Reyes, la Fiesta de Reyes, or el Dia de los Reyes Magos*; Dutch: *Driekoningendag*). Because of differences in church calendars, mainly between the Eastern Orthodox and the western Catholic and Protestant traditions, both Christmas and Epiphany have been observed at different times in the past. Today, most of the Eastern Orthodox traditions follow the western church calendar. The exceptions are some Greek Orthodox Churches and related traditions (for example, Russian and Serbian Orthodox) that still follow the older calendar and celebrate Epiphany as the Theophany on January 19th.

Epiphany is the climax of the Advent/Christmas Season and the **Twelve Days of Christmas**, which are usually counted from the evening of December 25th until the morning of January 6th, which is the Twelfth Day. In following this older custom of counting the days beginning at sundown, the evening of January 5th is the **Twelfth Night**. This is an occasion for feasting in some cultures, including the baking of a special **King's Cake** as part of the festivities of Epiphany (a King's Cake is part of the observance of **Mardi Gras** in French Catholic culture of the Southern USA).

In some church traditions, only the full days are counted so that January 5th is the Eleventh Day of Christmas, January 6th is the Twelfth Day, and the evening of January 6th is counted as the Twelfth Night.

In traditional Christian churches **Christmas**, as well as **Easter**, is celebrated as a period of time, a season of the church year, rather than just a day. The Season of the Church Year associated with Christmas actually begins with the first Sunday of **Advent**, four Sundays before Christmas Day. Advent is marked by expectation and anticipation in preparing to celebrate the coming of Jesus. **Christmas** begins with Christmas Day December 25 and lasts for **Twelve Days** until **Epiphany**, January 6, which looks ahead to the mission of the church to the world in light of the Nativity. The one or two Sundays between Christmas Day and Epiphany are sometimes called **Christmastide**.

For many Protestant church traditions, the season of Epiphany extends from January 6th until **Ash Wednesday**, which begins the season of **Lent** leading to **Easter**. Depending on the timing of Easter, this longer period of Epiphany includes from four to nine Sundays. Other traditions, especially the Roman Catholic tradition, observe Epiphany as a single day, with the Sundays following Epiphany counted as **Ordinary Time**. In some western traditions, the last Sunday of Epiphany is celebrated as Transfiguration Sunday.

The term *epiphany* means "to show" or "to make known" or even "to reveal." In Western churches, it remembers the coming of the wise men bringing gifts to visit the Christ child, who by so doing "reveal" Jesus to the world as Lord and King. In some Central and South American countries influenced by Catholic tradition, Three Kings' Day, or the night before, is the time for opening Christmas presents. In some eastern churches, Epiphany or the Theophany commemorates Jesus' baptism, with the visit of the Magi linked to Christmas. In some churches the day is celebrated as Christmas, with Epiphany/Theophany occurring on January 19th.

## Symbols of Epiphany

The colors of Epiphany are usually the colors of Christmas, white and gold, the colors of celebration, newness, and hope that mark the most sacred days of the church year. In traditions that only observe a single day for Epiphany, the colors are often changed after Epiphany to the colors of [Ordinary Time](#), usually green or thematic sanctuary colors, until Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent. The colors for Transfiguration Sunday are usually the colors of Holy Days, white and gold.

The traditional liturgical symbols of Epiphany are usually associated with the Magi. The symbols include either three crowns or a single crown, various portrayals of the Magi or Wise Men, three gifts, a five pointed star, or a combination of a star and crown. A more modern symbol of Epiphany is a globe or a stylized portrayal of the world.

Around January 6, the symbol **+C+B+M+** with two numbers before and two numbers after (for example, **20+C+B+M+10**) is sometimes seen written in chalk above the doorway of Christian homes. The letters are the initials of the traditional names of the Three Magi: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. These letters also abbreviate the Latin phrase *Christus mansionem benedicat*, "May Christ bless the house." The beginning and ending numbers are the year, 2010 in the example above. The crosses represent Christ.

Marking the lintels of doorways is an old European practice that originally had overtones of magic (protection of the house). However, the symbols are now used throughout the world and usually represent a traditional Epiphany prayer and blessing.

### A Blessing for the Marking of Doorways

**Leader:** Peace be with this house and with all who live here.

**Response (All):** And peace be with all who enter here.

**Leader:** During these days of the Christmas season, we keep this Feast of Epiphany, celebrating the manifestation of Christ to the Magi, and thereby to the whole world. Today, Christ is manifest to us! Today this home is a holy place because of the presence of Christ here.

**Leader:** Listen to the Gospel according to Matthew.

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2:2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 2:6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 2:8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 2:9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 2:11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure



chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

**Leader:** This is the word of the Lord to you.

**Response (All): Thanks be to God!**

**Leader:** O God, Lord of all that exists, you revealed your only-begotten Son to every nation by the guidance of a star. Bless this house and all who inhabit it. Fill each of us with the light of Christ, that our concern for others may reflect your love. We ask this through Christ our Lord. **Response (All):** Amen

## Significance of Epiphany in the Church

As with most aspects of the Christian liturgical calendar, Epiphany has theological significance as a teaching tool in the church. The Wise Men or Magi who brought gifts to the child Jesus were the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as "King" and so were the first to "show" or "reveal" Jesus to a wider world as the incarnate Christ. This act of worship by the Magi, which corresponded to Simeon's blessing that this child Jesus would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32), was one of the first indications that Jesus came for all people, of all nations, of all races, and that the work of God in the world would not be limited to only a few.

The day is now observed as a time of focusing on the mission of the church in reaching others by "showing" Jesus as the Savior of all people. It is also a time of focusing on Christian brotherhood and fellowship, especially in healing the divisions of prejudice and bigotry that we all too often create between God's children.

## An Epiphany Prayer

Father, we thank you for revealing yourself to us in Jesus the Christ, we who once were not your people but whom you chose to adopt as your people. As ancient Israel confessed long ago, we realize that it was not because of our own righteousness, or our own superior wisdom, or strength, or power, or numbers. It was simply because you loved us, and chose to show us that love in Jesus.

As you have accepted us when we did not deserve your love, will you help us to accept those whom we find it hard to love? Forgive us, O Lord, for any attitude that we harbor that on any level sees ourselves as better or more righteous than others. Will you help us to remove the barriers of prejudice and to tear down the walls of bigotry, religious or social? O Lord, help us realize that the walls that we erect for others only form our own prisons!

Will you fill us so full of your love that there is no more room for intolerance. As you have forgiven us much, will you enable us with your strength to forgive others even more? Will you enable us through your abiding Presence among us, communally and individually, to live our lives in a manner worthy of the Name we bear?

May we, through your guidance and our faithful obedience, find new avenues in ways that we have not imagined of holding the Light of your love so that it may be a Light of revelation for all people.

We thank you for your love, praise you for your Gift, ask for your continued Presence with us, and bring these petitions in the name of your Son, who has truly revealed your heart. Amen

# The Season of Lent

Dennis Bratcher

☉Lent ☉Carnival/Mardi Gras ☉ Ash Wednesday ☉ The Journey of Lent  
☉Reflections on Lent

The season of Lent has not been well observed in much of evangelical Christianity, largely because it was associated with "high church" liturgical worship that some churches were eager to reject. However, much of the background of evangelical Christianity, for example the heritage of John Wesley, was very "high church." Many of the churches that had originally rejected more formal and deliberate liturgy are now recovering aspects of a larger Christian tradition as a means to refocus on spirituality in a culture that is increasingly secular.

Originating in the fourth century of the church, the season of Lent spans 40 weekdays beginning on [Ash Wednesday](#) and climaxing during [Holy Week](#) with Holy Thursday (Maundy Thursday), Good Friday, and concluding Saturday before Easter. Originally, Lent was the time of preparation for those who were to be baptized, a time of concentrated study and prayer before their baptism at the Easter Vigil, the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord early on Easter Sunday. But since these new members were to be received into a living community of Faith, the entire community was called to preparation. Also, this was the time when those who had been separated from the Church would prepare to rejoin the community.

Today, Lent is marked by a time of prayer and preparation to celebrate Easter. Since Sundays celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the six Sundays that occur during Lent are not counted as part of the 40 days of Lent, and are referred to as the Sundays in Lent. The number 40 is connected with many biblical events, but especially with the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for His ministry by facing the temptations that could lead him to abandon his mission and calling. Christians today use this period of time for introspection, self examination, and repentance. This season of the year is equal only to [the Season of Advent](#) in importance in the Christian year, and is part of the second major grouping of Christian festivals and sacred time that includes [Holy Week](#), [Easter](#), and [Pentecost](#).

Lent has traditionally been marked by penitential prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some churches today still observe a rigid schedule of fasting on certain days during Lent, especially the giving up of meat, alcohol, sweets, and other types of food. Other traditions do not place as great an emphasis on fasting, but focus on charitable deeds, especially helping those in physical need with food and clothing, or simply the giving of money to charities. Most Christian churches that observe Lent at all focus on it as a time of prayer, especially penance, repenting for failures and sin as a way to focus on the need for God's grace. It is really a preparation to celebrate God's marvelous redemption at Easter, and the resurrected life that we live, and hope for, as Christians.



## Mardi Gras or Carnival

**Carnival**, which comes from a Latin phrase meaning "removal of meat," is the three day period preceding the beginning of Lent, the Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday immediately before **Ash Wednesday**, which is the first day of the Lenten Season (some traditions count Carnival as the entire period of time between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday). The three days before Ash Wednesday are also known as **Shrovetide** ("shrove" is an Old English word meaning "to repent"). The Tuesday just before Ash Wednesday is called **Shrove Tuesday**, or is more popularly known by the French term **Mardi Gras**, meaning "Fat Tuesday," contrasting to the fasting during Lent. The entire three day period has now come to be known in many areas as Mardi Gras.

Carnival or Mardi Gras is usually a period of celebration, originally a festival before the fasting during the season of Lent. Now it is celebrated in many places with parades, costumes, dancing, and music. Many Christians' discomfort with Lent originates with a distaste for Mardi Gras. In some cultures, especially the Portuguese culture of Brazil, the French culture of Louisiana, and some of the Caribbean cultures such as Trinidad, it has tended to take on the excesses of wild and drunken revelry. There has been some attempt in recent years to change this aspect of the season, such as using Brazilian Carnival parades to focus on national and cultural history. Many churches now observe Mardi Gras with a church pancake breakfast or other church meal, eating together as a community before the symbolic fasting of Lent begins.

## Ash Wednesday

**Ash Wednesday**, the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday, is the first day of the Season of Lent. Its name comes from the ancient practice of placing ashes on worshippers' heads or foreheads as a sign of humility before God, a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. (See [Reflections on Ash Wednesday](#)). Ash Wednesday is a somber day of reflection on what needs to change in our lives if we are to be fully Christian.

In the early church, ashes were not offered to everyone but were only used to mark the forehead of worshippers who had made public confession of sin and sought to be restored to the fellowship of the community at the Easter celebration. However, over the years others began to show their humility and identification with the penitents by asking that they, too, be marked as sinners. Finally, the imposition of ashes was extended to the whole congregation in services similar to those that are now observed in many Christian churches on Ash Wednesday. Ashes became symbolic of that attitude of penitence reflected in the Lord's prayer: "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" (Luke 11:4, NRSV).

## Colors and Symbols of Lent

The color used in the sanctuary for most of Lent is purple, red violet, or dark violet (see [Colors of the Church Year](#)). These colors symbolize both the pain and suffering leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus as well as the suffering of humanity and the world under sin. But purple is also the color of royalty, and so anticipates through the suffering and death of Jesus the coming resurrection and hope of newness that will be celebrated in the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Some churches use grey for Ash Wednesday or for the entire season of Lent, or for special days of fasting and prayer. Grey is the color of ashes, and therefore a biblical symbol of mourning and

repentance. The decorations for the sanctuary during Lent should reflect this mood of penitence and reflection. Some Anglican churches use unbleached muslin, which can range from white to beige, with accents in red or black for Lent to symbolize this same spirit of penitence.

Some churches avoid the use of any flowers in the sanctuary during Lent, using various dried arrangements. This can be especially effective if a [flowering cross](#) is used for Easter. Other churches use arrangements of rocks or symbols associated with the Gospel readings for the six Sundays in Lent.

Some church traditions change the sanctuary colors to red for [Maundy Thursday](#), a symbol of the disciples and through them the community of the church. Since Eucharist or communion is often observed on Maundy Thursday in the context of Passover, the emphasis is on the gathered community in the presence of Jesus the Christ.

Traditionally, the sanctuary colors of [Good Friday](#) and Holy Saturday are black, the only days of the Church Year that black is used. It symbolizes the darkness brought into the world by sin. It also symbolizes death, not only the death of Jesus but the death of the whole world under the burden of sin. In this sense, it also represents the hopelessness and the endings that come as human beings try to make their own way in the world without God (see [The Days of Holy Week](#)). Black is always replaced by white before sunrise of Easter Sunday.

## The Journey of Lent

There are many ways for a congregation to mark the journey of Lent. Of course, beginning with a service of worship for Ash Wednesday is always appropriate (see [Ash Wednesday: A Service of Worship](#)). During Lent, one of the most effective visual reminders of the season that can be expanded in many variations is to use a rough wooden cross as a focal point in the sanctuary. The type of cross and how it is constructed will depend on exactly how it will be used. The cross is usually erected in the Sanctuary on Ash Wednesday as a visible symbol of the beginning of Lent. It is usually draped in black on Good Friday. The same cross can also become a part of the congregation's Easter celebration as it is then draped in white or gold, or covered with flowers (see [The Flowering Cross](#)).

One effective way to make use of the cross is to use it as a Prayer Cross during Lent. A hammer, square nails, and small pieces of paper are made available near the cross. At a designated time of prayer during the Sundays in Lent, or beginning with Ash Wednesday, people are invited to write their prayer requests on the paper, and then nail them to the cross. The quiet time of prayer with only the sounds of the hammer striking the nails can be a moving time for reflection on the meaning of Lent, and a powerful call to prayer. The prayer requests can be removed and burned as part of a [Tenebrae](#) or [Stations of the Cross](#) service during [Holy Week](#) to symbolize releasing the needs to God.

Some churches have a special time of prayer or meditation one night of each week during Lent. Often Catholic and high church traditions pray the Stations of the Cross (see [The Fourteen Stations of the Cross](#)). Some Protestant churches have a special series of weekly Bible studies followed by a time of meditation and prayer. Often, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions, the prayer time is followed by a simple meal of soup and bread to symbolize the penitence of the Season.

## Reflections on Lent

We enjoy celebrating [Palm Sunday](#). The children get to make paper palm branches and for many it is one of the few times they get to take an active role in "big church." We wave the palm branches and celebrate. And we all love Easter Sunday! It is a happy time, with flowers, new clothes, and the expectation of Spring in the air.

But it is too easy and promotes too cheap a grace to focus only on the high points of Palm Sunday and Easter without walking with Jesus through the darkness of Good Friday, a journey that begins on Ash Wednesday. Lent is a way to place ourselves before God humbled, bringing in our hands no price whereby we can ourselves purchase our salvation. It is a way to confess our total inadequacy before God, to strip ourselves bare of all pretenses to righteousness, to come before God in dust and ashes. It is a way to empty ourselves of our false pride, of our rationalizations that prevent us from seeing ourselves as needy creatures, of our "perfectionist" tendencies that blind us to the beam in our own eyes.

Through prayer that gives up self, we seek to open ourselves up before God, and to hear anew the call "Come unto me!" We seek to recognize and respond afresh to God's presence in our lives and in our world. We seek to place our needs, our fears, our failures, our hopes, our very lives in God's hands, again. And we seek by abandoning ourselves in Jesus' death to recognize again who God is, to allow His transforming grace to work in us once more, and to come to worship Him on Easter Sunday with a fresh victory and hope that goes beyond the new clothes, the Spring flowers, the happy music.

But it begins in ashes. And it journeys through darkness. It is a spiritual pilgrimage that I am convinced we must make one way or the other for genuine spiritual renewal to come. I have heard the passage in 2 Chronicles 7:14 quoted a lot: ". . .if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." This usually is quoted in the context of wanting revival or renewal in the church, and the prayer is interpreted as intercessory prayer for others. But a careful reading of the passage will reveal that the prayer that is called for here is not intercessory prayer for *others*; it is penitential prayer for the faith community, for **us**. It is not to call for others to repent; it is a call for **us**, God's people, to repent. It is **our** land that needs healed, it is **our** wicked ways from which we need to turn, **we** are the ones who need to seek God's face.

Perhaps during the Lenten season we should stop praying for others as if we were virtuous enough to do so. Perhaps we should take off our righteous robes just long enough during these 40 days to put ashes on our own heads, to come before God with a new humility that is willing to confess, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Maybe we should be willing to prostrate ourselves before God and plead, "Lord, in my hand no price I bring; simply to the cross I cling." That might put us in a position to hear God in ways that we have not heard Him in a long time. And it may be the beginning of a healing for which we have so longed.

O Lord, begin with me. Here. Now.

# The Days of Holy Week

Dennis Bratcher

☪ Palm/Passion Sunday ☪ Maundy Thursday ☪ Good Friday ☪ Holy Saturday

Holy Week is the last week of [Lent](#), the week immediately preceding Easter or Resurrection Sunday. It is observed in many Christian churches as a time to commemorate and enact the suffering (Passion) and death of Jesus through various observances and services of worship. While some church traditions focus specifically on the events of the last week of Jesus' life, many of the liturgies symbolize larger themes that marked Jesus' entire ministry. Observances during this week range from daily liturgical services in churches to informal meetings in homes to participate in a [Christian version of the Passover Seder](#).

In Catholic tradition, the conclusion to the week is called the Easter Triduum (a *triduum* is a space of three days usually accompanying a church festival or holy days that are devoted to special prayer and observance). Some liturgical traditions, such as Lutherans, simply refer to "The Three Days." The Easter Triduum begins Thursday evening of Holy Week with Eucharist and concludes with evening prayers Easter Sunday.

Increasingly, evangelical churches that have tended to look with suspicion on traditional "High-Church" observances of Holy Week are now realizing the value of Holy Week services, especially on Good Friday (see [Low Church and High Church](#)). This has a solid theological basis both in Scripture and in the traditions of the Faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was executed by the Nazis, wrote of the *Cost of Discipleship* and warned of "cheap grace" that did not take seriously either the gravity of sin or the radical call to servanthood: "When Jesus bids a man come, he bids him come and die."

It is this dimension that is well served by Holy Week observances, as they call us to move behind the joyful celebrations of Palm Sunday and Easter, and focus on the suffering, humiliation, and death that is part of Holy Week. It is important to place the hope of the Resurrection, the promise of newness and life, against the background of death and endings. It is only in walking through the shadows and darkness of Holy Week and Good Friday, only in realizing the horror and magnitude of sin and its consequences in the world incarnated in the dying Jesus on the cross, only in contemplating the ending and despair that the disciples felt on Holy Saturday, that we can truly understand the light and hope of Sunday morning!

In observing this truth, that new beginnings come from endings, many people are able to draw a parable of their own lives and faith journey from the observances of Holy Week. In providing people with the opportunity to experience this truth in liturgy and symbol, the services become a powerful proclamation of the transformative power of the Gospel, and God at work in the lives of people.

The entire week between Palm Sunday and Holy Saturday is included in Holy Week, and some church traditions have daily services during the week. However, usually only Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday are times of special observance in most churches.

## [Palm Sunday \(or Passion Sunday\)](#)

Holy Week begins with the sixth Sunday in Lent. This Sunday observes the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem that was marked by the crowds who were in Jerusalem for Passover waving palm branches

and proclaiming him as the messianic king. The Gospels tell us that Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, enacting the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, and in so doing emphasized the humility that was to characterize the Kingdom he proclaimed. The irony of his acceptance as the new Davidic King (Mark 11:10) by the crowds who would only five days later cry for his execution should be a sobering reminder of the human tendency to want God on our own terms.

Traditionally, worshippers enact the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem by the waving of palm branches and singing songs of celebration. Sometimes this is accompanied by a processional into the church. In many churches, children are an integral part of this service since they enjoy processions and activity as a part of worship. This provides a good opportunity to involve them in the worship life of the community of Faith. In many more liturgical churches, children are encouraged to craft palm leaves that were used for the Sunday processional into crosses to help make the connection between the celebration of Palm Sunday and the impending events of Holy Week.



This Sunday is also known as **Passion Sunday** to commemorate the beginning of Holy Week and Jesus' final agonizing journey to the cross. The English word *passion* comes from a Latin word that means "to suffer," the same word from which we derive the English word *patient*.

In most Protestant traditions, the **liturgical color** for **The Season of Lent** is purple, and that color is used until Easter Sunday. In Catholic tradition (and some others), the colors are changed to Red for Palm Sunday. Red is the color of the church, used for **Pentecost** as well as remembering the martyrs of the church. Since it symbolizes shed blood, it is also used on Palm Sunday to symbolize the death of Jesus. While most Protestants celebrate the Sunday before Easter as Palm Sunday, in Catholic and other church traditions it is also celebrated as Passion Sunday anticipating the impending death of Jesus. In some Church traditions (Anglican), the church colors are changed to red for the *fifth* Sunday in Lent, with the last two Sundays in Lent observed as Passiontide.

Increasingly, many churches are incorporating an emphasis on the Passion of Jesus into services on Palm Sunday as a way to balance the celebration of Easter Sunday. Rather than having the two Sundays both focus on triumph, Passion Sunday is presented as a time to reflect on the suffering and death of Jesus in a Sunday service of worship. This provides an opportunity for people who do not or cannot attend a Good Friday Service to experience the contrast of Jesus' death and the Resurrection, rather than celebrating the Resurrection in isolation from Jesus' suffering. However, since Sunday services are always celebrations of the Resurrection of Jesus during the entire year, even an emphasis on the Passion of Jesus on this Sunday should not be mournful or end on a negative note, as do most **Good Friday** Services (which is the reason Eucharist or Communion is not normally celebrated on Good Friday).

## Maundy Thursday, or Holy Thursday

There are a variety of events that are clustered on this last day before Jesus was arrested that are commemorated in various ways in services of worship. These include the last meal together, which was probably a Passover meal, the institution of Eucharist or Communion, the betrayal by Judas (because of the exchange with Jesus at the meal), and Jesus praying in Gethsemane while the disciples fell asleep. Most liturgies, however, focus on the meal and communion as a way to commemorate this day.

During the last few days, Jesus and His disciples had steadily journeyed from Galilee toward Jerusalem. On the sunlight hillsides of Galilee, Jesus was popular, the crowds were friendly and the future was bright. Even his entry into Jerusalem had been marked by a joyous welcome. But in Jerusalem there was a growing darkness as the crowds began to draw back from the man who spoke of commitment and

servanthood. There was an ominous tone in the murmuring of the Sadducees and Pharisees who were threatened by the new future Jesus proclaimed.

Even as Jesus and his disciples came together to share this meal, they already stood in the shadow of the cross. It was later that night, after the meal, as Jesus and His disciples were praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, that Jesus was arrested and taken to the house of Caiaphas the High Priest. On Friday He would die.

There is some difference in the chronology of these events between the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and John's account (see [Synoptic Problem](#)). In the Synoptics, this last meal was a Passover meal, observing the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt when death "passed over" the Hebrew homes as the tenth plague fell upon the Egyptians. Yet, in John's account the Passover would not be celebrated until the next day. And while the Synoptics recount the institution of Communion (Eucharist) during this final meal, John instead tells us about Jesus' washing the disciples' feet as a sign of servanthood.

In any case, this Thursday of Holy Week is remembered as the time Jesus ate a final meal together with the men who had followed him for so long. We do not have to solve these historical questions to remember and celebrate in worship what Jesus did and taught and modeled for us here, what God was doing in Jesus the Christ. And the questions should not shift our attention from the real focus of the story: the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Traditionally in the Christian Church, this day is known as Maundy Thursday. The term **Maundy** comes from the Latin word *mandatum* (from which we get our English word *mandate*), from a verb that means "to give," "to entrust," or "to order." The term is usually translated "commandment," from John's account of this Thursday night. According to the Fourth Gospel, as Jesus and the Disciples were eating their final meal together before Jesus' arrest, he washed the disciples' feet to illustrate humility and the spirit of servanthood. After they had finished the meal, as they walked into the night toward Gethsemane, Jesus taught his disciples a "new" **commandment** that was not really new (John 13:34-35):

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, you also ought to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

The colors for Maundy Thursday are usually the colors of Lent, royal purple or red violet. Some traditions, however, use red for Maundy Thursday, the color of the church, in order to identify with the community of disciples that followed Jesus. Along the same line, some use this day to honor the apostles who were commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world.

The sharing of the Eucharist, or sacrament of thanksgiving, on Maundy Thursday is the means by which most Christians observe this day. There is a great variety in exactly how the service is conducted, however. In some churches, it is traditional for the pastor or priest to wash the feet of members of the congregation as part of the service (John 13:3-15). Increasingly, churches are observing some form of the Passover Seder as a setting for the Eucharist of Maundy Thursday (see [Introduction to a Christian Seder](#) and [Haggadah for a Christian Seder](#)). Some churches simply have a "pot-luck" dinner together concluded with a short time of singing and communion.

In some church traditions all of the altar coverings and decorations are removed after the Eucharist is served on Maundy Thursday. Psalm 22 is sometimes either read or sung while the altar paraments are being removed. Since the altar in these traditions symbolize the Christ, the "stripping of the altar" symbolizes the abandonment of Jesus by his disciples and the stripping of Jesus by the soldiers prior to his crucifixion. This, like the darkness often incorporated into a Good Friday service, represents the



humiliation of Jesus and the consequences of sin as a preparation for the celebration of new life and hope that is to come on Resurrection Day. Some churches only leave the altar bare until the Good Friday Service, when the normal coverings are replaced with black.

However it is celebrated, the Eucharist of Maundy Thursday is especially tied to the theme of remembering. As Jesus and his disciples followed the instructions in the Torah to remember God's acts of deliverance in their history as they shared the Passover meal together, so Jesus calls us to remember the new act of deliverance in our history that unfolds on these last days of Holy week (see [Remember! A Service of Communion](#)).

## Good Friday, or Holy Friday

Friday of Holy Week has been traditionally been called Good Friday or Holy Friday. On this day, the church commemorates Jesus' arrest (since by Jewish customs of counting days from sundown to sundown it was already Friday), his trial, crucifixion and suffering, death, and burial. Since services on this day are to observe Jesus' death, and since Eucharist is a celebration, there is traditionally no Communion observed on Good Friday. Also, depending on how the services are conducted on this day, all pictures, statues, and the cross are covered in mourning black, the chancel and altar coverings are replaced with black, and altar candles are extinguished. They are left this way through Saturday, but are always replaced with white before sunrise on Sunday.

There are a variety of services of worship for Good Friday, all aimed at allowing worshippers to experience some sense of the pain, humiliation, and ending in the journey to the cross. The traditional Catholic service for Good Friday was held in mid-afternoon to correspond to the final words of Jesus from the cross (around 3 PM, Matt 27:46-50). However, modern schedules have led many churches to move the service to the evening to allow more people to participate. Usually, a Good Friday service is a series of Scripture readings, a short homily, and a time of meditation and prayer. One traditional use of Scripture is to base the homily or devotional on the **Seven Last Words of Jesus** as recorded in the Gospel traditions.

Father, forgive them . . . (Luke 23:34)  
This day you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43)  
Woman, behold your son . . . (John 19:26-27)  
My God, my God . . . (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34)  
I thirst. (John 19:28)  
It is finished! (John 19:30)  
Father into your hands . . . (Luke 23:46)

Some churches use the [Stations of the Cross](#) as part of the Good Friday Service. This service uses paintings or banners to represent various scenes from Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, and death, and the worshippers move to the various stations to sing hymns or pray as the story is told. There is a great variety in how this service is conducted, and various traditions use different numbers of stations to tell the story (see [The Fourteen Stations of the Cross](#)).

Another common service for Good Friday is **Tenebrae** (Latin for "shadows" or "darkness"). Sometimes this term is applied generally to all church services on the last three days of Holy week. More specifically, however, it is used of the **Service of Darkness** or **Service of Shadows**, usually held in the evening of Good Friday. Again, there are varieties of this service, but it is usually characterized by a series of Scripture readings and meditation done in stages while lights and/or candles are gradually extinguished to symbolize the growing darkness not only of Jesus' death but of hopelessness in the world without God. The service ends in darkness, sometimes with a final candle, the Christ candle, carried out of the sanctuary, symbolizing the death of Jesus. Often the service concludes with a loud

noise symbolizing the closing of Jesus' tomb (see [The Empty Tomb](#)). The worshippers then leave in silence to wait.

Some churches do observe communion on Good Friday. However, traditionally Eucharist is not served on Good Friday since it is a celebration of thanksgiving. Good Friday is not a day of celebration but of mourning, both for the death of Jesus and for the sins of the world that his death represents. Yet, although Friday is a solemn time, it is not without its own joy. For while it is important to place the Resurrection against the darkness of Good Friday, likewise the somberness of Good Friday should always be seen with the hope of Resurrection Sunday. As the well-known sermon title vividly illustrates: "It's Friday. But Sunday's a'comin'!"

## Holy Saturday

This is the seventh day of the week, the day Jesus rested in the tomb. In the first three Gospel accounts this was the Jewish Sabbath, which provided appropriate symbolism of the seventh day rest. While some church traditions continue daily services on Saturday, there is no communion served on this day.

Some traditions suspend services and Scripture readings during the day on Saturday, to be resumed at the [Easter Vigil](#) after sundown Saturday. It is traditionally a day of quiet meditation as Christians contemplate the darkness of a world without a future and without hope apart from God and his grace.

It is also a time to remember family and the faithful who have died as we await the resurrection, or to honor the martyrs who have given their lives for the cause of Christ in the world. While Good Friday is a traditional day of fasting, some also fast on Saturday as the climax of [the season of Lent](#). An ancient tradition dating to the first centuries of the church calls for no food of any kind to be eaten on Holy Saturday, or for 40 hours before sunrise on Sunday. However it is observed, Holy Saturday has traditionally been a time of reflection and waiting, the time of weeping that lasts for the night while awaiting the joy that comes in the morning (Psa 30:5).

# The Easter Season

## Resurrection of the Lord

Dennis Bratcher

Easter or Resurrection Sunday is the day Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus the Christ from the dead. Even before theologians explained the death of Jesus in terms of various atonement theories, the early church saw his resurrection as the central witness to a new act of God in history and the victory of God in vindicating Jesus as the Messiah. This event marks the central faith confession of the early church and was the focal point for Christian worship, observed on the first day of each week since the first century (Acts 20:7; Sunday was officially proclaimed the day of Christian worship in AD 321). Easter as an annual celebration of the Resurrection that lies at the center of a liturgical year has been observed at least since the fourth century. Even in churches that traditionally do not observe the other historic seasons of the church year, Easter has occupied a central place as the high point of Christian worship.

### Origin and Significance of Easter Observance

Prior to the fourth century, Christians observed **Pascha**, Christian Passover, in the Spring of the year. Adapted from Jewish Passover, Pascha was a festival of redemption and commemorated both the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as the vehicle for God's grace. While historical records are not clear, it is likely that early Jewish Christians observed both Passover (Pesach) and Pascha. However, many Gentile converts were hesitant to adopt the Jewish festival, especially since the Jerusalem Council had decided that Gentile converts to Christianity did not have to observe Jewish religious practices (Acts 15). Gradually by the fourth century, with an increasing emphasis on Holy Week and Good Friday, Easter moved into a distinctively Christian celebration of the Resurrection, with Good Friday commemorating Jesus' crucifixion and death.

Easter, like Passover, is a **movable feast**. That is, the date of Easter (and Passover) is not fixed but is determined by a system based on a lunar calendar adapted from a formula decided by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. In this system, Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the Spring equinox (the day when the sun's ecliptic or apparent path in the sky crosses the equator, thus making days and nights of equal length). This usually occurs on March 21, which means the date of Easter can range between March 22 and April 25 depending on the lunar cycle. Since Jewish Passover is calculated differently, the dates for Passover and Easter do not correspond, although often the first Day of Passover falls during Holy Week. Much of the calendar of the Church year is determined by the date of Easter (see [The Hebrew Calendar of the Old Testament](#)).

In the Christian church year, the two major cycles of seasons, Christmas and Easter, are far more than a single day of observance. Like Christmas, Easter itself is a period of time rather than just a day. It is actually a seven-week season of the church year called **Eastertide**, the **Great Fifty Days** that begins at sundown the evening before Easter Sunday (the Easter Vigil) and lasts for six more Sundays until Pentecost Sunday (some traditions use the term **Pentecost** to include these Fifty Days between Easter and Pentecost Sunday). These seven Sundays are called the **Sundays of Easter**, climaxing on the seventh Sunday, the Sunday before Pentecost Sunday. This is often celebrated as **Ascension Day** (actually the 40th day after Easter Sunday, which always falls on Thursday, but in churches that do not have daily services it is usually observed the following Sunday). Ascension Day marks not only the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, but his exaltation from servanthood to Ruler and Lord as the fitting climax of Resurrection Day (Eph 1:20-22).

These special days and seasons are a means to shape sacred time, a structure in which to define what it means to be Christian and to call God's people to reverent and faithful response to God. Easter encompasses a time of preparation ([Lent](#); [Advent](#) for Christmas) as well as a following period of reflection on its significance for the life of God's people ([Pentecost](#); [Epiphany](#) for Christmas). However, while Epiphany following Christmas focuses on the mission of God's people to the world, the Pentecost season following Easter focuses on the church as the witness to the resurrection. In anticipation of this emphasis at Pentecost, the Scripture readings during the Sundays of Easter are different, with readings from the Acts of the Apostles replacing readings from the Old Testament. This emphasizes that the church, as empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, is the best witness to the resurrection and the work of God in the world in Jesus the Christ.

## The Colors of Easter

Color used in worship is especially important during the season of Easter (see [Colors of the Church Year](#) and [The Meaning of Church Colors](#)). The changing colors of the sanctuary from the purple of Lent to the black of Good Friday provide graphic visual symbols for the Lenten journey. The change of colors for Easter and the following Sundays helps communicate the movement of sacred time as well as personal faith journeys.

The Sanctuary colors for Easter Sunday and Ascension Day are white and gold, the colors of sacred days throughout the church year. For the Easter season, white symbolizes the hope of the resurrection, as well as the purity and newness that comes from victory over sin and death. The gold (or yellow) symbolizes the light of the world brought by the risen Christ that enlightens the world, as well as the exaltation of Jesus as Lord and King. The sanctuary color for the other five Sundays of Easter is usually also white and gold, although some churches use Red, the color of the Church, for these Sundays as well as for [Pentecost Sunday](#). During this time worshippers are called to celebrate God's ongoing work in the world through his people, and to acknowledge and reflect upon their purpose, mission, and calling as God's people, which makes Red an appropriate color for this season.

## The Easter Vigil

There are a variety of ways to celebrate Easter and various emphases that can be placed on the season. But from the early days of the church, the **Easter Vigil** was the primary means by which Easter was observed. This practice has evolved in modern observance into the Easter sunrise service that many churches observe, but its history is much richer.

From the earliest days of the church, the Easter Vigil was primarily a means of preparing new converts for baptism into the Christian Faith, which was normally done on Easter Sunday as the focal point of the entire year. This preparation traditionally arises from a set of Scripture readings from the Old Testament that recounts the unfolding of God's creation of a people in the Exodus, and a promise of restoration from Zephaniah (see [Readings for the Easter Vigil](#)). Following the lead of the Gospels themselves, this provides a crucial link between the revelation of God in Christ and the creation of the church with God's past revelation of himself and the creation of his people Israel. This important emphasis on the continuity of the church with the Old Testament's witness to God also helps define the nature of the church and its mission in the world, thoroughly grounding it in the ongoing work of God in history. The Gospel readings at the Vigil are not normally read until after sunrise on Sunday, or at the very end of the Easter Vigil.

The Vigil itself can begin at any time after sundown on Saturday, although there has been a tendency in Protestant churches to begin just before sunrise on Sunday and conclude the service just after the Gospel readings while singing praises at sunrise. In more temperate climates, this is often an outdoor service.

In church traditions that observe a [Service of Shadows](#) on Good Friday, the Easter Vigil begins in darkness as a flame is lit. This can either be the Christ candle returned to the sanctuary or to the worshippers, or a "new fire" lit amid the darkness. From this "new fire" all the other candles in the sanctuary are lit. Some churches use a special Paschal Candle as the focal point for this part of the service. All the worshippers light individual candles from the Paschal candle as they sing a song of praise.

This return of light symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus from the grave and the light of salvation and hope God brought into the world through the resurrection, the triumph of the light of God's grace and salvation over the darkness of death and sin. If celebrated in a sanctuary, the lights are then either turned on all at once or in stages as the Scriptures are read, thus reversing the effects of the Service of Shadows and dramatically symbolizing the "true light that enlightens everyone" (John 1:9). Of course, if this is done as an Easter sunrise service outdoors, the spreading dawn serves the same purpose. In any case, the service intends to celebrate the newness, the fresh possibilities, new beginnings out of old endings that Jesus' resurrection embodies.

In the early church, the Easter Vigil concluded with the baptism of new converts, celebrating not only Jesus' resurrection from death to life, but also the new life that God has brought through the death and resurrection of Jesus to individual believers. Those baptized changed into new white clothes to symbolize their new life in Christ, which is the origin of the tradition of buying new clothes at Easter. Although Easter baptism is rarely practiced today among Protestants, the Anglican practice of renewing baptismal vows during the Easter Vigil is becoming popular.

An ancient tradition from the early centuries of the church intensifies the fasting of Lent, so that no food of any kind is eaten on Holy Saturday, or for forty hours before sunrise on Easter Sunday. The **breaking of the fast** is the Eucharist or Communion that is celebrated at Easter sunrise at the end of the Easter Vigil.

## Ways to Observe Resurrection Sunday

Probably the most traditional way of celebrating Easter among Protestant and evangelical churches is the Easter musical or cantata, or a series of special music and song. This has a revered history in the Western church. Given the important place of music among most churches that tend to shy away from liturgical worship, it is easy to understand why music emerged as a primary means of worship for Easter. But even with music at the heart of many Easter services, there are still other symbols and activities that can be equally important and creative in communicating the message of the resurrection.

### The Flowering Cross

This is an especially striking and beautiful way to symbolize the new life that emerges from the death of Good Friday. There are many adaptations of this symbol, but they center on a very rough-cut wooden cross, often of cedar since it easily retains a rough texture. This cross can be of various sizes but a full sized cross six to seven feet high is most impressive (and most expensive to decorate!). For added effect, there can be three metal spikes driven into the wood at the arms and feet. This cross is usually erected at the front of the sanctuary on [Ash Wednesday](#) or on [Palm Sunday](#). If it is erected on Ash Wednesday, it can also be used as a Prayer Cross throughout Lent (see [The Journey of Lent](#)). Sometimes it is draped with the purple of Lent and a crown of thorns made of thorny vines, but is often left bare throughout Lent until Good Friday. On Good Friday, the cross is draped in black, the color of mourning for the death of Jesus.

Before the Easter Sunday service, the spikes and black drape are removed and the cross is covered with real flowers and the top draped in white. There are various ways to do this. Some churches use a chicken wire mesh over the cross and have worshippers each place flowers on the cross as part of the Easter Vigil service or as they arrive at church on Easter morning. For this to be effective, there must be enough flowers to cover all of the front and sides of the cross. Another approach is to have small holes drilled in the wood to accept florist-type vials that hold cut flowers. The entire cross is covered with the flowers and is placed prominently at the front of the church to greet worshippers as they enter the sanctuary on Easter Sunday. Or worshippers can place the flowers on the cross as part of Sunday worship. The contrast between the starkly bare cross that worshippers have seen for 40 days and the living flowering cross of Easter Sunday dramatically and visually represents the new life that they are celebrating as they witness the very instrument of death and endings transformed into life and new beginnings.

### Easter Garden or The Empty Tomb

This is a small model or symbolic representation of the tomb in which Jesus was placed. It can be constructed very simply from several hand-sized rocks stacked to make an enclosure, with a single rock at the front to serve as a closure for the tomb. If possible, a light is placed inside the tomb or a white candle placed near it, or both. If a candle is used, this can be the Christ candle that is removed from the sanctuary at the end of the Service of Shadows.

The tomb is usually placed at the front of the church in a visible location, often beside or near the communion table in Protestant churches. It is usually put into place on Ash Wednesday as a visible symbol throughout Lent of Jesus' impending death, although some churches only use it during Holy Week. It is normally left open during Lent, but with no light inside. On Good Friday as the last action at the end of the [Service of Shadows](#), the tomb is closed by placing the rock in front of the opening. A loud sound usually accompanies the closing of the tomb to symbolize the feeling of finality that the disciples experienced on Good Friday.

On Easter morning before worshippers arrive for service, the tomb is opened and the light inside is turned on or the candle is lit. Often flowers are placed over and around the rocks to symbolize the new life that has sprung from death.

### Symbols of Easter

The origin of the English name "Easter" is not certain, but many think that it derived from the Teutonic or Anglo-Saxon goddess of Spring, *Eostre* or *Eastre*. This fact, and other aspects surrounding Easter observance such as eggs and bunnies, has generated considerable debate concerning the origin of some traditions used in Easter observance, mostly since the Reformation and especially among evangelicals and low church traditions. Some argue that Easter is little more than an adaptation of a pagan fertility festival and has little to do with Christian tradition.

There is little question that many symbols of Easter have been adopted from various cultures. But this is true for almost all Christian symbols, including the cross (the sign of the fish is the most unique and original Christian symbol). But this has always been the case since the days of Abraham and Moses. That is, God's people have always used symbols with which they were familiar from the surrounding culture, and then infused them with new meaning to commemorate and worship God. In the process the symbols are radically transformed into a means to express faith in the only true God in spite of their "pagan" origins. Such sacred Old Testament institutions as animal sacrifice, circumcision, temple worship, the priesthood, and prophets, even names for God like El, were all adapted from preexisting counterparts in Canaanite religious practice. Even the rituals of Passover itself were adapted from two preexisting Canaanite festivals associated with fertility, one celebrating the Spring birthing of livestock

(the day of Passover) and the other celebrating the early barley harvest (the week long Feast of Unleavened Bread that begins on Passover; see [The Festival of Passover](#))

This simply suggests that the origin of the name Easter or other aspects of the Easter celebration are probably not as important as how those symbols have been transformed by a worshipping community or what is actually celebrated by the symbols and event. That does not mean that all elements should automatically be accepted uncritically or without question as to their Christian connection. And it certainly should encourage us to emphasize clearly, especially to children, what we are actually celebrating and the meaning of the symbols, and to do so deliberately and with purpose (Easter it is **not** a celebration of the coming of Spring!). But neither should it allow us to adopt a negative or hypercritical attitude toward the event so that people who should be hearing our witness to the grace and power of God at work in the world bringing hope and the promise of renewal amid endings, only hear grumbling and carping.

Easter should be the most openly joyful time of celebration of the church year. Celebrated against the background of the shadows and darkness of Lent and Holy Week, this season truly becomes a living expression of the hope that God has brought into the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Since this hope of renewal and new life, both present and future, is at the heart of the Good News that the church is commissioned to proclaim and live in the world, every possible avenue of proclaiming that Good News should be utilized. No doubt that is why many traditionally non-liturgical churches are increasingly recovering the value of the various traditions of the Easter Season as a means of bearing witness to their Faith. Seen as Proclamation, the various aspects of worship during this season can become vehicles for God's grace and transforming work in the world, and among his people.

### **An Easter Prayer** *(Adapted from [The Book of Common Prayer](#))*

O God, who for our redemption gave your only begotten Son to death on the Cross, and by his glorious resurrection has delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant that we who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit. Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection, empowered and transformed by your grace in and among us.

O Lord, so stir up in your church, indeed in each of us, that Spirit of adoption and reconciliation that is made possible by your grace revealed in Jesus the Christ, that we being renewed in both body and mind, may worship and serve you in sincerity and truth. We pray this in the name of the same Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

# The Church Year: Pentecost

Dennis Bratcher

In many churches, the season leading up to Pentecost Sunday is one of the most neglected of the church calendar. Even in less liturgical churches that are beginning to place more emphasis on observing the church calendar, the momentum to carry observation of the church year through Pentecost (**Whitsunday**, Whit Sunday, Whitsun, or Whitsuntide, in some traditions) and **Trinity Sunday** (the first Sunday after Pentecost Sunday) seems to be lacking.

No doubt there are a variety of reasons for this neglect. There is the simple practical fact that after five months or more of concerted effort invested in special emphases and activities from Advent to Epiphany to Lent to Easter, both ministers and parishioners may simply be mentally and emotionally exhausted. After the intensity of Lent and Holy Week there is a certain psychological "let down" after Easter.

Also, there is caution in some church traditions concerning "Pentecostal" theology and styles of worship. The association of "Pentecostal" with sometimes more radical elements of the charismatic movement continues to foster suspicion, in spite of several church traditions who carry the name "Pentecostal" that are far from "radical." This caution sometimes leads to downplaying the role of Pentecost in the church year.

The general misgivings toward liturgy in more evangelical churches has also led to a neglect of the more formal aspects of the church calendar. While that is rapidly changing, that change has begun with the more visible seasons of Christmas and Easter and has not yet expanded to include Pentecost. In the same vein, the more open style of worship that has tended to dominate some church traditions likewise has not lent itself to observe seasons of the church year such as Pentecost.

This has often led to a general lack of theological and pastoral understanding about how to articulate theology in symbols of sacred time and sacred place, as well as in visual symbols. This likewise has left many people wondering what to do with parts of the church year like Pentecost. Whatever the reason for its neglect, such sacred times have value for the worshipping community and provide, not only opportunities to instruct in theology, but also new and varied opportunities for spiritual renewal, nurture, and growth.

**Pentecost** was originally an Old Testament festival, since the time of Josephus calculated as beginning on the fiftieth day after the beginning of **Passover**. In the Christian calendar, it falls on the seventh Sunday after **Easter**. It was called the **Feast of Weeks** (*Shavuot*), and in the Old Testament was originally an agricultural festival celebrating and giving thanks for the "first fruits" of the early spring harvest (Lev 23, Exod 23, 34).

By the early New Testament period, it had gradually lost its association with agriculture and became associated with the celebration of God's creation of His people and their religious history. By the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the festival focused exclusively on God's gracious gift of *Torah* (the "Law") on Mount Sinai. It continues to be celebrated in this manner in modern Judaism.

While there are other references to **Pentecost** in the New Testament (*for example*, 1 Cor 16:8), it is most significant in Acts 2 and the familiar scene of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those in the "upper room." The New Testament writers associate the events of Acts 2 with Pentecost, and relate it to the prophecies of Joel 2 and promises of Jesus (Acts 1:8). In both, the emphasis is on a empowerment through the Holy Spirit to enable the people of God to witness to Jesus the Christ.



There is much debate in some circles about exactly what happened at Pentecost, whether it is a repeatable event or only for the early church, or whether it should or should not become a paradigm for personal religious experience. Those who advocate it as a paradigm are sometimes termed Pentecostals, although that term usually refers more specifically to church traditions who advocate speaking in "tongues" or a special Spirit-inspired prayer or praise language.

In any case, what seems clear is that Pentecost represents God's gracious, enabling presence actively at work among His people, calling and enabling them to live out in dynamic ways the witness of being His people. Perhaps at this point there is direct contact with the Pentecost of Judaism, for in Judaism the Torah, God's instruction to His people, is the means by which they become His witness to the world.

The word "pentecost" means "fiftieth day." In most Christian traditions, Pentecost Sunday occurs 50 days following [Easter](#) Sunday (counting Easter Sunday since it is the first day of the week). Those 50 days span seven Sundays after Easter, so Pentecost is the seventh Sunday after Easter (7 weeks times 7 days = 49 days, plus Pentecost Sunday). Since Easter is a "movable feast," meaning that it occurs on different days in different years (it is tied to the lunar cycle while the calendar is solar based), Pentecost is also moveable. It can occur as early as May 10 and as late as June 13 (see [The Church Year](#) for current dates). Some Christian traditions, Eastern Orthodox for example, use a different religious calendar and so have different dates for much of the Christian Year.

The sanctuary color for Pentecost Sunday is red, the color of the church. Technically, red is used only for the Sunday of Pentecost, although some churches use red for the Sundays between Easter and Pentecost Sunday. The red symbolizes both the fire of Pentecost as well as the apostles and early followers of Jesus who were gathered in the Upper Room for the empowerment from God to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world.

For Christians, Pentecost Sunday is a day to celebrate hope, a hope evoked by the knowledge that God through His Holy Spirit is at work among His people. It is a celebration of newness, of recreation, of renewal of purpose, mission, and calling as God's people. It is a celebration of God's ongoing work in the world. Yet, it is also a recognition that His work is done through His people as He pours out His presence upon them.

The Old Testament [Lectionary](#) reading for Pentecost Sunday from Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14) dramatically illustrates this sense of newness and renewal of mission. The reading from Isaiah 44:1-8 also connects renewal with the "breathing" of God in beautiful imagery of "streams in the desert" and the recreation of His exiled people. The reading from Genesis 11:1-9 (see [Commentary on Gen 11:1-9](#)) emphasizes the restoration of community and unity of purpose that had been disrupted by sin and selfish ambition. The Psalm reading (104:24-34) is also in creation language that speaks of newness and renewal. The New Testament readings include Acts 2, as well as John 14:8-17, 16:5-15, 20:19-23, all of which carry through this theme of God enabled mission in the world. The Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians 12:3-13 emphasizes the gifts of the Spirit that enable God's work in the world.

This focus on the church's mission to the world, and the enabling presence of God through the work of the Holy Spirit in the church to empower that mission should provide a powerful impetus for churches, especially those in the evangelical traditions, to recover this season of the church year. There is tremendous opportunity to use this sacred time to call people to renewal through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

# Ordinary Time

## Counted Time of the Church Year

Dennis Bratcher

Most of the [Seasons of the Christian Church Year](#) are organized around the two major festivals that mark sacred time, Christmas and Easter. The [Christmas Season](#) encompasses the time of preparation during [Advent](#) and the celebration of the [Twelve Days of Christmas](#) and [Epiphany](#) in early January (the 6th). The [Easter Season](#) encompasses the time of preparation during the 40 weekdays of [Lent](#) and [Holy Week](#), and is linked with [Pentecost Sunday](#) 50 days later. While there are other individual holy days within the church year, these seasons mark the movement of sacred time within the church calendar.

The rest of the year following Epiphany and Pentecost is known as **Ordinary Time**. Rather than meaning "common" or "mundane," this term comes from the word "ordinal," which simply means **counted time** (First Sunday after Pentecost, etc.), which is probably a better way to think of this time of the year. Counted time after Pentecost always begins with Trinity Sunday (the first Sunday after Pentecost) and ends with Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ the King (last Sunday before the beginning of Advent).

Many Protestant church traditions consider the Sundays following Epiphany a *season* of Epiphany that runs until the beginning of Lent. Those traditions that follow the Roman Catholic calendar only count January 6th as Epiphany and do not think of a season of Epiphany, so consider the Sundays following part of Ordinary Time. In either case, the Sundays after Epiphany are *counted* (1st Sunday after Epiphany, etc.) so technically are Ordinary Time.

The 33 or 34 Sundays of Ordinary Time (23 to 28 Sundays after Pentecost) are used to focus on various aspects of the Faith, especially the mission of the church in the world. The [Lectionary](#) readings for these Sundays tend to be semi-continuous readings through certain sections of Scripture, especially through the Synoptic Gospel of the year. However, many ministers use Ordinary Time to focus on specific themes of interest or importance to a local congregation rather than building sermons around the Lectionary readings. Even so, most pastors who observe the church year will continue to follow the Lectionary readings in public worship even if they are not the topic of the sermon in order to preserve the continuity of the spoken word of Scripture being heard by the congregation (see [Word and Table](#)).

The sanctuary color for Ordinary Time is dark green, although other shades of green are commonly used. Green has traditionally been associated with new life and growth. Even in Hebrew in the Old Testament, the same word for the color "green" also means "young." In Christian tradition, green came to symbolize the life of the church following Pentecost, as well as symbolizing the hope of new life in the resurrection.

However, many churches introduce variety into the color scheme during this part of the year. Some churches use colors that match the décor of the church, so that the special seasons of the church year are marked by a change of color from the ordinary. Some churches coordinate parament colors with sanctuary banners that present various biblical themes during this part of the year. The most often used alternate colors for Ordinary Time are bronze or copper, olive, and aqua with maroon showing up occasionally.

Some church traditions only celebrate **Pentecost Sunday** and **Trinity Sunday** (the first Sunday after Pentecost), and then begin Ordinary Time with the Second Sunday after Pentecost that runs until **Christ the King Sunday**, the last Sunday before the beginning of Advent. Other traditions observe a Pentecost Season extending for the eleven to sixteen Sundays (depending on the date of Easter)

beginning with Pentecost Sunday and running through the next to last Sunday of August. Then beginning with the last Sunday of August, they count the remaining thirteen or fourteen Sundays until the beginning of Advent as **Kingdomtide** (in the Methodist tradition) or **Dominiontide** (in other churches), climaxing with the **Christ the King Sunday**. This serves to break up the long stretch of Ordinary Time following Pentecost into two seasons that can carry different emphases.

The season of Pentecost usually focuses on the evangelical mission of the church to the world and its responsibility in carrying out that mission of proclamation. That emphasis often extends into Ordinary Time. Some Protestant churches also celebrate **Reformation Sunday** (end of October) and **All Saints Sunday** (first Sunday in November). These are becoming increasingly popular ways to flesh out the themes of the Church in the World during Ordinary Time by focusing on heritage and the faithfulness of those in the past. The season of Kingdomtide celebrates Christ as King and Sovereign of the world, emphasizing God's Dominion over all of creation. The focus in this season is often on social justice and action as an expression of the Lordship of God over his people and the world.