

# SEASONS OF THE CHURCH YEAR

Rev. Waveland King - (c) 2013

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Calendars are among the most important methods we humans have devised over the millennia to track time. These began as ways of predicting important cyclic events, especially those having to do with the Sun and Moon. The earliest calendars weren't like our hang-on-the-wall sort; they included structures like Stonehenge, and were designed to allow the detection of the solstices - the extreme northerly and southerly points in the sun's yearly movement in the sky.

Today we still keep track of time and seasons of the year with calendars that tell us when to celebrate important events. Following in the tradition of the Jewish people, whose calendar focused around the events of the Exodus from Egypt as well as festivals of agriculture such as harvest time, our Christian calendar has been rebuilt around the stories of the life of Jesus. As the seasons change and repeat, we continually renew and refresh our faith understanding and have opportunities to celebrate our faith in worship of God as Lord of Life. God in the Christian understanding is a surprising God of change and newness, as well as a dependable God of constancy and seasonal repetition.

With this in mind, the sequence of festivals (or "feast times") from Advent to Easter Sunday becomes an annual spiritual pilgrimage for worshippers, as we kneel at the

manger... listen on a hillside... walk the streets of Jerusalem... hear the roar of the mob... stand beneath the cross... and witness the resurrection! The other parts of the church year provide opportunities to reflect on the meaning of the coming of Jesus and his commission to God's people to be a light to a hurting world. These stories we celebrate need not be understood literally, but as symbols and milestones in our journey of understanding and spiritual growth, as images of deeper truths we need for a whole and abundant life.

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The Church Year *begins* not on New Year's Day, but with the Season of ***Advent*** - and its color is traditionally blue. Advent is a time of anticipation and hope, which is one reason why the figure of Jesus' mother Mary is commonly shown robed in blue.

The word "advent" means "coming" or "arrival." Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, and of longing. We have long yearned for deliverance from the evils of the world - as expressed by Israelite slaves in Egypt crying out from their bitter oppression. It is a cry shared by all who have experienced the tyranny of injustice in a world under the shadow of evil, but still cling to hope of deliverance by a God who hears the cries of oppressed slaves and leads them to freedom!

It is ***that*** hope - however faint at times - that the light will shine in our darkness, however distant God

sometimes seems - that brings to the world the anticipation of a special ruler - one who will bring truth and justice and righteousness to God's people, and to all creation. In more patriarchal times this ruler, known by various names as the "Messiah", the "Christ", the "son of God", or the "anointed of God", was assumed to be a male king - although now our vision is expanding beyond such cultural limits. Advent celebrates our time of waiting... of longing... of hoping for and expecting to experience God's presence among us yet again... in newness.

*Jeremiah 23:5-6 (NRSV+)*

*The days are surely coming, says [YAHWEH], when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "[YAHWEH] is our righteousness."*

*[UM Hymnal #196-stanza 1] "Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus"*

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The season of ***Christmas*** is a festive time of white and gold, signifying celebration, newness, and hope.

Christmas (or Christmastide) is a season of praise and thanksgiving for the gift of God in Jesus the Christ. The word "Christmas" comes from Christ-Mass, which was

the worship event held in the early church on December 25. Despite the appearances of the commercial world around us, the Season of Christmas actually **begins** on Christmas Day, concluding twelve days later (*hence the "Twelve Days of Christmas" song*) on Epiphany Day (*January 6*). During the Christmas season we celebrate the sacred stories that have wrapped around Jesus' conception and birth and early childhood, stories that try to show us his place in God's plan for the world, God's preference for the downtrodden, meek and outcaste, and that reflect Jesus' Jewish origins in their imagery and characters.

*Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)*

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. God will establish and uphold it with justice*

*and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of [YAHWEH] of [vast armies] will do this.*

*[#228-stanza 1] "He is Born"*

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The season *following* the ***Day of Epiphany*** (January 6) is symbolized with the color green, representing growth in Christ. It is a time of revealing God's love and presence, even in times of darkness, as represented in the evergreens.

The word "epiphany" means "to show", "to make known" or even "to reveal." Epiphany and the season which follows it celebrate the story of the coming of magi with gifts to visit the Christ child - non-Jewish visitors who by their journey "reveal" the central place of Christ to all the world. Epiphany Day itself is often colored gold, a reminder of one of the three kinds of gift said to be brought by the magi. This season and its stories show God's intent to reach out through Jesus not only to the Jewish people, but to all peoples - focusing on the coming of light into the world, symbolized as the Star in the East.

*Matthew 2:1-7 (NRSV)*

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told hem, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘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.’” Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.*

[#254-stanza 1] "We Three Kings"

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The Season of ***Lent*** is marked by purple, a color of suffering, penitence and the expectation of a royal savior. This is a season of reflection, renewal, of housecleaning in our souls... the time when we can focus on being honest with ourselves and God about our failures, our weaknesses, the ways we contribute to the problems of the world. It can be a sober time, but also joyful one, as we approach the welcome and renewal God has waiting for us up ahead.

Lent is marked by a time of prayer and preparation to celebrate Easter. Since Sundays celebrate the resurrection, each one being a “little Easter”, the six

Sundays that occur during Lent are not counted as part of the 40 days of Lent counted backward from Easter Day to set the date of "Ash Wednesday". The number forty is connected with many biblical events, 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. So Christians today use this period of time for introspection, self examination, and repentance. Lent begins in ashes (made from the victory palms of last year's Palm Sunday) and journeys through deep darkness toward a light only visible to the eyes of faith. It is a spiritual pilgrimage we must all take - one way or another - if genuine spiritual renewal is to come.

*Psalm 51:6-10 (NRSV)*

*You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

*[#269-stanzas1,5] "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days"*

**Holy Week** marks the end of Lent, and it's a time of great passions, as shown by its colors of black and red. As the bridge between Lent and Easter it can be difficult, but Holy

Week is a special opportunity for us to experience the heights and depths of human emotions - as we journey in story from the triumphant palm victory parade of **Palm Sunday**, through betrayal, the **Last Supper**, Jesus' **trial and Crucifixion**, denial and abandonment, the burial of his body... and finally a time of emptiness and despair on what we have come to call "**Good Friday**".

*John 1:1-5,9-14,19-21 (Inclusive, NRSV)*

*{Incl} In the beginning there was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God. The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being. In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light - a light that shines in the darkness, a light that the darkness has never [overwhelmed]... ... the true Light that illumines all humankind. The Word was coming into the world - and though the world was made through the Word, the world didn't recognize it. Though the Word came to its own realm, the Word's own realm, the Word's own people, didn't accept it. Yet any who did accept the Word, who believed in that Name, were empowered to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor urge of flesh, nor human will - but born of God. And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us' we saw the Word's glory - the favor and position a parent gives an only child - filled with grace, filled with truth... {3:19 NRSV} And this is the judgement: that the light has*



*come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*

*[#288-stanzas 1,5] "Were You There"*

**Easter** is a festive time of rejoicing, marked by colors of white, gold and silver. Easter Sunday is the very *center* of our church year, and it moves around in the year because tradition in the Western (Roman) Church and its descendants (including us) place Easter Sunday on the first Sunday after the first Full Moon after the Spring Equinox. *(The Eastern Church uses a different method, and so they celebrate Easter on other days.)*

During the Easter Season we celebrate the resurrection mystery, and the victory of life over death. We stand in awe when life - not death - has the final word. And as white light combines all the other colors in perfect harmony, white can be understood as a symbol of the diversity we find in our celebration of the gift of new Easter life.

*John 20:1-3, 11-18 (Incl+NRSV+)*

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary [of Magdala] came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and*

went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus love, and said to them, "They have taken the [Rabbi] out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid [Jesus]." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ... Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "why are you weeping?" She said to them, "[Because they've] taken away my [Rabbi], and I don't know where they have [put the body]." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she [didn't] know it was Jesus. [He asked] her, "[]why are you weeping? [For] whom are you looking[]?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said [], "[Please], if you have carried [Jesus] away, tell me where you have laid [the body], and I will take [it] away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means teacher). Jesus said to her, "[Don't] hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to [Abba God]. But go to the [sisters and] brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my [Abba] and your [Abba], [ ] my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the [Teacher]"; and she told them that [Jesus] had said these things to her.

[#304-stanzas 1,2] "Easter People"

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The day of ***Pentecost*** is colored red - for fire, for blood, for the "harvest of martyrs". Red symbolizes both the flames of the Holy Spirit in the story of Pentecost, and the blood of Jesus and those apostles and early followers of Jesus who gathered in their "Upper Rooms" to await the empowerment from God to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world.

"Pentecost" means *fifty days*, and for Jews it is the Jewish holy day of "first fruits" following Passover. For Christians, Pentecost Sunday is a day to celebrate hope, a hope evoked by the knowledge that God through the Holy Spirit is hard at work among God's people. It's a celebration of newness, of re-creation, of renewal of purpose and mission and calling as God's people - a celebration of God's ongoing work in the world. Yet it's also a recognition that God's work is done through God's people as God pours our God's presence upon them. As the first half of the year is spent looking at Jesus life, the second half is spent hearing the stories of Jesus' teachings and also looking at how God's spirit works in the church and in our lives.

*Acts 2:1-6,44-47 (Incl, NRSV+)*

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. [Something*

*appeared to them that seemed like] Divided tongues, as of fire, [] and a tongue [of fire] rested on [the head of ] each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as [she] gave them ability. Now there were devout [people] from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in [their own] native language []. ... All who believed [lived] together and [shared] all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and [winning the approval] of all the people. And day by day [God] added to their number those who were being saved.*

*Romans 8:14-16 (Inclusive)*

*Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. For the Spirit that God has given you does not enslave you and trap you in fear; instead, through the Spirit God has adopted you as children, and by that Spirit we cry out, "Abba!" God's Spirit joins with our spirit to declare that we are God's children.*

*[#558-stanzas 1,5] "We Are The Church"*

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The Season of ***Kingdomtide*** is green, for growth in Christ. This is the longest season of the Church year, and (along with the time between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday) is often called "ordinary time", since it travels not through the extraordinary festivals and celebrations, but through *ordinary* life, lived in the faith. "Kingdomtide" is a uniquely United Methodist name for the ordinary season between Pentecost Sunday and "Christ The King Sunday" (also known as "Realm Of Christ Sunday").

The season of Kingdomtide celebrates Christ as King and Sovereign of the world, emphasizing God's Dominion over and love for all of creation, and so our focus at this time is often on social justice and action as an expression of the Lordship of God over his people and the world. During this season we hear the stories of Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom of God, and we celebrate the great "cloud of witnesses" that have gone before us.

*Colossians 1:11-13 (NRSV+)*

*May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from [God's] glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to [God], who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. [God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the [kingdom, the realm] of God's beloved [child, the Christ]...*

*Luke 17:20-21 (NRSV+)*

*Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is [within and] among you."*

*[#444-stanzas 1,5] "O Young and Fearless Prophet"*

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These are the seasons of our Church year which we celebrate - time and again, year after year - as God makes them continually new, and renews our lives through the cycles and rhythms of our faith.

***Thanks be to God! Amen!***

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