

## **The Journeyer's Guide to the Church Seasons**

One of the ways Christians have presented the story of our faith is by presenting it through a series of predictable seasons scattered throughout the church year. The shape of these seasons evolved over several centuries. Since "liturgy" refers to the sacred work of the people in worship, the whole sacred year is referred to as the "liturgical year."

The earliest beginnings of the church year began with Christians telling of story of Jesus' resurrection, Easter, and it was scheduled to fall on the Spring Equinox. In time they added the special week leading up to Easter called Holy Week. After that the forty day season of Lent was added preceding Holy Week. Lent begins with a day called Ash Wednesday. They also added a fifty day season following Easter called Eastertide. That leads all the way to the day of Pentecost, the day of the coming of the Spirit.

After several centuries Christmas was added on December 25 and it coincided with the Winter Solstice. They soon added a four-week season of expectation preceding Christmas called Advent and a six-week season following Christmas called Epiphany.

To round out the liturgical year they added a long season following Pentecost called Ordinary time, a season given to reciting the life and teaching of Jesus and mission of the church. Ordinary time continues all the way to Advent and the story begins again.

We now have a seamless cyclical story that begins every Advent and continues for a year. These seasons are accented in a multi-sensory way with distinctive colors, stories, song, rituals and observances. Year after year practicing Christians are given the opportunity to grow spiritually deeper each time they experience these seasons. And sharing the cycle of seasons with other Christians binds them together in unique ways.

The congregations of the Disciples of Christ began observing the liturgical seasons late in our history; in earlier times each Sunday was pretty much like the next, except for Christmas and Easter. As we participated with the larger Christian community through the ecumenical (Christian unity) movement we became more acquainted with the richness of the ancient traditions and wove many of them into our own practices. It is our hope that a greater understanding of the church seasons will add richness to worship for all Christians, those new to the liturgical seasons as well as those very familiar with them.

So we have it:

**Advent → Christmas → Epiphany → Lent → Easter → Pentecost → Ordinary Time (repeat)**

**Advent** – Color: Blue (traditionally affiliated with Mary and her carrying of Jesus)

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation that leads to receiving Christ into the world and our hearts. The preparation of Advent focuses on hope and the trustworthy God who fulfills the promise to be with us. Since the focus of Advent is on the future activity of God our worship does not center on the birth of Christ ... yet. We anticipate that coming with trust and excitement. The God who comes always comes. In a sense, we are waiting with Mary for the glorious birth.

**Christmas** – Colors: White and Gold (symbolizing purity and supreme value)

Christmas or the Nativity celebrates the incarnation or embodiment of God. The Word or Wisdom of God manifests as a human being and lives among us. (John 1:14) Traditionally the celebration of Christmastide continues for twelve days, the Twelve Days of Christmas. During this season we pray for a new birth to take within all of us.

**Epiphany** – Color: Green (representing growth)

Epiphany dramatizes the coming of the light of God into the farthest reaches of the world. The season begins with story of the Magi following the great star to Bethlehem. Epiphany is often known as the season of lights. The light of God fills the cosmos and we pray that the same light will be known in our deepest hearts.

**Lent** – Color: Purple (The color of royalty reminding us of Christ our king)

Lent comes from the Latin word “lencton” and refers to the lengthening of days and awakening of our spirits. This penitential season is based on Jesus’ forty days of testing. Christians are challenged to reflect on their readiness to follow Jesus as their guide and example. The first day of Lent is Ash Wednesday, a day in which the church is reminded of our mortality, ways we miss the mark, and the need to turn back to God. Ashes are generally marked on the foreheads of worshippers as a sign of penitence. Lent is often the time baptismal candidates are prepared for baptism.

**Holy Week**

During Holy Week the congregation follows the footsteps of Jesus from the Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem through the Last Supper of Maundy Thursday to his death on the cross on Good Friday. The three day unit from Maundy Thursday – Easter is called the Triduum. At the end of the Maundy Thursday service the sanctuary is stripped bare in preparation for Good Friday. The color of Good Friday is generally black and Christians traditionally fast on that day. As we traverse Holy Week and walk the way of sorrows with Jesus we experience the love of God poured out sacrificially for all human kind.

**Easter** – Colors: White and Gold (Symbolizing purity and supreme value)

Easter is the celebration of the resurrection and the culmination of Holy Week. If Good Friday represents fasting then Easter is feasting; death is overcome and transcended by the life that will never die. In the early church baptismal candidates fasted and prayed the preceding night during the Great Easter Vigil. Easter morning they donned their white robes and were baptized which was often followed by their first communion with the whole congregation. The white light of hope pierces the darkness of despair and death when Christ is risen.

**Pentecost** – Color: Red (symbolizing the fire of the spirit)

Fifty days after Easter is the festival of Pentecost, originally a commemoration of the Law-giving. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit poured upon Jesus followers, overcame every humanly-made barrier and filled them with spiritual power for their future mission. We also wait and pray for the spirit so that the power beyond ourselves can direct and strengthen our lives.

**Ordinary Time** – Color: Green (representing growth)

Ordinary Time is the longest season of the year beginning with Pentecost and continuing all the way to Advent. The focus of this season is on living the Christian life and the church in mission. Its color, green, reflects an accent on growth in the faith. Life is a continuous journey of growth, changing, emptying and taking up great challenges for God. Through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit we can do all things.