

The Seasons of the Historic Church Year

From the *Book of Family Prayer*

ADVENT

Unlike the secular calendar, which begins its year on January 1, the Christian Church begins the celebration of its liturgical year four Sundays before Christmas with the season of Advent. The word “Advent” comes from a Latin word and means “coming.” During Advent we especially prepare our hearts for the coming of our Lord at Christmas; however we reflect upon other comings of Jesus as well. In the first week of Advent we hear of His coming as Messiah, then during the second week we focus on His Second Coming as Judge, and in the third week we hear of His present coming in Word and Sacrament. The fourth week of Advent finalizes our preparation for Christmas. Thus, Advent is a time of reflection and repentance, but also of hope.

CHRISTMAS

The first major festival of the Church Year is the glorious celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior. At Christmas we focus on those words of the Creed, “born of the Virgin Mary,” and ponder the miracle that God and man are united in the person of Jesus Christ. With Luther we confess about the Baby in the manger, “I believe that Jesus Christ is true God, begotten of His Father from all eternity, and also true Man, born of the Virgin Mary; and that He is my Lord.” Or, as we will sing this season, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity! (ELH 125:2)

EPIPHANY

The word Epiphany means “to make known.” At Christmas we journeyed with the shepherds to see the Baby in the manger. Now, in Epiphany we journey with the wise men, and the full nature of the Christ Child is made known to us. Epiphany reminds us that the Son of Mary is also the Son of God, the Savior of all people. Each week of Epiphany reveals this to us with increasing clarity, from the Child worshiped by wise men, to the Boy Jesus in the temple “about His Father’s business,” to the Man Jesus who reveals His deity through His miracles. The Second Person of the Trinity has broken into our earthly world. God has appeared among us.

PRE-LENT

This period of the Church Year is our “narthex,” our entrance, into the season of Lent, a time for us to pause before we begin our pilgrimage to Calvary and the empty tomb. The names of the three Sundays in this mini-season are markers telling us about how many days there are until our celebration of Easter: Septuagesima (70), Sexagesima (60), and Quinquagesima (50). Each of the three Sundays focuses on one of the three Solas of

Lutheranism. The first week we will hear how we are saved by Grace Alone (*Sola Gratia*), the next week of Scripture Alone (*Sola Scriptura*), and finally we consider the importance of Baptism and how we are saved by Faith Alone (*Sola Fide*). With our eyes focused on how God works to save us, we are prepared to enter the penitential season of Lent.

LENT

The earliest Christians set aside days during which they prepared themselves to celebrate Easter. And it is Easter we are preparing for, not Good Friday. The purpose of Lent is to set before us our former captivity to sin, death, and the devil, and then to direct us to Jesus, who out of His great love for us rescues us from that captivity by His death and resurrection. Thus during this season we meditate on our sinfulness, but always with an eye toward Easter, where the empty tomb tells us that our salvation has been accomplished.

EASTER

Easter is the oldest and the most important festival of the Church, and for 2000 years the life of the Church has centered on it. Just as the Resurrection of Our Lord is the center of our faith, so it is the high point of the Church Year. We prepare for it during Lent, and now we set aside six more weeks especially to meditate on its meaning to the Christian life. During this time we are reminded that through faith, Jesus' death and resurrection are our death and resurrection. In Him we have died to sin and risen to new life, thus Baptism is a recurring theme during the Easter season, along with the joy and the fruits of the Christian life.

PENTECOST

The Feast of Pentecost is the end and climax to our Easter celebration. It is the festival in which we celebrate the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Risen Jesus. On Pentecost, we are reminded that Jesus' promise has been kept; He has not left us as orphans, but has sent the Holy Spirit who is our constant link to the Lord Jesus. Through His work, Christ and His gifts are brought to us, and our faith is nourished and strengthened. This is the peace Jesus leaves with us.

TRINITY

From Advent until Pentecost, the Church meditates upon the life and work of Christ. In the season of Trinity (or the Sundays after Pentecost, as some churches call it), we reflect how the work of God expresses itself in the Christian life. This long season, which runs from about June until December, is actually divided into four parts. Doing this helps us see the themes of the longer season and digest the lessons we hear from Sunday to Sunday.

TRINITY I (THE CHURCH OF THE SPIRIT)

Trinity I is made up of six Sundays. On the first Sunday we pause to consider how God has revealed Himself to us in the Holy Trinity. The five Sundays after this tell us something of God's Church. In many ways these Sundays are a continuation of the celebration of Pentecost, for during this time we will hear how the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

TRINITY II (ST. JOHN'S TIDE)

The 6th through 18th Sundays after Trinity all tell of the growth and fruit of the Christian life. During this time of the Church Year we hear many of the parables of Jesus, and are encouraged in our daily cycle of repentance and renewal. This period is sometimes called "St. John's Tide," since it usually follows soon after the festival of St. John the Baptist (June 24). The words of St. John, "He must increase; I must decrease" nicely sum up the theme for this time of the Church Year.

TRINITY III (MICHAELMAS)

The weeks of Trinity 19-23, called Michaelmas, speak of the struggle of the Church against Satan and the powers of darkness. The name comes from the fact that the beginning of this mini-season is the day the Church observes as St. Michael and All Angels' (September 29). These Sundays are a reminder that it is for good reason we are called the Church Militant: Satan seeks to destroy the Church and to lure Christians from the flock of Christ. Yet God defends His Church, through the work of His Holy Angels and by the proclamation of His Holy Gospel. The last Sunday of Trinity III is Reformation Sunday, a fitting end to a season which focuses on our battle against "the old evil foe."

This is such an important theme that it was intended that these lessons be read every year. Thus, in many places, no matter what Sunday after Trinity we may be on, the first Sunday after September 29 is considered Trinity 19 or Michaelmas 2, and we skip to those readings.

TRINITY IV (END-TIME)

Very appropriately, the end of the Church Year is when we focus on the end of the world. The last few Sundays of the Church Year remind us that one day this world will come to an end, and Christ will fulfill His promise to return and "judge the living and the dead." We are to be ready for His return, and prepare ourselves by diligent use of the Means of Grace. Nor is the Last Judgment something we need fear. The Church is not a society trying to create heaven on earth. We are the Bride waiting for her Bridegroom, who will take us from the troubles and anxieties of this earth to our place prepared in heaven.