

About the Seasons of the Church Year

The Episcopal Church observes the seasonal telling of our foundational narrative of God working through Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit. These seasons and their meanings are an important rhythm of our spiritual life and are one of the many reasons that a complete representation of the Faith requires regular attendance all year around.

The thousands of years old observance of the church seasons celebrates God's participation with us in time and immerses us again and again in our stories of faith, that we might move faithfully with God into the future. The church year is anchored in time on the days of Christmas and of Easter each year, and begins with Advent.

Advent

Advent is a season of hopeful anticipation of God's breaking into our world and our time. It is composed of four Sundays prior to Christmas Day, beginning around the first of December. Liturgical colors are used for vestments and altar decoration (frontals) to mark the seasons and to symbolize the themes. The color used for Advent is either purple or blue. We prefer blue to represent water - the water over which God's Spirit moved in Creation (Gen. 1) to begin the process of life and the water of Baptism which is the starting place for all Christians who anticipate the coming of Christ into their lives.

The liturgies of Advent are characterized by a sense of the majesty of the God for whom we wait. We often use an Advent Wreath of four or five candles, lighting one more each week, to mark the time of waiting. Many families observe this custom at home.

Christmas

Christmas is the Season when we proclaim the unique nature of our God - that He does not stand aloof from us, but fully enters into our lives. The first liturgy of Christmas is the Eve of (prior to) that day. The late night liturgy, called the Christ Mass is a high-light of our year. Other liturgies are offered earlier that afternoon and on Christmas morning. The season of Christmas lasts for 12 days, beginning on the 25th and ending on the 12th night, or January 5th. The color used in Christmas liturgies is white, symbolizing purity, joy, and hope.

Epiphany

The third season of the church year is Epiphany. The word means *making God manifest*. It is the church's response to God's Christmas. The primary theme is Baptism, beginning with the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. A similar idea is reflected with the response of the magi who journeyed far to worship Jesus at Bethlehem.

This season begins on the *Day of the Epiphany* and lasts until Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent. The number of weeks depends on the date of Easter Day, which is a function of the date of the spring equinox. The liturgical color used on vestments is generally green, representing the green things of God's earth and referring to growth of the spirit of God within us in response to His coming at Christmas tide.

Lent

Things did not go well for Jesus as he began to teach. People began to feel threatened. He challenged their way of thinking and doing and they killed him on a cross. This is a reality in our world. We, too, suffer and die. The marvel of the Faith is that God makes that journey with us as well. Our seasonal observance of this reality is called Lent. It begins with the ashes of *Ash Wednesday* at the dark end of winter. (The word *Lent* means, literally, *springtime*.) It is a time of recognizing our need for God to understand what we face in this life and accompany us along the way. Its highest message is that God is so willing, and that in the depths of our pain, we can be related to our God, who also knows pain and tears and death.

Lent is 40 days long (not counting Sundays, which are always feast days) reflecting the 40 days of rain for Noah, the 40 years of schooling of the people, Israel, in the Exodus, and the 40 days of testing of Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism in the Jordan River. Liturgies during Lent are subdued, introspective, and penitential in nature, often beginning in silence and with the general confession of the people. The color used is deep purple, signifying penitence and the mood of Lent.

Holy Week

At the end of Lent is the one week called *Passion Tide*, or *Holy Week*. It begins on *Passion Sunday*, also called *Palm Sunday*, and ends at the first Alleluia of Easter in the midst of the Great Vigil on Saturday night. *Passion Sunday* begins with the triumphal procession commemorating Jesus entering the Holy City on a donkey. Participants experience in the liturgy a stark change in the middle of things. What had been falsely understood as Jesus joining the crowd becomes the confrontation of Jesus with the failures of society and the crowd as well. The day turns decidedly dark and we read dramatically of Jesus being sought for arrest by the threatened authorities. The color for this Sunday is the red of martyrs, the color of blood.

The next major liturgy is *Maundy Thursday* (the name comes from the Latin for *mandate* in the liturgy for foot washing - *a new mandate I give to you, that you might love one another.*) This liturgy commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. At the close of this liturgy all kneel as we sing, *Go to dark Gethsemane*, as we remember that Jesus departed from the upper room for the Garden by that name. At this time, people strip the altar area of all ornamentation and all symbols of God's presence. No Eucharists may be celebrated from this time until Easter anywhere in the world.

On *Good Friday* our Lord was killed for the folly of humankind and the love and willingness of God to let the consequences play themselves out. We gather, often in the darkness and wearing black, for one of the most touching liturgies of the year. Here we share our pain with God, who knows all about pain, and tears, and death, and we begin the observance of the three days of death, when our Lord was in the tomb. The lights go dim and we leave in silence to await, finally, upon God's resolution.

Easter

The queen of all the liturgies of the church is the *Great Vigil and first Eucharist of Easter*. We gather in the tomb-like darkness of *Holy Saturday* night and, suddenly, a great flame is struck among us. This flame is the new fire of Christ in-breaking among us in the midst of the tomb. The Paschal Candle is lighted from the fire and the celebrant processes throughout the Nave (the part of the church where the pews are - from the Latin word for *ship* or *navy*), symbolizing the pillar of fire by which God led the Hebrews out of Egypt toward the promised land. The celebrant pauses three times to chant, *The Light of Christ*; and three times the people respond, *Thanks be to God*. The people light individual candles from the Paschal Candle and the light spreads in the darkness among the congregation as we chant and read the Old Testament stories of God's deliverance from death and slavery. Then, with the first reading from the resurrection narratives all the lights come on and we sing alleluias for the first time since Epiphany season, and we find the church beautifully decorated for Easter with the vestments of white and flowers everywhere. We then joyfully celebrate together the first Eucharist of Easter tide.

Easter tide begins with that first Alleluia at the Great Vigil, continues through the festive Eucharists of the Day of Resurrection, and ends 50 days later on the Day of Pentecost. During this season, the liturgical color is white and liturgies are uplifting and joyful. The General Confession is not used during the first weeks. God has turned us full circle: from the ash heap of our lives of Ash Wednesday He has brought us into fullness of life and joy. God does, indeed, have the final word. The *Paschal Candle* burns in the church near the font throughout this season and at all baptisms and funerals. We also use it for weddings to symbolize the presence of Christ and the possibility of resurrected living in a marriage relationship.

Pentecost

God's Word does not fall to the ground without bearing fruit. How does the church, how do we, react to the saving grace of God we have observed in the drama of the seasons from Advent through Easter? The disciples wondered about this as well. They huddled together, wondering, in the upper room until the *Day of Pentecost* (literally, *50 days*). That was the day the *Holy Spirit of God* came upon them and they became great warriors of the faith! Pentecost is the great day of realization that God has given us life and power to be different.

Trinity or Christ the King Sunday

The season called the Season after Pentecost is that time in the church year when we react to the story of salvation proclaimed in the preceding cycle of seasons. The color used is green, symbolizing growth - growth of the grass and trees, growth of crops, growth of the church, growth of Christians together in the fellowship of faith.

The last Sunday of the Season after Pentecost is often called *Trinity Sunday* or the *Sunday of Christ the King*. It is a day of triumph of our Lord and his final victory in the heart of the community. Then, since we are as yet imperfect people in an imperfect world, we begin the cycle all over with Advent. Waiting for God to work His miracles in our hearts.

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