

Telling Time in the Church Year Cycle

Telling Time in the Church Year Cycle provides historical backgrounds, meanings and reflections for the seasons in our church year.

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The Church Year Cycle

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A Time Called ... ADVENT

When children say, "I can't wait for Christmas," they convey what it means to live in Advent. With joy they are waiting for an event that is good, that has been promised, and is now hidden from sight. Children do manage to wait. One way they do this is by sharing in the many preparations for Christmas. Waiting and preparing are the themes of Advent for adults as well. But when did Advent begin? And what can it mean in your life?

Historical Roots of Advent

The *calendar year* may begin on January 1, but for Christians the Christian year begins with Advent – four weeks before Christmas. Advent is the beginning of a cycle of time that celebrates the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

The church has observed an Advent season for over 15 centuries. It may originally have been a time of instruction for people who were preparing to be baptized on January 6, on Epiphany. History reveals Advent traditions of varying lengths, but our waiting time is now the four Sundays before Christmas.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

Advent is the time when Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We recall those who waited and prepared for a promised Christ child: the prophet Isaiah, Mary, his mother, and John the Baptist. We also think about God's promises that are yet to be revealed under the reign of Christ, in "the age to come" or "the day of the Lord." Advent is oriented in both the past and the future.

As we get ready for the birth of Jesus and for the promise that Christ will come again, we use gifts of spiritual preparation: worship, prayer, singing, Bible study, fellowship (Christmas parties!), and service to others.



Questions for Personal Meditation

- What am I waiting for?
- Who am I waiting for?
- How am I preparing?
- What gives me joy in this season? What might I discover from that?

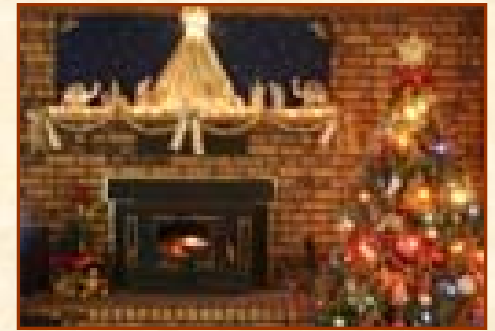
A Time Called ... CHRISTMAS EVE

The stores are closed. There are only a few things left to do. The children have to wait for just one more sleep. At last, we can give ourselves over to the mystery of it all and let the carols, the church, and the story speak to us again. What is the meaning of Christmas Eve?

Historical Roots of Christmas Eve

No one knows when this service came into being. It is likely, however, that the last night of a preparation time for the festival of Christmas took on the character of a vigil, with people waiting together through the last hours

before the coming of Christmas Day. Today, for churches without regular Christmas Day worship, a Christmas Eve service also gives the opportunity to celebrate together when Christmas is not on a Sunday.



Finding Meaning in the Tradition

As we welcome the birth of Jesus, we welcome God's light breaking into the world's darkness. We light a Christ candle in the centre of the Advent wreath as a sign of Christ's birth – the light coming into the world. The service may end with each worshipper lighting a candle from the Christ candle, showing that each is now a bearer of the light that comes into the world at Christmas. The story of Jesus' birth is retold, challenging the limits of possibility.

Christmas Eve worship is a time to gather in church with guests and family. We come together at church for many reasons – a desire to know God, curiosity, hope for a new beginning, wonder, nostalgia. The ancient Bible story speaks to each of us, telling us that with God, all things are possible.

Questions for Personal Meditation

- What brought me here tonight?
- What impossibilities in my life could become possibilities with God?
- How can I be a light-bearer in this world?
- What touches me most in this service? What is God saying to me?

A Time Called ... CHRISTMAS DAY

For many, this is a truly wonderful day. It's a day of family, of special and traditional food, sharing of gifts, conversation, and laughter. It is a day (unless you have little children in the house!) when time seems to run more slowly. The day has a drowsy, gentle pace. It is a day to think of the slow and gentle movements of Mary, Joseph, and the new baby, and the rhythmic breathing of the animals in a stable long ago.

Historical Roots of Christmas Day

It is not known exactly why or when December 25 came to be associated with Jesus' birth. Some of the earliest references to the celebration of Christmas were not made until the mid-300s. The celebration of Christmas Day became more prominent after the crowning of Charlemagne in 800 and King William 1 of England in 1066. And – a curious little note from history – during the Protestant Reformation, some Puritans condemned Christmas celebrations as pagan, and in 1647 in England, Christmas was banned! After much rioting and many protests, it was restored in 1660.



The Bible doesn't give the date of Jesus' birth. Some suggest that December 25 was chosen to stand against the Roman pagan festival of the Winter Solstice, which ended on that date. Others suggest that December 25 was chosen by counting backwards from the date of Jesus' death, but calendars and calculations are inconclusive.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

Christmas Day, despite its tumultuous past, has become for Christians a day of celebrating that the Messiah was born to the Virgin Mary. Christmas is a celebration of God joining us in a small, vulnerable child. This, of course, doesn't "make sense," making Christmas Day a time of great mystery. When God could have come to us in a blazing chariot or an earth-awakening UFO, this day causes us to ponder. Why did God come to us in a newborn child?

Questions for Personal Meditation

- Today, in the midst of activity, how can I find time to ponder the mystery of God's coming?
- How is this day different from all the other days in the Christian year?
- When I crawl into bed tonight, what will I most remember about Christmas Day?

A Time Called ... CHRISTMAS SEASON

God has come among us. After centuries of looking up to find God, people looked down into a mother's arms to see the face of God. In becoming human, God shows absolute commitment to humanity and creation. Things can never be the same again. What can this event mean to me?

Historical Roots of the Christmas Season

In our Canadian reformed tradition, we have come to think of the time after Christmas Day as "the 12 days of Christmas," but this is a time known, in liturgical calendars, as Christmastide or Twelve Holy Days. And, of course, this season is best known popularly by that repetitive song which we love to hate – *The Twelve Days of Christmas*! This season leads us to Epiphany on January 6. These twelve days celebrate the Light that is entering the world.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

In our homes, the Christmas season is usually a time of winding down and tidying up after the excitement of Christmas Day. So it is in the church. As we wonder at the birth of the Christ child, we reflect on the



story's many surprises: a faithful pregnant virgin, a baby born in a make-do setting, and the announcement, not to monarchs, but to shepherds going about their everyday lives. Christmas reveals the mystery of grace and God's presence with us, coming unexpectedly and intimately. It takes more than one day, once a year, to reflect on these things. It takes a season.

Questions for Personal Meditation

- What questions would I like to ask God about the Christmas story?
- What is my favorite part of the Christmas story?
- How does Christmas challenge the idea that God is out there someplace?
- What part of Christmas most affects my faith?

A Time Called ... EPIPHANY

After Christmas and New Year's, Epiphany could seem like a bit of an anticlimax. But think about a time when you received some wonderful news, so wonderful that you could scarcely believe it. Did you take it all in at once, or did you find that the full meaning was revealed over time? Epiphany is our time to contemplate the Christmas story and feel the wonder of the Magi as they saw the baby.

Historical Roots of the Christmas Season

January 6 is Epiphany. It is believed that Epiphany was initially based on the Jewish Feast of Light. In Western Christian tradition, over time, December 25 was established as the date to celebrate Christ's birth, but the Eastern (Orthodox) tradition continues to celebrate it on January 6. In many parts of Canada, this day is referred to as "Ukrainian Christmas."

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

For Christians, Epiphany begins on January 6. Epiphany, with its focus on the coming of the magi (traditionally representing various races of humanity) celebrates the universality of the gospel. God came for all people. Instead of putting away the crèche scene, it is a good time, in our homes, to gather the magi – especially if they have differing skin colours – and set them in the middle of the dining room table where we can gaze at them and consider God's revelation to all nations.

The season of Epiphany leads us toward the baptism of Jesus and the Sunday called "Transfiguration."

Questions for Personal Meditation

- What does it mean to me to say that God is revealed to all people and all nations?
- Our *Living Faith* (9.2.1) says: "Some whom we encounter belong to other religions and already have a faith." How is God revealed to them?
- "For some people today, 'God' is an empty word indicating no reality they have ever consciously known. They do not believe there is a God." *Living Faith* (9.3.1) How would you share the amazing news of God's revelation with unbelievers? Think of someone specific, perhaps a neighbour or friend.



A Time Called ... TRANSFIGURATION

Words occupy the mind, but images haunt the soul. Scripture records that, after a ministry of sermons, stories, and conversations, Jesus was transfigured on a mountain before his disciples. He appeared in dazzling whiteness with two heavenly figures – Moses and Elijah.

Historical Roots of the Transfiguration



Widely adopted in the Eastern Church before 1,000 A.D., the Western Church added this special day to the church year in 1457. Its date coincided with the celebration of a great military victory over the Turks by Callistus III. In recent history, it appears as the last Sunday after Epiphany – the Sunday before Lent begins, where it

powerfully presents the message that God is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

The story of Jesus' transfiguration need not be reasoned through. It is a mystery to be contemplated, an image to keep with us as a continuing epiphany. The miracle is not that Jesus changed, but that the three disciples saw clearly who Jesus was. Glory, splendour, transcendence – such words are rarely used today, yet they truly belong to this event. As we turn towards Lent and the solemn events of Holy Week, we carry with us this image of our Lord, in glory and in mystery.

Questions for Personal Meditation

- Read this story in Mark 9: 2-8.
- How would I describe the Transfiguration?
- What would I have done, had I been on the mountain?

A Time Called ... LENT

Some of us grew up thinking that Lent was a time to keep personal enjoyment in check and to focus on personal guilt. That emphasis was to ensure we appreciated what Jesus suffered and accomplished in Holy Week. But Lent can also reveal the great blessings of being a Christian.

Historical Roots of Lent

In the early church, Lent was a time of training and preparation for baptismal candidates at Easter. By the fourth century, it developed into a 40-day period, following the biblical pattern of 40 days or 40 years of preparation and anticipation. In its early form, elements of penitence were included. Lent, in our tradition, is a time to re-examine and reaffirm our identity as people baptized into Christ's body, the church.



Finding Meaning in the Tradition

Our baptism is a symbolic dying and rising with Christ. In Lent, we turn with Christ towards these events in his life. Along the way the Spirit gives the opportunity for us to redirect and refocus our lives, and more fully realize our baptismal identity. We recall where we are going and what it cost God for us to become resurrection people. We become open to the possibilities of new beginnings all around us. The season of Lent points us to Easter.

Questions for Personal Meditation

- Is there something in my life that needs to die so that I can move toward a new life with Christ?
- What are the important ingredients in my Lenten journey?
- If I am not baptized, might this become preparation for a step of faith?

A Time Called ... PALM / PASSION SUNDAY

For many, the procession of the palms re-enacted by the children of our church schools is a vivid and lasting memory of this day. But once you know the whole story of this week, it is hard to see Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem except as set against his passion – betrayal, humiliation, and death.

Historical Roots of Palm/Passion Sunday

Since about the fourth century, the joy of Christ's triumphal entry has been set in deliberate contrast to the passion narrative. Although churches name this Sunday in different ways, the connection between Christ's glory and death keeps the full redemption story before us. This, the first Sunday in Holy Week, begins the seven days of the redemption drama. It may help us to think of this week as the seven days for creation and re-creation.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

Holy week is framed by glory – the glory offered by people as Jesus entered Jerusalem and the glory offered by God in the resurrected Christ. Today, we think about the glory we give Jesus in our lives and are reminded, in the reading of the passion narrative, that the glory we offer is not enough to save him from death. Only the glory that God bestows triumphs in the end. We are moving toward the cross where we shall see what humans did, and shall wait for what God does.



This week is a roller coaster of deep emotion and dramatic events. The palm tree branches of this Sunday honour Jesus, but soon another tree will

bring death. We wait for Easter resurrection.

Questions for Personal Meditation

- How do I honour Jesus in my life?
- In this Holy Week, how and when can I set aside daily time for prayer and meditation?
- What part of the Palm Sunday service touches me most?

A Time Called ... MAUNDY Thursday



We speak of the church year, but we break it into smaller bits like Lent. A still smaller bit of Lent is Maundy Thursday. At each step, our focus sharpens as we move from a wide-angle lens to a close-up shot. Through today's lens we see the events of Maundy Thursday.

Historical Roots of Maundy Thursday

The name comes from the Latin *mandatum novum* ("new commandment" John 13:34) – from the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. The foot-washing service dates back to the 7th century, when bishops and abbots used it to symbolize their servanthood. Now, a foot-washing service is for everyone.

A celebration of the Lord's Supper in commemoration of its institution began in the 4th century. In our tradition, however, the celebration of the Lord's Supper always goes beyond historical concerns to its full meaning as a sacrament. Possibly the oldest act, which is no longer practiced) was a public reconciliation for penitents, prior to readmission to communion at Easter.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

These riches are a lot to put into one service. Perhaps one thing will stand out for us. In the foot-washing service, we might see that it is not the act which gives meaning, but who is doing it that carries the message of radical servanthood. In the Lord's Supper, we may focus on God's gifts, strengthening us to face tomorrow in faith. We remember the commandment to love one another and ask for a new beginning in love. We remove the colour and decoration of our sanctuary, symbolizing the colour and creativity that left the world when Jesus died – leaving that story to stand unadorned.

Your service of worship may end with the ancient tradition of stripping the chancel and sanctuary of decoration and colour. We wait for Good Friday.

Questions for Personal Meditation

- In what ways am I learning to love?
- Is it harder for me to serve another, or let another serve me? Where is Jesus asking for growth?
- If things of colour and decoration were removed from the sanctuary, how did that affect me?

A Time Called ... GOOD FRIDAY

A woman lamented the poor attendance of church members at her church's Good Friday worship: "If we can't even bear the cost of one hour to hear the story of Jesus' death, how can we begin to consider and how can we begin to fathom the cost he bore for us, and how deeply we are loved?"

Historical Roots of Good Friday

In the early church, this was a day for fasting in preparation for the great festival of Easter. By the late 4th century, a service existed with readings from Isaiah and Hebrews, and the Gospel accounts of Jesus' trial and death, as well as prayers and devotion to the cross. Later, this service sometimes included the Lord's Supper. Protestant churches might draw on traditions of the Three Hour Devotion (readings and meditations on the seven last words of Jesus, focusing on the three hours of his dying). Others may use a reading of and meditation on the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death. The Lord's Supper is not generally included in these services.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

On this dark day, we know that Jesus will be raised. But giving the events their own day reminds us that new life comes at great cost and by way of a cross – this cross. In the same way, baptism is not just about rising with Christ, but dying and rising with him. Part of our baptismal identity is given to us today, giving us the courage to face the pain, suffering, and injustice in our lives and in our world. Seeing those things through the Good Friday story, we glimpse the promise of Easter.

Questions for Personal Meditation

- What troubles me in this story? Could it become a prayer?
- How do I "get into" this story and make it part of my faith story?
- What questions would I like to ask God about this story?
- What questions does God ask of me?



A Time Called ... EASTER DAY

Today shatters the natural order. The crucified one lives again. Reality is redefined through Christ's death and resurrection. God has spoken the last word on death – and that word is LIFE! All creation can live again through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Alleluia!



Historical Roots of Easter Sunday

The celebration of the Resurrection is the oldest and greatest feast of the Christian Church. In the early church, the Sunday celebration began with the Saturday all-night watch, the Easter Vigil. People preparing for baptism waited for the first light and were baptized on Sunday. In several traditions, this is still done. Reformed churches may keep the Easter vigil, with or without baptism. Like Christmas, Easter probably superseded an old pagan festival, its name possibly traced to the name of a pagan deity. Unlike Christmas, it is a moveable feast, taking its date from the phases of the moon.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

The Easter story is about Jesus who is raised from the dead. But that is not all. The resurrected Christ remembers his followers and seeks them out. He wants them to know he is alive. Why? Not to impress them with a trick, but because his dying and rising has to do with them. He seeks us out for the same reason. We all may share in his death and his resurrection. We can all have a new beginning. God has done this for us through Jesus Christ. This is the Good News. We have found a saviour!

Questions for Personal Meditation

- What part of the resurrection account stands out for me?
- If I could only share one aspect of my faith in Christ with someone, what would that be?
- Read your favourite Easter hymn as prayer and praise to God.

A Time Called ... EASTER SEASON

In a way, Easter is a “moveable feast” which, unlike Christmas with its set date, falls on the Sunday after the full moon following March 21. It is easy to fall back into “life as normal” after Easter. But, the season of Easter – 40 days – is Christendom’s most meaningful and historic celebration.

Historical Roots of Easter Season

The Easter Season – or Eastertide – is seven weeks after Easter. It seems likely that Eastertide was modelled after the Jewish festival of Shavuot, The Festival of Weeks, which was seven weeks long and ended with the celebration of Shavuot on the 50th day. In Christian tradition, the Easter season leads us to celebrate Pentecost, the gift of God’s Holy Spirit on the 50th day.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

As with Christmas, there may be an emotional slump after Easter. The Easter season – Eastertide – is, therefore, a good time to engage in something new in mission, something daring and innovative. Gather up your slow cookers and serve soup on the main street of your town. Invite guests to tell you of local mission opportunities in your community, or go to the national church website www.presbyterian.ca to find out about international ministry supported by *Presbyterians Sharing*



Questions for Personal Meditation

- Read the accounts of the last week of Jesus’ life from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (If you own a copy of *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels*, by Burton Throckmorton, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1992, it will help you to see the differences between the various gospel writers.)
- How does the resurrection story influence your life?

A Time Called ... PENTECOST DAY

Today, Christ's body, the Church, is born by the power of the Holy Spirit and equipped for service and witness. Today is the story of a spiritual presence so powerful that ordinary people see and do things beyond their own abilities.

Historical Roots of Pentecost



Pentecost is a Greek word meaning *Fiftieth Day*. It was applied to a Hebrew Festival that happened 50 days after Passover. Christians used the term Pentecost for the celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit, 50 days after the Resurrection. The earliest records of this feast date back to the 4th century, although *Acts 20:16* shows that Paul considered it an important day. It became the alternative date for baptism, after Easter. The British term for Pentecost – Whit Sunday – is taken from an association with the white robes worn for baptism. The account of Pentecost is recorded in *Acts 2*. Pentecost crowns the Great Fifty Days of Easter.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

The Bible story is dramatic – full of sound, wind, fire, and extraordinary speech. The result was witness, in word and deed, to the Risen Christ, a new looking outward. Yet, even the author of *Acts* chooses words carefully, saying there was *something like* tongues of fire. In the story, we see that the Spirit first chose a community setting to manifest its presence and gifts. The Spirit-filled life is one lived in community, where we hear and live out the call to love one another. We do so by the sustaining presence of the Spirit and the Spirit's gifts. By the Spirit, we prepare the way for the Lord's return. By the Spirit, the ministry of Word and Sacraments receives power and authority. By the Spirit, the priesthood of all believers hears God's call to mission and is equipped.

Questions for Personal Meditation

1. What words would you use to describe the account found in *Acts 2*?
2. Does this account affect your idea of God?
3. What do you look for as signs of the Spirit's presence?

A Time Called ... PENTECOST SEASON

What is better than an ordinary day? An ordinary day lets you catch up on small tasks, or it gives you time to have a nap, or it gives you time to clear out the garage. The season of Pentecost is both long and ordinary.

Historical Roots of Pentecost

The seasons of the Christian church are organized around two major celebrations – Christmas and Easter. The long period of time (33 or 34 Sundays) between Pentecost Sunday and Advent have long been referred to as Pentecost Season or Ordinary Time. The original meaning of Ordinary Time seems not to have the meaning of mundane or common. Rather, it meant “counted time” – the time counted between Pentecost and Advent. Traditionally, this time focused on the mission of the church to the world.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

Sometimes church leaders jokingly say that the long stretch of time from Pentecost Sunday in the Spring to Advent in the fall contains all the parts of the church year left over after everything else has been accounted for. It is a time for growth. Hence, the colour green. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “green” also means “young.” Pentecost season is a time for doing ordinary things – teaching the young, growing, learning, experimenting changing, thinking. This long season is a time to reflect on how to live under the guidance of God's Spirit.



Questions for Personal Meditation

- In what ways will I grow and change in this long season?
- What delights me about Ordinary time?
- How can I engage in the mission of the church to the world?

A Time Called ... TRINITY SUNDAY



While there is much we can say about the Trinity, our words are never adequate and our analogies never sufficient. On Trinity Sunday, we explore one way to explain the mystery of God and deepen our relationship with the God who is three persons – Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Historical Roots of Trinity Sunday

The early church struggled with the relationships of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The Athanasian Creed from the 4th century is the Christian Church's most profound confession of the triune God – three-in-one. In the West, the observance of this Sunday is first recorded in the 10th century. Spreading slowly, Trinity Sunday was widely observed during the Middle Ages. Rome officially adopted this feast in the 14th century. On this Sunday, we celebrate God in three persons through the church year cycle, beginning with the birth and life of Christ, the son, through to his Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. In this way, Trinity Sunday is different from some other church year celebrations, for it is a theological celebration, not an historical one.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

Every Christian puzzles over the Trinity – its purpose, merits, correct use, and terms of definition – but it is somehow never compromised by the controversy or the mystery that surrounds it. The Trinity is so compelling as an expression of divine identity that it has become the common reference point for all Christians. When we invoke the name of the Trinity, we honour both the mystery of God that we never fully understand, as well as the person of God we may come to know intimately.

Questions for Personal Meditation

- When does the minister invoke the name of the Trinity?
- What does that reveal about its role?
- What other expressions of the Trinity do you know? (Some examples are: *Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer* or *Mother, Friend, Lover* – from theologian Sallie McFague.) Are they helpful?

A time called ... REIGN of CHRIST SUNDAY

What pops into your mind when you hear the word “royalty”? For Christians, royalty has a different meaning. The Sovereign Christ let go of power and pageantry and redefined royalty in weakness and humility. Therefore, God gave him the highest honour and set him to reign over all creation.

Historical Roots of the Reign of Christ Sunday

This celebration is a relatively recent one, which was established in the Roman Catholic Church in 1925. Today, we celebrate it on the last Sunday after Pentecost, and it is a fitting crown to the church year. It is especially helpful to Presbyterians, who emphasize that Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, the one who both interprets and rules history.

Finding Meaning in the Tradition

The Sunday that completes the church year cycle centres on Christ as both the *Alpha* and *Omega*, the beginning and the end (*Revelations 22:13*). The Reign of Christ over all things is affirmed, a reign both just and compassionate. To trust in a Sovereign Christ is to look for signs of his reign in everything in our lives, the big and the small. We learn again and again that our times are in his hands. But we also look to the future and his coming glory, which turns our attention towards the hope of Advent. Earthly rulers rise and fall, but Christ's Kingdom has citizens in every era and every land.



Questions for Personal Meditation

- What helps me see that Jesus Christ is Sovereign?
- What makes it difficult for me to see the Reign of Christ?
- In what ways can I show the importance of the Reign of Christ to others?