

Park Hill
Presbyterian
Church

To know,
testify to,
celebrate,
embody,
and proclaim
the astounding,
overwhelming,
majestic grace
of God through the
Cross of Jesus Christ.

An Introduction to the Seasons of the Church Year

by
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In the fall of 2007, Park Hill Presbyterian Church (OPC) began following the historic Church calendar, Advent through Pentecost, in its morning services. The session chose to do so by using *The Revised Common Lectionary*, the product of an ecumenical collaboration which is used in many Protestant Churches. It gives Scripture readings to be used in worship services for every Lord's Day and all the significant feast days of the Church. This lectionary (collection of readings) follows a three-year cycle: Year A features Gospel readings from Matthew; Year B from Mark; and Year C from Luke.

The session asked me to write a series of pastoral letters, which are collected here, to introduce the seasons of the Church year to our congregation. Since 2007 was a "Luke year," these letters make reference to Scriptures from Year A of *The Revised Common Lectionary*. Nonetheless, I hope they will provide a useful introduction to the internal logic of the Church calendar in whatever year they may be read.

On Advent

The Church calendar begins with Advent; while the word means “arrival,” the season itself focuses on *preparing* for the arrival of the Son of God in Jesus, celebrated at Christmastide. Advent is thus comprised of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas.

It takes but a moment of reflection to realize that in the Bible, Jesus does not come only once. We think of his birth as his First Coming, but he arrived on the public scene (as it were) for the first time when he was baptized by John; this event marked the beginning of his public ministry. Moreover, we live in hope of his Second Coming, when he will come to judge the living and the dead. Thus, Advent does not merely focus on Christ’s birth, but on all the Bible has to teach us about what his coming to the world and to his people means. This fact is reflected in the Gospel texts for Advent for Year A in *The Revised Common Lectionary*.

Matthew 26:36-44	Christ’s Second Coming
Matthew 3:1-12	John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus Christ
Matthew 11:2-11	The natures of Jesus, as Messiah, and his Kingdom
Matthew 1:18-25	The birth of Jesus, Emmanuel

The Spiritual themes of Advent are thus complex and multifaceted. Sober reflection and repentance are the natural response to the arrival of the Lord and Judge of all. One must earnestly strive to live according to the demands of Christ’s Kingdom, made all the more difficult when the world has made this time of year a frenzied celebration of those things which are passing away. Joy fills the believer’s heart at the realization all the promises of God contained in the Old Testament have come, and are coming, to pass in the person of Jesus Christ. These themes are not at odds or in competition with one another, but all come together as aspects of the Christian’s hope in this world. In my opinion, the hymn which best represents the full scope of Advent is *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*.

Perhaps you could sing that hymn, along with others found in the *Trinity Hymnal*’s “Advent” section, in your times of family worship. Use this season of the Church calendar to search the Scriptures and meditate on the glorious fact that the long-promised Christ and Savior has come and is coming.

On Christmastide & Epiphany

The twelve days of Christmas do not exist only in a song designed to become increasingly (and inevitably) annoying, but are in fact a season in the Church calendar. Christmas Day, December 25, marks the season's beginning; it lasts twelve days, through January 5. As everyone knows, Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Christmastide, and the one or two Lord's Days it includes, focuses on the significance of the Incarnation. It gives us an opportunity to reflect on the awesome fact that the Son of God Himself, Lord of Heaven and earth, became a man and lived the same sort of life we all do. Twelve days is a passingly short time to meditate on one of the most wondrous events in history.

January 6 marks Epiphany (meaning "manifestation"). It takes the visit of the magi to Jesus (Matthew 2) as the beginning of Christ being revealed to the world. The Sundays after Epiphany thus focus on the beginnings of Jesus' earthly ministry, the period during which he became known throughout Galilee and Judea.

Christmastide and Epiphany are linked because the former celebrates the arrival of God as a man in the world he created, and the latter explores the meaning of that event. They give us the opportunity, as Christians, to consider the supernatural and awesome reality of our Gospel: not only did the infinite God become a finite man (and one in the most humble of circumstances) he did so in order to save us from our sins and lift us up into the heavenly glory which is rightfully only his, but ours by his grace and mercy.

On Lent

Because of the unfortunate tendencies and practices of Roman Catholicism, Lent can be perceived as a denial of the Gospel instead of an embrace of it. This season in the Church year is widely thought of as a time in which to take on oneself the sufferings of Christ by giving something up, such as chocolate. When one does so, our Savior's work on our behalf is both trivialized and considered incomplete.

We should instead look on Lent as a forty-day period of preparation for Easter, at which time we celebrate Jesus Christ's Resurrection and God's public declaration of his completed work for his people. One prepares for this Good News by repentance, putting off the sins which hinder and striving to live righteously in dependence on the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the Gospel readings for Lent (during Year A of *The Revised Common Lectionary*) bring the Gospel into clear focus.

Matthew 4:1-11	Jesus is tempted by and defeats Satan.
John 3:1-17	God's love for the world is shown by sending his Son to redeem.
John 4:5-42	Jesus presents himself as Messiah to the Samaritan woman.
John 9:1-41	Jesus heals the man born blind.
John 11:1-45	Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

Lent (the name comes from the old Saxon word for "spring") actually begins forty-six days before Easter because the season contains six Sundays; since the Lord's Day celebrates Christ's resurrection, and thus is a feast day on which fasting or other acts of repentance are inappropriate, other days must be added. Throughout Scripture, the Lord uses forty "units of time" to test people. For example, mankind was tested for forty days in the Noahic flood, and Israel was tested for forty years in the desert. These tests were failed, but Jesus passed the forty-day test he endured at the beginning of his ministry. Because he passed that test for us, we are not tested by God. Instead, we seek to more fully appreciate and lay hold of Christ's work for us by putting off our sins and living for his glory.

Lent, then, is most especially not a "Sunday-only" season of the Church year. Throughout its weeks, take special care to examine your life and "lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily entangles us, and run with patience the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:1-2)

On Eastertide

As answer 59 of our Shorter Catechism reminds us, each Sunday is a celebration of Christ's resurrection: "From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, God appointed the seventh day of the week to be the weekly Sabbath; and the first day of the week ever since, to continue to the end of the world, which is the Christian Sabbath." After all, this is the central, cardinal, and essential doctrine of our faith. "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain." (1 Corinthians 15:14)

Not surprisingly, then, Easter was the first festival recognized by the Church; the rest of the liturgical calendar formed around it. During the second century A.D., Easter began to be celebrated on the Sunday following Passover. It grew beyond a single day into a 50-day festival (seven weeks) which culminates in Pentecost. Other feasts and seasons of the Church calendar were added to this foundational celebration, Advent being last.

Jesus' resurrection is the Father's public vindication of his ministry: that is, it testifies to the world that everything Jesus claimed about himself during his earthly ministry was true, and his death accomplished the salvation of his people. It is also the basis of the Christian hope: our own resurrection from the dead on the last day, when sin and death are finally defeated.

Accordingly, Eastertide ought be a season of joyous celebration. In your personal and family worship, take time to list the things God has done for you and meditate on all the benefits of the salvation you've received from Christ. (I suggest, for example, memorizing Shorter Catechism #32-38.) Come to worship services prepared to sing with loud and glad voices, and stick around afterward to encourage your fellow saints to rejoice in all God's goodnesses to them through our resurrected Savior and Lord.

If we can come with resurrection joy to all the Lord's Day services of Eastertide, we will be well on the way to learning how to come to Church each and every week. By making Sunday the first day of the week, the Church has proclaimed the centrality of Christ's resurrection for the entirety of God's creation. Thus, we as Christians can and must celebrate each Lord's Day as an Easter Sunday.

On Pentecost

Under the Old Testament liturgical calendar, a harvest festival (also called the Feast of Weeks) was to be held seven weeks after Passover (Leviticus 23). In time, “Pentecost,” the Greek word for that fifty-day period, became another name for the feast, as we see in Acts 2:1. This was the festival which had brought so many pilgrims to Jerusalem on the day when the Holy Spirit was poured out with power on the apostolic band in particular and the Church as a whole after Christ’s Ascension.

Properly speaking, Pentecost Sunday is the end of Eastertide, seven weeks after Easter Sunday. This is because the outpouring of the Spirit was the culmination of Jesus’ ministry. As we learn from John 13-17, Jesus left this world so the Holy Spirit might come in his place to apply the benefits of his Cross and Resurrection to believers, and to sustain them through their earthly pilgrimages. In other words, we need the Holy Spirit to enjoy the blessings we celebrate at Easter.

At the same time, Pentecost is a celebration in its own right because it marks the day on which the Church became the Church as we know her today. In this New Covenant era, the Holy Spirit has given each believer Spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12) so the work of ministry can be completed by the whole body working together (Ephesians 4), to the end that the Church will spread over the entire world (Acts 1). In terms of the Christian liturgical calendar, it introduces “ordinary time,” during which the focus is not on a particular aspect of our Savior’s life and ministry, but on the “ordinary” life of the Church and believer, as it is taught and described in the whole of Scripture. That life is of course anything but ordinary, since it is empowered by the living presence of the Spirit of God within each Christian. Thus, ordinary time is itself an ongoing recognition that we are privileged to live in the age of the Spirit, as genuinely Pentecostal Christians.

During ordinary time, our congregation leave *The Revised Common Lectionary*, which helps us concentrate on particular aspects of Christ’s work during the appropriate season, and turn to the “continuous lectionary” of entire books of the Bible, through which the Spirit speaks to us today. By following the traditional Church calendar, we are reminded of all Jesus has done for us. Lord willing, this equips us to better appreciate the specific points of application we hear from the Spirit-breathed Word whenever the Scriptures of our Lord are preached.