

The Symphony of the Christian Year

by Donald Schmidt

The seasons of the church year form a unique rhythm by which Christians can live their lives. This rhythm is further enhanced by the melody of a lectionary which establishes a sequence of scriptures over the liturgical seasons. On top of this, a variety of traditions spanning times and cultures adds layers of harmony. All of this creates the symphony of the Christian year, a wondrous celebration of the life of Christ that can inform, guide, and challenge our daily living.

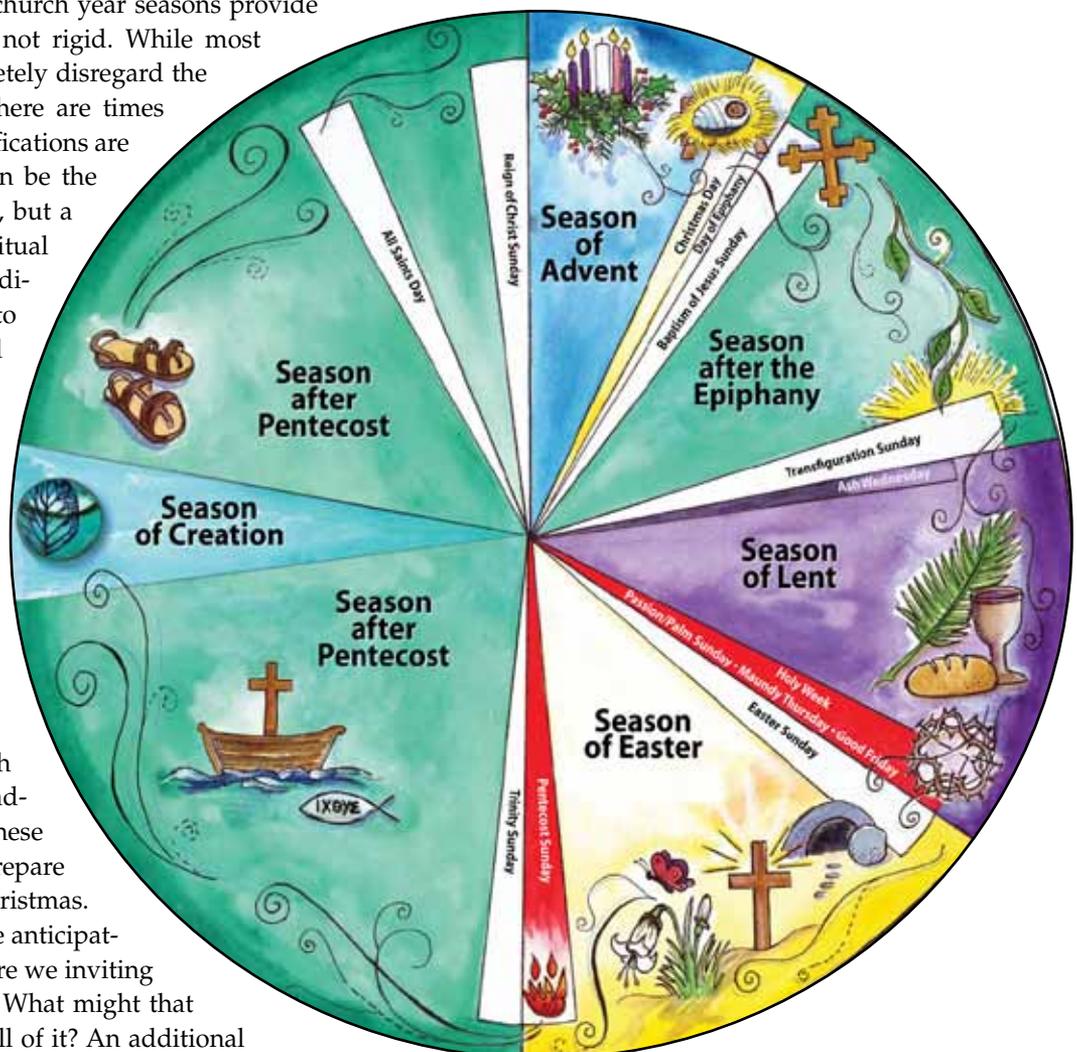
Seasons of the Christian year

Like any good rhythm, the church year seasons provide a framework, but they are not rigid. While most musicians would not completely disregard the stated rhythm of a piece, there are times when fluctuations and modifications are helpful. The church year can be the same. It is not a static thing, but a powerful vehicle for spiritual formation. It allows us, as individuals and as community, to encounter the scriptures and allow them to guide us.

Second, the seasons of the church year can be unifying for Christians throughout the world. Even when other seasons change dramatically from one place to another, there is a profound constancy to the seasons of the church year.

The year begins with **Advent**, four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day. These four weeks invite us to prepare ourselves spiritually for Christmas. What kind of Messiah are we anticipating? What kind of changes are we inviting God to make in our world? What might that mean? What is our part in all of it? An additional

advantage of beginning the church year with this season is that it intentionally puts the church calendar out of sync with the secular calendar. It reminds us that, as Christians, we are challenged to order our lives differently, in response to the life and gospel of Jesus Christ, rather than any other authority. Purple has traditionally been used to represent penitence. Others use blue, representing hope, or to suggest that the penitence of this season is not as strong as that of Lent. Still other colours are used in various regions and traditions.



Following Hebrew tradition where a day begins at sundown, the season of **Christmas** begins the evening of December 24, and lasts for 12 days. This is a joyous season, celebrating the birth of Jesus through to the arrival of the magi at the feast of the Epiphany (January 6). White and gold suggest joy and glory.

The time from the Epiphany until the beginning of Lent is the Season after the Epiphany or **Ordinary Time**. The colour green, for growth and new life, serves as a backdrop for stories of the call of disciples and prophets, and of the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. The early designation "ordinary time" for this period and the longer season following Pentecost, speaks of the fact that these two seasons are not attached to either of the great festivals of Christmas or Easter. Yet it is the very ordinariness of these times that gives them their importance. We are reminded, that God is with us not only at the great, celebratory moments of our lives, but in the ordinary, everyday moments that make up the vast majority of time. In the Season after the Epiphany we are invited to reflect on our own call to ministry and our own place in the scheme of prophetic ministry and discipleship.

Lent consists of the 40 days – not including Sundays – before Easter. Because each Sunday is a little Easter, these days were not included in the counting of days for fasting. Lent is one of the oldest observances in the church's history. In ancient times when baptisms were held annually at Easter, candidates for baptism were required to spend some time in preparation. The 40 days of Lent compared to the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness prior to his ministry. Over time, this period of fasting and reflection prior to Easter became popular for all Christians. The colour purple supports a mood of penitence.

Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, invites us to prepare for a season of reflection which can take on many forms. Knowing the end of the story, we can dare to confront the realities of the death of Jesus and its implications. Others seek to acquaint themselves more fully with the earthly life of Jesus in this season, or to encounter themes of Hebrew scripture, such as covenant or prophecy. All of this is in anticipation of Holy Week and its re-enactment of many of the last events of Jesus' life.

After confronting the reality of crucifixion, Christians can exult in the unbridled joy of resurrection at **Easter**. Not merely one day, this great joyous season goes for 50 days, celebrating that Christ is risen and that powers of evil, fear, death, and destruction do not have the final word. The season reaches a wonderful conclusion with the feast of **Pentecost**, celebrating the presence of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church. Traditionally, bright reds and oranges light up this day.

After the Day of Pentecost we return to **Ordinary Time – the Season after Pentecost**. It generally covers about half the year, taking us back to Advent where the cycle begins again. In this lengthy season, we remember again the presence of God with us in the everyday; the breathing in and breathing out of each morning and evening.

A variety of other days – Transfiguration, Trinity Sunday, All Saints', Reign of Christ/Christ the King – have become quite widely accepted and generally observed at common times. The commemoration of saints and historical events are important in certain traditions and less so in others, providing myriad possibilities for variation and harmony.

Yet the simple pattern, basically unchanged for some 1500 years, serves its purpose, and we are all invited to sing along.

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