

For
and
Signs
Seasons

by Duane Garner

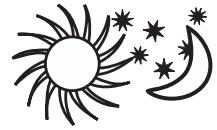
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For Signs and Seasons

All scripture citations are taken from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

Prayer texts taken from *The Book of Common Worship*, 1946 edition, and *The Shorter Prayer Book*, 1946, an abbreviation of *The Book of Common Prayer*.



Introduction

And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for festival times, and days and years.”

—Genesis 1:14¹

AS I WRITE THIS, IT IS THE SUMMER OF THE YEAR 2016. 2016 what? It is 2016 *Anno Domini*, “the year of our Lord”: 2,016 years since the incarnation of Jesus. Everyone in the modern world—from the atheist to the Buddhist to the Muslim to the agnostic to the polytheist—recognizes the life of Jesus of Nazareth every time they write a check, sign a contract, or make an appointment. They acknowledge, whether they like it or not, that the events of His life are the most important events in history, that they irreversibly changed the world, and that because of them He is the Lord of History. He is Lord of time itself. All of creation—even the seasons and the passing of years—point to the lordship of Jesus over all things.

Because we are His people we care about history, and therefore we care about time. We mark time so that we can redeem time. Things that mark time: the courses of the sun, moon and stars, the changing of the seasons, are not irrelevant to us. They are not simply tedious aspects of this creaturely existence which we hope to shed someday when we become disembodied spirits. The faithful care about these things, because through these things God has revealed himself.

¹ Editor’s translation.

“Teach Us to Number”

Moses spent many days of his life waiting. He experienced brief spurts of action interspersed with long periods of faithful, obedient patience. Which is kind of like our lives. We have some pretty exciting days, and some pretty disastrous days, but most of our lives are even-keeled: a little bad, a little good. Moses had three forty-year-long stretches of preparation, each capped by a great event.

Moses waited patiently the first forty years of his life, growing and learning in Pharaoh’s house, looking for his purpose and his opportunity to serve his own people who were in bondage. He jumped at the opportunity to deliver one of them who was being physically beaten. In the process of defending him, he killed the assailant, but the people of Israel mocked him for it. They were not yet ready for their deliverance. So Moses went and spent the next forty years in the wilderness with dumb stinky sheep—a preparation for when he would later spend forty years in the wilderness with dumb stinky sheep of the two-legged variety. He married a girl and took care of her father’s animals. One day, he saw a burning bush and God commissioned him to return to Egypt and bring Israel out of bondage. God delivered his people, carried them through the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai, and gave them His law, with orders to go take the land of Canaan. Yet the people refuse to obey, and so Moses and the people spent the next forty years wandering in the wilderness, waiting for the next generation to grow up so that they could go in and take the land.

Moses wrote Psalm 90 near the end of his life, reflecting on the past hundred and twenty years or so, seeing how fast it had gone, how quickly those years had run through his fingers. He compared our short lives to the eternity of God. We get seventy years, eighty if we are really blessed. If we think that time goes quickly, how much shorter our lives must seem from God’s vantage point. Moses did not say time does not matter, or time does not matter to God; to the contrary, he teaches that God has a perspective that we cannot begin to appreciate.

Later, Peter picked up this theme to comfort the churches by encouraging them to be patient and endure suffering because “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). This is not a mathematical formula. His words are a declaration that God does not share our perspective about time. When we think a particular blessing or deliverance is taking forever, God has prepared

the answer right around the corner. When we see our lives flying before our eyes, our children growing so fast, He sees all the details and all the fractals and branches of every detail that He is working out.

God has committed a number of days to each of us. He expects us to be faithful stewards of those days. In light of the fleeting nature of our lives, the fact that we are like grass that shoots up and gets cut down, Moses prays, “teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (v. 12). The faithful ought to care about time, to mark time, so that we can redeem time. Because time is precious, we must plan our time and not waste it. He prays, “satisfy us early with Your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (v. 14), and “establish the work of our hands for us; yes, establish the work of our hands” (v. 17). Time is thus redeemed in two ways: first, in rejoicing—in worship, in celebration, in festivity and feasting—and second, in work—work to provide food for our houses, work to educate and train our children, work to provide for others. We keep both in view before us. There is so much work, there never seems to be enough time. Yet we understand that work isn’t everything. We also redeem our time through worship and feasting, since they, too, are indispensable ways to number our days with wisdom.

Of Time and In Time

When the church sets aside time for the very serious business of rejoicing and celebration, we celebrate *real* events that happened in time, in history. We don’t celebrate a philosophy, a system of morality, or a political agenda. Our faith is founded upon *factual historical events*; not on theories, ideas, or constructs. Time and history matter to the Christian faith because it is rooted in time, with real people, places, and events *in time*. The gospel is rooted *in time* because it is *real*. The gospel writers give historical markers: “in the time of Herod, in the time of Caesar Augustus, on this day, these things happened.” God’s work in history makes history relevant and meaningful. Since our faith is rooted in time, it is by the faithful preaching of the gospel that time is redeemed and claimed. Jesus does not rescue us from time and history—but from sin and death, so that we can reclaim all those things for His glory. We aren’t saved *from* time, but *in* time. We can now consecrate our time and reclaim it for God.

To pagans, unbelievers and the ignorant, history appears to repeat itself, which for them makes no time more relevant than the present, and their view presents no broader purpose or story being played out in time. History has no goal or aim. Memorializing is not a priority for them; they value nothing enough to give it lasting significance. However, the faithful know that time has a goal and a purpose, that history is flowing toward something. Time is not a curse, nor a result of the curse. Time was built into the existing order at creation, and the entire creation is ordered in such a way to aid us in marking out God's works in history. Taking our cue from creation, God's people have always used calendars, chronologies, and histories to commemorate God's mighty acts on our behalf.

A Festal World

At creation, God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be [...] for days and years” (Gen. 1:14). It is important to note that God so appointed them before the fall. Seasons and the marking of time are not ways that we manage the effects of the curse. Before Adam’s sin, God intended for there to be a cycle of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. He intended for the heavenly bodies to mark our time. People have always used them that way. A year is one trip around the sun. A month is generally one cycle of the moon. Beyond that, God said “let them be for signs and seasons.” The word translated “seasons” there is not only referring to summertime and wintertime. This word is used two hundred times throughout the Old Testament for festival seasons and special times for worship. God set up the stars, sun, and moon in their courses to show them, and us, when to celebrate, rejoice, and give thanks. The creation guides us in how to reflect upon His work of grace and redemption. The cycles of the year tell the story of the gospel.

After He redeemed Israel from Egypt, God prescribed Israel’s festival seasons and the feasts in a calendar synchronized with the seasons of the year (Lev. 23). (Here, as before, the word “feasts” is the same word “seasons” from Genesis 1.) In the spring, they were to celebrate Passover, with its theme of deliverance. Just as the trees and plants and earth moved from death to life, so they would be reminded that God has brought them from death to life. In the summer, they would celebrate Pentecost. The summer is the season of growth, maturation, fruition.

Analogously, they were to celebrate the giving of the Law, by which they would grow through the Spirit. Then in the fall they held the Feast of Tabernacles. While they were gathering the harvest in and thanking God for His provision, they would be pointed to that final spiritual harvest of all the nations.

In addition to these three seasons, they had the weekly Sabbath, and other feasts, harvest festivals, and also celebrations they picked up along the way. As Israel moved through history, they found that God gave them other reasons to celebrate. The Israelites were apparently free to add to the calendar of festivals. In Esther we read about a great deliverance of God’s people that resulted in the holiday of Purim, where gifts were exchanged. This was not some licentious practice borrowed from the pagans. Later, in the period between the Old and New Testaments, there was another deliverance during the time of the Maccabees, and out of that came the celebration of Hanukkah.²

Jesus Changes Our Time

Because Jesus has now fulfilled all the things to which those old feasts pointed, and because the Church has been designated as the new humanity with and under Jesus, we have taken dominion over time with new festivals and feasts that celebrate the fulfillment of the old covenant. From very early in her history, the Church established a new calendar based on the works of our Savior, with the understanding that time has been redeemed by the work of Jesus, who is Lord over all. Our feasting is founded upon the fact that God became man: now we arrange our year around the life of Jesus.

We begin our calendar with the great cycle of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. This season focuses both on the future and the first comings of Jesus, and all the ways He revealed himself to be the light of the world. The second great season is that of Easter, which includes Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Ascension. The third great season is the long one

²Jesus goes up to the temple during Hanukkah in John 10. As a Jewish boy from a faithful family, he would have kept all of these feasts, including Purim and Hanukkah. We might ask those Christians who do not wish to celebrate Christmas or Easter because they are “man-made” holidays if it was wrong for Jesus to celebrate Hanukkah. If it was permissible for Jesus to enjoy the entire calendar of Jewish festivals—both those instituted directly by God and those his people instituted to praise him for his deliverance—then why should we not celebrate his birth, his life, and his resurrection?

of Pentecost, in which we focus on the maturation and growth of the Church by the work of the Spirit. It includes the feast days of Pentecost, Trinity, and All Saints' Day.

Creation helps us see this story: in the grand drama of the heavens above and the changing of the seasons, the story is told. Advent and Christmas come at the close of the year, where in the northern hemisphere everything is dying, everything is winding down, there is less and less light. If this were the first time you had experienced winter, you would think that the world was ending. Darkness has the victory. Everything is dead and cold and gray.

But then, when the days are at their darkest, the wheels start to turn the other way, and the light gets stronger. This is when we celebrate the incarnation. Jesus came at the darkest time, where it looked like everything was really over for Israel, no revelation, no hope, no future, death reigned over the whole world but then here comes Jesus and He fights back against the darkness. Light starts gradually to overtake the darkness in the middle of winter, but it is going to take time for the sun to have its full effect.

In the mid- to late winter, the light has come, but the trees are still dormant; there are no flowers or fruit. During this season of Lent, we remember the sufferings of Jesus. We remember that He was the light of the world, but that the world didn't receive him. We remember our own sins which were the cause of His suffering. As Lent winds down, suddenly everything around us comes to life. There's life everywhere—flowers and leaves on the trees, and green grass and birds and bees, boys proposing to girls and weddings and babies. It's the time of resurrection; and, indeed, Jesus' resurrection brings new life to the whole world.

When we move to the summer, a time of growth and fruit bearing, a time of maturation, we're in the season of Pentecost. We celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and acknowledge the way that He grows up humanity, reforms it and shapes it. At the end of the season of Pentecost comes the harvest, which points us to the final harvest and judgment. There we wrap back around to Advent, beginning our cycle of memorializing again.

The seasons play the story out for us, and they do this every year, repeating their rhythms. This arrangement is not necessary. God did not have to make things this way. We do not have to have seasons, or even weather. It could be sunny and 72 with a gentle breeze every day, but God did not desire it to be that way. There are hot days and cold

days, clear and cloudy, soft breezes and great storms. Beautiful sunny days that make you wish to run and roll in the grass; and dark, gloomy, cloudy rainy days that make you wish to stay inside and not stick your head out. This variation of weather is kind of like our lives. We have days where we have unbelievable joy and success, and we have days where life is tough and painful. Our lives and all of history go through cycles, just like creation goes through cycles, and this is how God wills it to be and this is how things get better and more glorious.

Why a Church Calendar?

Redeeming the time through a cyclical festival calendar causes us to realize that festivals and feast days and holidays are not mostly for the children to give them something fun to do. They are not silly reasons to decorate the house, or eat something different—things that we could really take or leave. In our very pragmatic world, we might think of holidays as kind of a short break from work. We eat, we give presents, take off work a day or two, but then get back to our real life, the really important stuff. Because, after all, holidays truly are impractical, with all their fuss and expense. You might be tempted to think, "Maybe this year I ought to just skip the whole thing." This sounds like a serious, no-nonsense approach, but in reality this is warped and upside-down. Festivity is serious business. Whether or not you celebrate the most important events in the history of the world is not a peripheral matter. God commanded His people Israel to follow a certain calendar of feast days and celebrations, by which He indicated they must stop doing what they were doing, to stop their work, because these were His days. They were to be prepared to set aside their time and their money, because they were to have a party when He told them to have a party. They must buy meat and wine and bread, and He wished them to sing and laugh and dance and cut up. This "non-sense" is, in fact, essential for God's people, then and now.

Following the Church calendar does so many things for us, providing experiences and perspectives that we cannot even articulate. Here are three identifiable benefits.

First, following the calendar of feast days disciplines us in joy and festivity. There may be years where you do not feel like celebrating this or that. You have had a tough year; you lost someone special; you are battling illness and you just do not have it in you. But these are fixed

days; you don't get to choose when they are coming. When the day comes you are called to rejoice on that day, just like you are called to worship. God calls you to rise above your sorrows and celebrate, in spite of your situation, acknowledging God's work throughout your whole life and not letting sorrows, which we acknowledge to be temporary, to obscure that. Because Jesus has come, because He has been resurrected, because He has poured out His spirit, and all of human history is headed toward that great harvest, everything is going to be fine. In fact, they are going to be better than fine. We need to be happy about that.

These celebrations teach us to see sorrow and bitter providences as temporary and part of the cycle of life. By them we put into action our knowledge that these bad things in life are just chapters in a bigger story of which we are a part. It puts a narrative on those long days of waiting and waiting and wondering when the next big thing is going to come, when we think we are not getting anywhere. The cycle of celebrations reminds us, no, you are going somewhere, and the church is going somewhere, and everything is moving and improving and reforming, in ways you cannot see because you don't have God's perspective on time. Trust that, although it is winter now, spring is coming. It comes every year. God said after the flood, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease." (Gen. 8:22). Do not despair. Spring is coming.

Second, this calendar gives us an identity and a culture. The Western world is reverting to a kind of tribalism. Because everyone feels disconnected from the whole, and the culture is so splintered, people grasp for some kind of identity and shared history. We do not have to go looking for a culture or a tradition; we have those things, and we have the only substantial, real, lasting, redeeming story available to mankind. The calendar shapes us into a people with one mind and one heart. Our holidays are reference points indicating who we are and what is most important to us. They remind us of what is at the center of life. For Israel, their feast days identified who they were: the delivered people. So, too, our feast days remind us that we are members of the body of Christ. We mark time by the events of His life, and every year we remind ourselves of those events together, by singing them back and forth to each other, by reading them and hearing them, and it never gets old. Each time we hear it, it's like the first time. Our calendar gives us an identity.

And third, our calendar tells the story of the gospel. Through re-enacting the grand drama of the seasons and the feast days, we show the world that we believe the gospel. Jesus' people have been and ought still

to be known for deep, unshakable, irrepressible joy. No matter what is going on in the world, we stop on feast days and determine that we will be really happy. We say to the world, "Don't you want to be a part of this? Stop just borrowing the things you like and crafting your own counterfeit. Come be part of the real deal."

Living in covenant with the Creator of the universe, and with his people, is the happiest thing in the world. I want everyone around me to understand that. I want my children to get that. I want them to know the covenant as the happiest place on earth. In it we have all the best that life has to offer—this is where the fun is. What's out there, whatever it is, can't even come close to what we have here. They outside the covenant think they are having fun, but they are killing themselves and destroying each other. This is the place of life. This is the place of fulfillment of all your heart's desires. This is deep abiding everlasting light and joy.

Let us be earnestly tenacious and unyielding about our feast days. Determine to enjoy them and enjoy all of them. Let us be dead serious about expressing our joy in the God who gave us life through His son Jesus through all the days and seasons and years He has given us.

The Calendar is thoroughly catholic in the sense that it arranges for the proclamation and observance of the whole biblical message in yearly sequence, as the Church in many ages and many lands and any branches has best learned to ensure its essential catholicity.

—William F. Dunkle, Jr.³

³ William F. Dunkle, Jr., *Values in the Church Year* (New York: Abingdon, 1959), 12.



Advent

*Lift up your heads, O you gates!
And the King of glory shall come in.
—Psalm 24:7*

What Is Advent?

THE ENGLISH WORD “ADVENT” IS DERIVED FROM THE Latin verb *advenire*, “to come.” Advent has to do with the Lord’s coming to us. The Lord has come to us (at the birth of Christ), continues to come to us (especially on the Lord’s Day), and will come to us (bodily again at the end of this age). Advent is a time to reflect upon all of the ways—past, present, and future—in which the Lord comes to us.

Remember that the purpose of Advent is not to imagine ourselves to be living at the time immediately preceding Christ’s birth and so we are somehow pretending that we are waiting for Him to be born. It is not time for a spiritual game of “make believe.” Neither is the purpose of Advent to think sentimental thoughts about the baby Jesus. The purpose of Advent is to pray for the coming of the Lord. During Advent, we remember His first coming (He kept His promises to His people in the Hebrew Scriptures), and we pray today that He will remember His promises and come again, judging the enemies of the Church and delivering His people from all evil. During the Advent season, we petition the Lord to come again to us, both now and finally at the end of the age;

and we switch the sanctuary colors to royal purple, marking our expectation of the coming King.

The Advent Readings

The Bible readings emphasize the Lord's coming in judgment and salvation. You should read Isaiah, for example, remembering that the Lord kept His word and came (*avenire*) to His people. He sent the Assyrians and Babylonians to chastise them for their unrepentant ways. He also came to them after the exile, as He promised, to return them to their land.

The Lord promises similar judgment on His people in the New Testament if they reach the same level of spiritual dullness that Israel did (Rev. 3:14-22). The New Testament readings all refer either to the Lord Jesus' historical coming in judgment upon apostate Israel in A.D. 70 and His final coming at the end of the age. "Judgment begins in the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). Ultimately, the Lord came to His people in Jesus Christ in order to forgive our sins (Matt. 1:21), and He will come again as our King to accomplish our comprehensive deliverance from evil.

Look for the connection between the Old and New Testament readings. They will usually have a common theme centered on the coming of the Lord in judgment and salvation. The Psalms selected for this season are prayers for deliverance in anticipation of the coming of the King.

A Brief Order for Advent Family Devotions

Opening Psalm

The family may begin by singing one of the following Psalms: 2, 22, 23, 24, 29, 47, 66, 72, 76, 80, 98, 99, 100, 122, 124, 148

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

First Week in Advent

All: Stir up, we implore you, your power, O Lord, and come, that by your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and be saved by your mighty deliverance: for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and forever. Amen!

Second Week in Advent

All: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of your only-begotten Son that at his second coming we may worship him in purity, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and forever. Amen!

Third Week in Advent

All: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come alongside us with great might; and because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us: through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and forever. Amen!

Fourth Week in Advent & Christmas

All: O God, who makes us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of Your only Son Jesus Christ; grant that as we joyfully receive Him for our redeemer, so we may with sure confidence behold Him when He comes to be our judge, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen!

Lighting the Advent Candle

If the family uses an Advent wreath, the appropriate candles may be lit at this time.

Scripture Readings**First Week in Advent**

*Is. 1:1-20; 1 Thes. 1:1-10; Ps. 122
Is. 1:21-31; 1 Thes. 2:1-12; Ps. 72
Is. 2:1-11; 1 Thes. 2:13-20; Ps. 23
Is. 2:5-22; 1 Thes. 3:1-13; Ps. 118
Is. 3:1-4:1; 1 Thes. 4:1-12; Ps. 98
Is. 4:2-6; 1 Thes. 4:13-18; Ps. 147
(Opt. Sun.: Is. 43:1-13; Ps. 46)*

Third Week in Advent

*Is. 25:1-12; 2 Pet. 1:1-11; Ps. 72
Is. 28:9-22; 2 Pet. 1:12-21; Ps. 71
Is. 29:13-24; 2 Pet. 2:1-10; Ps. 24
Is. 33:10-24; 2 Pet. 2:11-16; Ps. 33
Is. 62:1-12; 2 Pet. 2:17-22; Ps. 34
Is. 64:1-12; 2 Pet. 3:1-18; Ps. 25
(Opt. Sun.: Is. 25; 1 Cor. 3:16-4:5; Ps. 75)*

Second Week in Advent

*Is. 7:1-17; 1 Thes. 5:1-11; Ps. 85
Is. 8:11-9:1; 1 Thes. 5:12-28; Ps. 19
Is. 9:2-12; 2 Thes. 1:1-12; Ps. 103
Is. 11:1-16; 2 Thes. 2:1-12; Ps. 145
Is. 12:1-6; 2 Thes. 2:13-3:5; Ps. 1
Is. 24:1-23; 2 Thes. 3:6-18; Ps. 80
(Opt. Sun.: Is. 46; Rom. 15:4-13; Ps. 9)*

Fourth Week in Advent

*Zech. 2:10-13; Lk. 1:39-56; Ps. 98
Rev. 21:9-21; Lk. 1:57-79; Ps. 31
Rev. 21:22-22:5; Lk. 2:1-14; Ps. 97
Rev. 22:6-21; Lk. 2:25-35; Ps. 100
Rev. 1:1-8; Jn. 1:1-18; Ps. 96
Is. 40:1-31; 1 Jn. 4:7-16; Ps. 106
(Opt. Sun.: Is. 35; Phil. 4:4-9; Ps. 97)*

Hymn

In the first through third weeks, select one of the following Advent hymns:

Arise, Sons of the Kingdom
Behold, the Bridegroom Cometh
Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus
Come, Thou Precious Ransom, Come
Comfort, Comfort Ye My People
Hark! a Thrilling Voice Is Sounding
Hark, the Glad Sound, the Savior Comes
Hills of the North, Rejoice
How Lovely Shines the Morning Star!
Jesus Came, the Heavn'ns Adoring
Lift Up Your Heads
Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending
Magnificat
O Bride of Christ, Rejoice!
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
O Savior, Rend the Heavens Wide
Prepare the Way, O Zion
Rejoice, All Ye Believers
Savior of the Nations, Come

The Advent of Our King

The Bridegroom Soon Will Call Us
The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns
The Race that Long in Darkness Pined
Thy Kingdom Come on Bended Knee
Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying

In the fourth week, the following Christmas hymns are appropriate:

Angels We Have Heard on High
From Heaven Above to Earth I Come
God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen
Good Christian Men, Rejoice
Hark! the Herald Angels Sing
Joy to the World! the Lord Is Come
Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence
Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming
O Come, All Ye Faithful
O Little Town of Bethlehem
Of the Father's Love Begotten
Silent Night, Holy Night
Sing, O Sing, This Blessed Morn
The First Noel
What Child Is This

Prayer Requests & Closing Prayer

Family members may make specific prayer requests, after which the entire family can pray.

Leader: The almighty and merciful God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless us and keep us.

All: Amen!



Christmas

*Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!*

—Luke 2:14

All the Twelve Days of Christmas

AS WE BRING THE ADVENT SEASON TO A CLOSE, WE EX-change the “preparatory purple” of Advent for the “celebratory white” as we begin the full twelve-day feast of Christmastide. The season begins on Christmas day and then goes all the way to Epiphany on January 6. There are traditions and a special significance assigned to many of the days within that twelve day stretch. In fact, centuries ago, people would wait until Epiphany to exchange gifts, and do many little things along the way during the Christmas season to build up to the great feast of Epiphany.

As Christians try to recover many of the traditions we have lost, there has been a renewed interest in understanding and celebrating throughout the whole Christmas season. One idea for celebrating the twelve days is to leave your decorations and lights up until Epiphany. They are *Christmas* decorations, after all, and Christmas isn’t over on December 26. It is just getting started. This is sure to prompt interesting conversations with your neighbors when they see your lights still up in January, and they begin to wonder if you are going to leave them up until sometime in July!

Another general principle is to try to do some small special thing every day. It does not always work out perfectly, and we certainly do not stress over it, but I ordinarily try to find one special thing to do every day of the season as a way to keep up the cheer—whether it is going somewhere as a family we don't normally go, or having special foods and drinks, or saving a small present or two to give on a later day of the season.

To assist your planning, here is a schedule that can be adapted to serve different traditions and families.

A Christmas Schedule

1st Day of Christmas, Christmas Day

Begin the Christmas season with gifts and feasting and your usual family traditions.

Collect for the day:

O God, who makes us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of Your only Son Jesus Christ; grant that as we joyfully receive him for our redeemer, so we may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our judge, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen!

2nd Day of Christmas, St. Stephen's Day / Boxing Day

This is the feast of Stephen, the first martyr for Christ and a deacon who was set apart to care for the poor. In memory of his faith and example we look for opportunities today to bless those who are not as well off as we are. Christians throughout history have used the second day of Christmas to give leftovers from their feasts to the poor. As the children bring new Christmas toys into their rooms, and as you add new clothes to your closet, maybe it is a good time to bag up some old gently-used things and donate them. Charity can take many forms, but however you might have opportunity be sure to sing or whistle "Good King Wenceslaus" as you do it.

Collect for the day:

Grant, O Lord, that, in all our suffering here on earth for the testimony of Your truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled by the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors

by the example of Your first martyr, Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to You, O blessed Jesus, who stands at the right hand of God to comfort and aid all those who suffer for You, our only mediator and advocate. Amen!

3rd Day of Christmas, the Feast of St. John the Evangelist

Gather to celebrate the feast of St. John. Remember, John was the apostle who wrote "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren," and "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." One old custom on this feast day is to manifest that fellowship and love around a good bottle of wine, to bless it and give thanks to God for the "wine which gladdens the heart of man" and for the joy we have in our communion together.

Collect for the day:

Merciful Lord, we ask You to cast Your bright beams of light upon Your church, that it, being illuminated by the writings of Your blessed apostle and evangelist John, may so walk in the light of Your truth, that it may at length attain to live everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

4th Day of Christmas, the Feast of the Innocents

A day to remember Herod's slaughter of the Hebrew children and the way that he copied Pharaoh's similar wickedness. The Serpent has always tried to kill the Seed of the Woman, and thus has always made war on children. His warfare continues today. Our response to this is to give thanks for our children, to sing the imprecatory Psalms against the Serpent and his minions who would destroy children and to value and delight in childhood. One enjoyable custom on this day is to allow the youngest child in the household to choose the day's food, drink, music, and entertainments.

5th and 6th Days of Christmas

Quiet days on the church calendar, but good days to get caught up on whatever you were not able to get done earlier in the season. These are great days to work on Christmas cards, thank-you cards, and other Christmas-time correspondence.

7th Day of Christmas, New Year's Eve

This day of Christmas is always the last day of the year, and it is customary on this day to reflect on all the ways that God has blessed us,

protected us, corrected us, provided for us and sanctified us in the last year.

Give thanks and rejoice for another year of life under the sun, and for the manifold blessings of being God's image-bearers living in this amazing world He has created for us. The traditional drink for this time of year is a punch called "wassail" (from the Saxon *was haile* meaning "to your health"). It is a hot spiced cider for which you can find several different recipes on the internet. But even without the special punch, when friends come "wassailing" on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, drink in joy and say a prayer for their health and yours in the coming year.

8th Day of Christmas, New Year's Day / Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus

Remember that Mary and Joseph were faithful to God's Law and brought the infant Jesus to be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth (Luke 2:21). Jesus was fully obedient to God's Law every step of the way, all through his life, and there was nothing in his life that someone could point to as evidence that he was not a faithful Jew. Because we are united to him, his faithfulness is our faithfulness, his obedience is our obedience; and every thing that he does, he does for his people. So as he is circumcised and submits to the Law every day of his life, he is fulfilling and obeying perfectly the Law which we failed to uphold and submit to in our sin and rebellion. On the basis of his obedience, and because we are his, so now his acceptance before God the Father is our acceptance before God the Father.

The eighth day of his life is also when he was given the name "Jesus" or "Yeshua"—"Yahweh saves"—because, as the angel said to Mary, "He will save his people." All of this is why we rejoice and give thanks this Eighth Day of Christmas! Even before he could talk or walk, Jesus was beginning his saving work on our behalf, delivering us from our sins! One fun dinner conversation to have tonight is to rehearse the origin of everyone's name—not only its meaning, but also whom each was named after, or the story of how you decided upon each child's name. And then tell the story of each person's baptism, and talk about when they were brought into covenant with God, just as Jesus' parents were faithful to bring him into the covenant when he was a child. Also, this is a good day to sing the Song of Simeon, the man who burst out in praise the day that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple on that eighth day.

Collect for the day:

Almighty God, who made Your blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for men; grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit; that our hearts—and all our bodies—being made dead to all worldly lusts, we may in all things obey Your will; through Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen!

9th Day of Christmas

A good night to get together with other families, bring instruments, and sing and play Christmas songs and other favorites. As the Christmas season winds down, recall the great Christmases of your family's past. What was the most memorable present you ever received? What was the funniest thing that ever happened at Christmas? What were some traditions that you grew up with that you might try next year?

10th and 11th Days of Christmas

Another quiet set of days on the calendar, these are good days to give each other any small trinkets or candy or special little treat you have put back. Perhaps the children could work on little plays or presentations or poems and songs to perform for the family.

12th Day of Christmas, Twelfth Night / The Final Day of Celebration

This, traditionally, was the day of the biggest party of the season, where you break out the cakes and pies and all the best wine. If you have been saving any presents, now is the time to give them, and close out the Christmas season with a bang.



Epiphany

*Arise, shine; for your light has come!
And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.*

—Isaiah 60:1

All About Epiphany

EPIPHANY IS A TIME WHEN WE REFLECT ON ALL THE ways that Jesus was revealed to be the Savior of the Nations. “Epiphany” comes from the Greek word for “revelation” or “manifestation,” and this is the time of the year where we reflect on all the ways that Jesus was made known to be the Messiah.

Beginning with His revelation to the nations when the wise men appeared before Him (why this is also called “Three Kings Day” in some parts of the world) through His baptism, miracles, and transfiguration, the scripture readings, hymns and prayers of this season walk us through the various manifestations of Jesus’ mission throughout His life.

The lectionary gospel reading for the Sunday after Epiphany each year takes us to the baptism of Jesus, and so we will join with the Christians all over the earth in meditating and reflecting on what Jesus’ baptism means for us and the world. After this Sunday, we switch the sanctuary colors from the bright glorious white to the growing green, reminding us that we are in a “growing season” specifically focusing on the ever-growing revelation of Jesus to the nations.

A Brief Order for Epiphany Family Devotions

Opening Psalm

The family may begin by singing one of the following Psalms: 2, 8, 46, 72, 96, 97, 100

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Everlasting Father, the radiance of faithful souls, who brought the nations to Your light and kings to the brightness of Your rising; fill the world with Your glory, and show Yourself to all the nations, through Him who is the true light and the bright morning star, Jesus Christ Your son our Lord. Amen!

Scripture Readings

Mt. 2:1-12; Ps. 145; Is. 49:5-23; Eph. 3

Hymn

Select one of these Epiphany hymns:

Arise and Shine in Splendor
As with Gladness Men of Old
Brightest and Best
Let All the Stars in the Skies Give Praise
What Star Is This with Beams So Bright

Prayer Requests & Closing Prayer

Family members may make specific prayer requests, after which the entire family can pray.

Leader: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with us all.

All: Amen!



Lent

*So rend your heart, and not your garments;
Return to the Lord your God.*

—Joel 2:13

The Forty Days of Lent

DURING THE FORTY DAYS OF LENT, WE REMEMBER THE forty days of fasting and temptation Jesus underwent in the wilderness as He battled Satan and suffered on our behalf. The last week of Lent is often referred to as “Holy Week” wherein we walk through the events of the last days of Jesus earthly ministry leading up to His crucifixion.

Those forty days, not counting Sundays, leading up to the high feast of Easter has been known for centuries as the season of Lent. “Lent” comes from the old English word *lencten*, which means “spring,” and closely related to the word “lengthen,” referring to the lengthening days that comes this time of year.

In the ancient Church and in certain parts of the world throughout history baptisms of new converts were done on Easter, and thus this season before Easter was traditionally used as a time of catechesis. Converts were instructed in the doctrines of the Christian faith and thus prepared to enter the church not as novices, but as well-trained disciples.

Giving Up for Lent?

Because the forty days also bring to mind Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness, His battle with Satan, and His suffering on our behalf, this has also been used as a time of fasting. When we struggle with our sins and have an acute sense of our own lack of discipline over our minds, tongues and bodies, it can be appropriate to "go without" certain good things to help us to recall our sinful conditions and the fact that we do not deserve all the good things that God has given us. It is also appropriate to fast in order to pray for our suffering and persecuted brothers and sisters here and around the world.

However, in our day, the fasting aspect of Lent has become something of a joke, with people "giving up" M&M's or Coke or Facebook from now until Easter. Not only do they give these things up, but they let everyone know that they are giving them up, in direct defiance of Jesus' instruction in Matthew 6 which requires discretion and privacy when fasting.

The purpose of this season is not to try to become a public martyr for giving up donuts for forty days. The purpose of this season is to reflect on the work of Jesus on our behalf, and to soberly reflect on our own sinful conditions. If fasting assists us, then by all means fast; but fast from food, not Twitter, or gossip magazines, and above all, fast from sinning. That is the real target. However you fast from food, always break the fast on Sunday. The Lord's Days are not fast days, they are feast days, and not included in the season of Lent. You will notice that in various places we refer to Sundays "in" Lent and not Sundays "of" Lent. Sundays are not counted in the forty days of Lent.

It is also helpful to use this as a time of catechesis and training for you and your family. Go through a catechism or confession after supper at night these next forty days. Pick up that fat theology book that you bought several years ago and never had a chance to crack open—divide up the pages by forty and finish it by Easter. Tackle a section of the Bible you are not that familiar with—the prophets or the later histories. Pick a couple of Psalms and concentrate on committing them to memory. Or commit yourself to becoming more familiar with the book of Psalms as a whole.

There are many ways to be discipled by God's Word these forty days, and to enter the feast of Easter an even stronger and more faithful Christian. May you will find the Lenten season a sober, but joyful, time of growth and maturation.

The sanctuary colors shift back to the royal purple as we wait for and welcome the victory of our king.

Lent Devotional Aids

Collect for Lent:

Almighty and everlasting God, who, of Your tender love toward man, sent Your son, our savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross that all men should follow the example of His great humility; mercifully grant that we may both follow the example of His patience and also be made partakers of His resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

Hymns:

Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended
 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
 Forty Days and Forty Nights
 From Deepest Woe I Cry to Thee
 Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah
 Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright
 Psalm 42
 Wilt Thou Forgive That Sin
 When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

+ *Holy Week*

*Look! Your king is coming to you:
He is the rightful king, and is made victorious!*

—Zechariah 9:9¹

Palm Sunday

ON THIS LORD'S DAY WE BEGIN THE LAST WEEK OF THE Lenten season, which we call "Holy Week." Throughout the days leading up to Easter Sunday we mark the final events of the life of the Lord Jesus before his resurrection. The worship services held during latter part of Holy Week—on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday—are understandably more subdued and sober in tone, but the week begins on Sunday with a loud and boisterous "Hosanna!"

The occasion we mark and remember on this day is the grand entrance of Jesus riding a kingly donkey into the city of Jerusalem, where He was met by crowds shouting in praise, waving palm branches and laying their coats on the ground before him. The gospels provide this striking scene of the people's acceptance and rejoicing at the start of the week that is quite jarring in contrast to the rejection and persecution which comes at the end of the week. As we commemorate these events, we must keep this emphasis in mind, for while on that day there were certainly many sincere shouts of "Hosanna!" (which means "save,"

¹ Editor's translation.

"help" or "deliver"), there were also those in the crowd whose celebration was not altogether a celebration of what Jesus' actual mission was. We have to look under the surface of this palm branch waving—because while the multitudes are shouting "Hosanna" or "Save us" on this day, they are going to be shouting "Crucify him!" a few days later.

Given what we know of the political and social climate of the day, and of the conflicts that Jesus had both with outsiders and his own apostles, it is evident that a good portion of this population was expecting that God had sent them a new powerful military leader who intended to declare war on Rome and the Herods, to liberate Judea and to bring in a new golden age of Jewish self-rule under a new Jewish kingdom.

They came bearing palm branches because these were a symbol which the Maccabees used centuries before, after their victory over their occupiers. Palm branches were symbols of peace, but taken on this nationalistic weight, as if they were little Judean flags. The crowd sang Psalm 118 expecting that this Jesus who is riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, like David did, was going to set up his kingly administration in Jerusalem and they were finally going to be out from under Roman rule. However, this represents a misinterpretation of the prophets and a misunderstanding of the role of Messiah.

We know that Jesus is not taking all this at face value because, as Luke reports, Jesus was actually weeping as he entered the city. Jesus says, "If you actually knew the things that make for your peace! But now these things are hidden from your eyes!" All of this enthusiasm will turn on a dime when Jesus goes into the city and does not march up to Herod's doorstep and claim his rule over the city nor does he declare war on Rome. Instead he goes into the temple and declares war on the activity there. He drives out the money changers and interrupts their routine of extortion and thievery.

This is also the same day where Jesus rebukes the fig tree, and it shrivels up. Like Israel, the fig tree is all leaves, but no fruit. He has palm leaves waved in his face, but there is no real repentance or desire to follow the way that Jesus has laid out for them that would lead them into true peace and life.

As the Church remembers this day through her hymns and prayers and preaching each year, we keep all of these themes in tension. We truly and sincerely sing "Hosanna to the Son of David!" and praise him as he proceeds into the New Jerusalem, his holy sanctuary. We praise him as a conquering King for the victory that he has sealed for us. At the same time we are aware of how often throughout history the mis-

sion of Jesus and the church has been distorted, misinterpreted and co-opted. So we do not ask for salvation or deliverance on our terms, for Jesus to come join us on our plan of self-preservation. We lay down our misguided and uninformed agendas and say, *Lord Jesus you are King, we are your subjects. You lead us.*

Palm Sunday traditions vary throughout history and throughout the world, but one common practice in various places is for the congregation to proceed through the community singing before entering the church together to begin worship. Another tradition is for the children of the congregation to proceed into the sanctuary at the beginning of worship singing and carrying palm branches. These activities capture the theme of the movement and procession of Jesus into the holy city, as he was carried along and "enthroned" on the praises of Israel. For churches who impose ashes on the foreheads of worshipers on Ash Wednesday, the palm branches of Palm Sunday are saved to be burned the following year, and their ashes used. This makes an interesting juxtaposition of the themes of the two services, and the tensions present in Palm Sunday itself. The liturgical color for Palm Sunday remains the royal purple of Lent.

Maundy Thursday

On Maundy Thursday, we remember the night on which Jesus lead his disciples at the Passover table, instituted the Lord's Supper, washed his disciples feet, and prayed in garden of Gethsemane. Maundy Thursday is so called because of the saying of Jesus to his disciples in John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another." In Latin the first words of this verse are *Mandatum novum*, thus the word *mandatum* has become, in English, "Maundy."

Because the institution of the Lord's Supper is at the center of these events, the Maundy Thursday service traditionally includes communion. Since, however, every Lord's Day worship service is in effect a celebration of the events of Maundy Thursday, this is not absolutely necessary. It is best to hold the complete covenant renewal liturgy at regular times on the Lord's Day when the whole congregation is expected to be present. If a special service on this day is not held at a time where the majority of the congregation can be present, it would be best not to include communion but to make the "mandate" of love the central focus of the service. If communion is to be included, the entire liturgical pro-

gression of confession of sins, consecration by the word and communion should be followed.

Another Maundy Thursday practice in various quarters is the incorporation of a foot-washing service, where the members of the congregation literally wash each other's feet as Jesus did for the disciples. Because the washing of a guest's feet is no longer a cultural or practical necessity, this is an odd proposition for most modern people. Furthermore, it is likely that the cleansing ritual in the upper room had ties to the cleansings necessary under the old covenant. The ground is cursed, after all, and people needed some ritual and symbolic cleansing after they come in contact with it. But that old world has passed away, and Jesus has cleansed the world. The ground and the dirt no longer make us "unclean" in any ritual or symbolic sense.

Some thought could be given, though, to what a modern parallel to foot-washing would be, and how we could perform acts of kindness for each other which are menial and which we might be tempted to think are "beneath us." This is the central point of the "mandate" we are given on Maundy Thursday.

Good Friday

On Good Friday, we meditate on the day on which Jesus was betrayed, arrested, tried, scourged, mocked, condemned, crucified, died, and laid in a tomb. Because of the grave and serious nature of these events, our worship and reflection are subdued and sober, and yet not entirely without joy. Remember that we do not go through these days of worship and remembrance playing make-believe as if it is our first time hearing of these events and acting as if we do not know how things turn out in the end. Even on Good Friday we must hold before us the truth and power of the resurrection. On this day we are rejoicing in the great victory of the King who is presently not on a cross, nor in a grave, but Who has been exalted over all things and currently reigns from a throne.

It is tempting to turn the Good Friday service into a very dark, maudlin funeral for Jesus. Churches can go out of the way to cut the lights, shroud all of the sanctuary furniture and fixtures in black, and to insist that no one talk or greet each other before or after worship. The intent is sincere, but the effect is to teach something that is not true, and that is the idea that the cross of Jesus is an occasion for great mourning and sorrow. Certainly that was the case for the women and the disciples in

the story who did not fully understand what was coming, but that is not the case for us.

Worship on Good Friday must certainly have a sense of gravity, largely because of the guilt of our own sin that made the cross a necessity. However, we do not wallow in our sin, nor do we dwell on the graphic and gory details of the practice of crucifixion—which the gospel writers do not even go into. We exult in the power and the majesty and might of our King who by the cross secured so great a victory, and rejoicing in Him, we commit ourselves to take up our cross, to die to our sins and to live cruciform lives ourselves.

For worship on this day it is appropriate to simply remove all the ordinary colored paraments from the sanctuary. No other funereal decoration is necessary. It is good to read through the crucifixion account in its entirety, to sing hymns about the passion and suffering of Jesus, to reflect on what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and then to end the service with a exuberant song of victory and a joyful benediction, reminding ourselves of the crushed head of the Serpent and of the great things we are about to celebrate on Easter morning.

A Brief Order for Holy Week Family Devotion

Opening Psalm

The family may begin by singing one of the following Psalms: 8, 22, 23, 24, 27, 32, 56, 64, 69, 143

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

Palm Sunday

All: O Lord Jesus Christ, who as on this day entered the rebellious city where You were to die: enter into our hearts, we pray, and subdue them wholly to You. And as Your faithful disciples blessed Your coming and spread their garments in the way, covering it with palm branches, make us ready to lay at Your feet all that we have and are, and to bless You, O You who comes in the name of the Lord. And grant that after having confessed and worshiped You upon earth, we may be among the number of those who shall hail Your eternal triumph and bear in our hands the palms of victory, when every knee bows before You, and every tongue confess that You are Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen!

Monday

All: Almighty God, whose most dear son went not up to joy, but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before He was crucified; mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Your son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

Tuesday

All: O Lord God, whose blessed son, our savior, gave his back to the smiters and did not hide his face from shame; grant us grace to take joyfully the suffering of the present time, in full assurance of the glory that shall be revealed; through Your son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

Wednesday

All: Assist us mercifully with Your self, O Lord God of our salvation; that we may enter with joy upon the meditation of these

mighty acts, by which You have given us life and immortality; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

Maundy Thursday

All: Almighty Father, whose beloved son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the sacrament of his body and blood; mercifully grant that we may thankfully receive it in remembrance of Him, who in these mysteries gives us a pledge of life eternal; Your son Jesus Christ our Lord, who now lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost forever; one God, world without end. Amen!

Good Friday

All: O Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sakes suffered death on the cross; help us to bear about with us Your dying, and, in our living, to show forth Your life. Looking on You whom we have pierced, we would mourn for our sins with unfeigned sorrow; we would learn from You to forgive, with You to suffer, and in You to overcome. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us Your peace. Lord, we pray, in Your great mercy, remember us when You perfect your kingdom. Amen!

Saturday

All: O God, whose only-begotten son followed the way of faith and duty even to the crown of thorns and the cross; give us grace that we may learn the harder lessons of our faith. And so endue us with power from on high, that, taking up our cross, and following our savior in His patience and humility, we may enter into the fellowship of His sufferings, and come at last to dwell with Him in His eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

Scripture Readings

Palm Sunday

Zech. 9:9-14; Mal. 3:1-12; Mk. 11:1-11; Ps. 8 & 62

Monday

1 Cor. 1:18-25; Mk. 11:12-24; Ps. 6

Tuesday

Zech. 13; Mt. 21:23-32; Ps. 31

Wednesday

Gen. 37:13-28; Mt. 26:1-16; Ps. 55

Maundy Thursday

Ex. 24:1-11; Lk. 22: 1-30; Ps. 64

Good Friday

Gen. 22:1-19; Jn. 19; Heb. 10:1-25; Ps. 69

Saturday

Hos. 6:1-6; Mk. 15:42-47; 1 Pet. 3:7-22; Ps. 30

Hymn

Select one of the following hymns:

All Glory, Laud, and Honor
 O Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee
 Hymns for the Remainder of the Week
 A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth
 Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended
 How Sweet and Awful Is the Place
 Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness
 Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners!
 Let Thy Blood in Mercy Poured
 O Lamb of God Most Holy
 O Sacred Head, Now Wounded
 O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus
 Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted
 Through Every Age, Eternal God
 When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Prayer Requests & Closing Prayer

Family members may make specific prayer requests, after which the entire family can pray.

Leader: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, be with us now and forever.

All: Amen!



*The Lord is risen indeed!
—Luke 24:34*

An Easter That Lasts

THE EASTER SEASON IS A FESTIVAL SEASON WHEREIN we celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as we observe not just one Christmas day, but an entire twelve-day season of Christmas, so our celebration at Easter is not contained to one Sunday only, but rather, a full forty-nine day period from Resurrection Sunday to Pentecost. These forty-nine days of Eastertide parallel the forty days that Jesus spent with his apostles after his resurrection plus the nine days that the apostles waited in Jerusalem after His ascension.

During these days of the liturgical year the Church rejoices in and reflects upon the significance of the resurrection and how this event has reshaped the cosmos. We contemplate the way that the old order was buried with Jesus in his death, and how the new heavens and the new earth have been ushered in with His resurrection. The world is a different place after the resurrection of Jesus. During Eastertide, we rest in the realities of this new world.

This season is a joyful celebration with a particular emphasis on the victory of Jesus over the grave. Because Jesus has gone into the grave, and come out the other side, we are no longer slaves to death. For those

who are united by baptism to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, death is only the gateway to more life.

At various times throughout church history, Easter Sunday has been the preferred day for baptisms, especially for those new converts who had spent the Lenten season being catechized in the Christian faith. Other Easter Season traditions include the decoration of eggs and various games involving eggs, which from antiquity have been viewed by the church as a symbol of new life. It is also customary to serve the best meats, drinks, and chocolates over these feast days, enjoying the fullness of the creation that Jesus has redeemed.

On this Sunday, and throughout Eastertide, we change the sanctuary color to radiant white, which signifies the glory of the resurrection.

A Brief Order for Easter Family Devotions

Opening Psalm

The family may begin by singing one of the following Psalms: 57, 93, 98, 111, 113, 114, 118

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Jesus, brightness of God's glory and image of His being, whom death could not conquer nor tomb imprison; as You have shared in our mortality, help us to share in Your immortal triumph. Let no shadow of the grave frighten us and no fear of darkness turn our hearts from You. Reveal Yourself to us as the first and the last, the living one, our immortal savior and lord. Amen!

Scripture Readings

Ex. 12:1-28, 40-42; Lk. 24:13-49; Ex. 15:1-18; Ps. 115

Hymn

Select one of the following hymns:

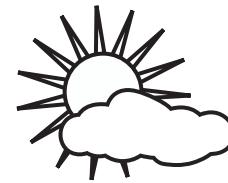
Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands
 Christ the Lord Is Ris'n Today
 Hail Thee, Festival Day!
 Now Let the Vault of Heaven Resound
 O Paschal Feast, What Joy Is Thine
 That Easter Day with Joy Was Bright
 The Strife Is O'er
 Thou Hallowed Chosen Morn of Praise

Prayer Requests & Closing Prayer

Family members may make specific prayer requests, after which the entire family can pray.

Leader: May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make us perfect in every good work to do His will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight; through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever.

All: Amen!



Ascension

*This Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever,
sat down at the right hand of God.*

—Hebrews 10:12

The Unknown Holiday

THE SCRIPTURES TELL US THAT FOR FORTY DAYS AFTER his resurrection, Jesus walked with and taught his disciples on earth and afterward ascended into the heavens to take his place at the Father's right hand.

Ascension Day is marked in many places throughout Christendom by special feasts and worship services. Businesses and schools close, and everyone stops and praises King Jesus for his rule over the earth.

In our culture I would guess that not one person in ten, and perhaps not even one Christian in ten, could tell you what is special about this day. Our society mostly only celebrates the holy days that get special displays in Wal-Mart. We have been fully secularized. So it is up to the Church to recognize our holidays. It is our job to remind the world of the life and works of Jesus by celebrating the most important events in all of human history.

On this day we celebrate that day when Jesus publicly displayed his ascent into the heavens and was received up into a cloud, leaving his people with a sense of his continuing presence and rule. In witnessing this, they knew that he had not really gone far away. The apostles did

not think of heaven as some far off place at the outer edge of the universe that we could get to if we had a space ship to take us that far. They understood that heaven and earth overlap—that there are all kinds of heavenly spiritual things around us and above us that we cannot see with our eyes, but are really there.

They understood what the cloud was. Throughout the Bible clouds both represent and hide God's heavenly glory. We could think of the cloud that led Israel in the wilderness, the glory cloud that filled the tabernacle and temple, or the bright cloud that enveloped Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. Over and over throughout the scripture people hear God's voice speaking from a cloud. If God's throne room were an iceberg, the glory cloud would be just a tip of that iceberg. Psalm 68 might have crossed their minds, where it says "Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds—his name is Yahweh—rejoice before him." With Jesus' being taken up into the cloud, there is no doubt in the apostle's mind where Jesus was going or who he was.

Jesus, the man, entered heaven to be our representative before the Father. Everything that Jesus did, He did for us and with us. Jesus' ascension comforts the church because his ascension is our ascension. Now one of us, the man Jesus, is in heaven. Because he is accepted and welcomed there, we are accepted and welcomed there. Because his work is accepted there, our work is accepted there. As he is seated in the heavenlies, so now, as Ephesians says, we are seated into the heavenlies.

Another comfort is what Jesus does there. He intercedes for us. We know that he will answer every charge the accuser brings against us, we know that there is always forgiveness. We know that our prayers always reach the Father's ears, they will always get the Father's attention, and they will always be answered lovingly and with heavenly wisdom.

Jesus' ascension guarantees the Church victory in her mission. Jesus not only acts as an intercessor for us, but he also brings his own prayers. The Father tells the son in Psalm 2, "Ask of me and I will give you the nations as an inheritance." Jesus receives that invitation and asks his Father for the nations. In the ascension we see that Jesus is King. He rules over heaven and earth, and he does it with our interests in mind.

Though man was at one time cut off from fellowship with the Father, kicked out of the garden, and then separated by zones of holiness, now Jesus' ascension has opened heaven, and now we have access with Jesus into not just an earthly sanctuary divided by curtains and coverings. In worship we ascend into the heavenlies and join in the heavenly wor-

ship. We can now truly enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.

Ascension Devotional Aids

You might celebrate Ascension Day by listening to one of the following musical reflections on the ascension.

Bach's Ascension Oratorio

Praise My Soul the King of Heaven

Psalm 47 from the Genevan Psalter (even if it is too slow!)

A Brief Order for Ascension Family Devotions

Opening Psalm

The family may begin by singing one of the following Psalms: 15, 24, 27, 96, 97

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Almighty God, whose blessed son our savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things: mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his church on earth, even to the end of the ages; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Ghost, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen!

Scripture Readings

Dan. 7:9-14; Heb. 1; Acts 1:1-11; Ps. 68

Hymn

Select one of the following hymns:

On Christ's Ascension I Now Build

Rejoice! the Lord Is King

See, the Conqueror Mounts in Triumph

Prayer Requests & Closing Prayer

Family members may make specific prayer requests, after which the entire family can pray.

Leader: The almighty and merciful God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless us and keep us.

All: Amen!



Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, who calls, “Abba! Father!”

—Galatians 4:6¹

Words of Fire

ON THE FIFTIETH DAY AFTER EASTER WE CELEBRATE the feast of Pentecost, the day on which the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled as the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church, anointing her and equipping her to complete her mission in the world. Just as God breathed life into Adam's nostrils, making him a living soul, so on Pentecost God breathed life into the Church and filled her with that same life-giving Spirit.

As the Spirit hovered over the waters of the first creation, and as the wind blew back the waters of the flood and the waters of the Red Sea, just as the Spirit hovered over the waters of Jesus' baptism as a dove, so the rushing mighty wind of the Spirit blew over the waters of thousands of baptisms on Pentecost.

This day is also known as Whitsunday throughout parts of the English-speaking world. *Whit* or *wit* is an old English word for “spirit,” much like the French word for “wit” is *esprit* and the German word *geist*, meaning “ghost” or “spirit,” also has a secondary meaning of “wit.”

¹ NET Bible. <https://bible.org/netbible/>.

There is a connection in our language between the work of the Spirit and “wit” or “clever speech.” Certainly the apostles were filled with both the Spirit and clever speech as they preached in tongues to the people gathered in Jerusalem. This is a day to not only give thanks for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but also for the gift of language by which we communicate the gospel, breathing out words of life to a dead world.

Red is the liturgical color of Pentecost since it reminds us of the tongues of fire that rested on the heads of the apostles. We remember also that we are the new altar that is lit by the fire of the Holy Spirit. One custom is for the entire congregation to wear red on Pentecost to reflect this.

Except for Trinity Sunday and All Saints’ Day, the Sundays between Pentecost and Advent are generally referred to as “Sundays after Pentecost” and mark the weeks of “ordinary time” on the church calendar. This is a period where we focus on the growth of the church and the outworking of the kingdom until we cycle back to Advent, where we look forward to the future coming of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead.

A Brief Order for Pentecost Family Devotions

Opening Psalm

The family may begin by singing one of the following Psalms: 18, 48, 68, 104, 112, 145

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

All: O God, who sanctifies Your universal church in every race and nation; send throughout the whole world the gift of the Holy Spirit, that the work done by His power at the first preaching of the gospel may now be suffused among all nations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

Scripture Readings

Is. 55; Jl. 2: 21-32; Acts 2:1-11; Ps. 145

Hymn

Select one of the following hymns:

Come Down, O Love Divine
Come, Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling
O Heav’ly Word, Eternal Light
We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost

Prayer Requests & Closing Prayer

Family members may make specific prayer requests, after which the entire family can pray.

Leader: May the God of peace sanctify us wholly and preserve us blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All: Amen!



Trinity

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!*

—Revelation 4:8

Community of the Trinity

ON THIS SUNDAY THE CHURCH PLACES SPECIAL EMPHASIS on the doctrine of the Trinity. Through songs, readings, prayers and sermons we reinforce that foundational Christian teaching that the God of creation has eternally existed in a covenant of three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. By returning each year to spend one Sunday on this doctrine, we remember that the Trinity is not an esoteric piece of theological trivia but rather is the very definition of God. The one and only, true and living God has revealed Himself to us as a Trinity of three persons in community. We then understand that if we are to reflect His image then we, too, must live in union with the Body of Christ.

On this day we return to “growing green” for the sanctuary as we enter the long ordinary season of growth and maturation.

A Brief Order for Trinity Family Devotions

Opening Psalm

The family may begin by singing one of the following Psalms: 29, 139

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Almighty and everlasting God, who has given us, your servants, grace, by the confession of a true faith to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; we pray that You would keep us steadfast in this faith and evermore defend us from all adversities, who lives and reigns, on God, world without end. Amen!

Scripture Readings

Is. 6:1-8; 63:7-19; Jn. 3:1-21; Rom. 5:1-5; Rev. 4

Hymn

Select one of the following hymns:

Holy, Holy, Holy

St. Patrick's Breastplate

Prayer Requests & Closing Prayer

Family members may make specific prayer requests, after which the entire family can pray.

Leader: The almighty and merciful God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless us and keep us.

All: Amen!



All Saints'

You have made them kings and priests to our God.

And they shall reign forever and ever.

—Revelation 5:10; 22:5

To Follow in Their Train

IN THE EARLY CHURCH IT WAS COMMON TO COMMEMORATE the Christian martyrs with a feast day of giving thanks for their faith and sacrifice. However, by the fourth century the list of martyrs had grown so long that the church could no longer dedicate an entire day to every one of them. Thus, the practice of celebrating one common feast day in memory of all the martyrs and departed saints was born.

On this day the church remembers that she stands at the end of a long line of faithful men and women throughout the centuries who each preserved the faith in their own day. The church gives thanks for their lives, for their examples and for their service and sacrifices for the Lord Jesus. We remember our own fathers and mothers in the faith, and also give thanks for the lives of friends and loved ones who have passed. As they continually worship before the throne of God, we remember that each Lord's day our voices are joining their songs of praise and we worship with them in the Spirit. We reflect on the fact that we are truly surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

All Hallows', Reformed

The night before All Saints' Day, All Saints' Eve or All Hallows' Eve, commonly shortened to "Hallowe'en," has played host to a number of myths about its history. Due to an unfortunate confluence of circumstances, Hallowe'en has become popularly known as "the devil's night" and a night set aside for witchcraft or evil spirits. Hallowe'en and All Hallows' is more properly understood particularly as a celebration of the saints' triumph over Satan. The tradition of dressing in ridiculous parodies of Satan's hosts mocks him for his failure to defeat the saints and reminds him that even in our deaths we have the victory in Jesus. Children can participate by dressing up and so openly exposing the powerlessness of the darkness over us.

It is common in Reformed and Lutheran churches at this same time to remember the beginning of the Reformation on October 31, 1517. These two commemorations—All Saints' and Reformation Day—need not to be viewed as if they were in competition with each other. Martin Luther posted his theses at the church on Hallowe'en because he knew many would be coming to church for All Saints' and see his proclamation there. In our All Saints' Day activities and prayers we give thanks for all of the great lights of Church history, including Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and all the other heroes of the Reformation.

A Brief Order for All Saints' Family Devotions

Opening Psalm

The family may begin by singing one of the following Psalms: 24, 34, 149

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray.

All: We give thanks to You, O Lord, for all Your saints and servants, who have done justly, loved mercy, and walked humbly with their God. For all the high and holy ones, who have wrought wonders and been shining lights in the world, we thank You. For all the meek and lowly ones, who have earnestly sought You in darkness and held fast their faith in trial, and done good to all men as they had opportunity, we thank You. Especially for those men and women whom we have known and loved, who by their patient obedience and self-denial, steadfast hope and helpfulness in trouble, have shown the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, we bless Your holy name. As they have comforted and upheld our souls, grant us grace to follow in their steps, and at last to share with them in the inheritance of the saints in light; through Jesus Christ our savior. Amen!

Scripture Readings

Is. 25: 1-9; Mt. 5:12; Rev. 7:9-17

Hymn

Select one of the following hymns:

- For All the Saints
- How Firm a Foundation
- I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord
- Jesus, with Thy Church Abide
- O God of Earth and Altar
- The Church's One Foundation
- The Son of God Goes Forth to War

Prayer Requests & Closing Prayer

Family members may make specific prayer requests, after which the entire family can pray.

Leader: May the God of peace sanctify us wholly, and preserve us blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All: Amen!