

Redeeming Time

BY KIMBERLEE CONWAY IRETON

The church year is most meaningful, most formative, and most transformative when we embrace its seasons and their rhythms, allowing the life of Jesus to speak again and again into our own lives, seeking always to follow in the way Jesus leads us, year after year.

When I was a young girl, my sister and I always had Advent calendars in December. Each morning before school we opened one of the little doors to discover what lay behind it. And each morning we looked at each other and said, “Only fifteen days till Christmas!” “Only nine days till Christmas!”

We counted down each day until Christmas Eve in this way, our excitement mounting as the days passed and the house slowly transformed into a winter wonderland of ornament-laden tree and stocking-hung fireplace.

And, of course, there were the gifts, all lying beneath the tree, wrapped in green and gold and red paper, garlanded with bows and tied with ribbons. We’d pick them up and look at the little labels: “For Kimberlee,” “For Chris,” “For Jen,” “For Carol.” We’d feel the heft of each one, shake it a little to see if it made a sound, and try to guess what was inside.

For us, “Advent” was simply an adjective for “calendar,” and the calendar was a way to count the days until Christmas and the opening of all those wondrous gifts beneath the tree.

I am not sure when the shift occurred, when I came to know that Advent was about more than counting down the days till presents could be opened, but at some point between girlhood and adulthood such a shift in my way of seeing the month of December occurred. I still love the tree and the wreaths and the red and green decorations and, yes, the gifts. But even more, I love that this month of getting ready for Christmas marks the beginning of the Christian year. I love that it is a season of thoughtful preparation, of joyful

waiting. I love that Advent is a call to be mindful in the midst of what is often a crazy-busy month.

This is not to say it is easy to observe Advent in a culture where “Christmas” begins right after Halloween. It is not easy. A worthwhile life seldom is. And so I choose to live a little differently in December.

Actually, I choose to live a little differently all the time. It is just most obvious in December. Observing the church year has that effect on me. It has had that effect on countless others, too.

Marking time by the calendar of the Church instead of the calendars of our culture—the school year, the civic year, the fiscal year—sets you apart. It is not that I don’t also live by those other calendars; I live in the United States; I cannot help but live by them. But ordering my life by the Christian year means I am immersed year after year in the story of Jesus and the story of the Church. It means I look at time a little differently. And it means those cultural calendars are secondary to the church calendar.

Why do I choose to embrace the church year? What about this particular ordering of time is so compelling? And what effect does living according to the church calendar have on my moral and spiritual formation?



Before I can answer those questions, I want briefly to outline the structure of the church year.[†] Different traditions have slightly different names for some seasons and date some holy days differently, but the overall shape of the year remains constant regardless of tradition. Here I outline the tradition with which I am most familiar.

The church year—also called the Christian year or the liturgical year—is divided into two halves. The first half focuses on the life of Christ; the second, on the life of Christ’s body, the Church. All of our highest holy days—Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost—occur within the first half of the year.

Within the first half of the year are two cycles, which center on the holy days of Christmas and Easter. These cycles are comprised of a season of preparation (Advent and Lent), a season of celebration (Christmas and Easter), and a special day of rejoicing (Epiphany and Pentecost).

In the first cycle, Advent is the season of preparation for Christmas, which is the season of celebrating the birth of Christ. This cycle concludes with Epiphany. In the second cycle, Lent is the season of preparation for Easter, which is the season of celebrating the resurrection of Christ. This cycle concludes with Pentecost. After each of these two cycles is a season called Ordinary Time.

Looking at a calendar, the church year would be structured like this: it begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, in late November or early December. This is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent stretches across four Sundays, inviting us to mindfully prepare and joyfully wait for Christmas.

Christmas begins on December 25, when we celebrate the birth of Christ, and lasts twelve days. On January 6, we celebrate Epiphany – the coming of the Magi and Christ’s manifestation to all people. Following Epiphany is a short season of Ordinary Time that lasts until Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the six-week season of fasting and penitence that precedes Easter. Easter is the fifty-day season – outside of Ordinary Time, the longest season of the church year – of celebrating Christ’s resurrection and triumph over sin and death. On the fiftieth day after Easter we celebrate Pentecost, rejoicing in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church.

Following Pentecost is the second season of Ordinary Time, which corresponds to the second half of the church year and focuses on living out the Christ-life (through which we have just journeyed) in the midst of our daily lives.



Embracing this way of marking the year has formed my faith and my character, in large part, because I am repeatedly thrust back into the life of Jesus through the stories told and retold each season. These stories place Christ daily before my eyes and point me back to the One whom I am all too prone to forget in the busyness and bustle of my life.

Because each season has a special emphasis, I have opportunities to focus on specific areas of spiritual growth as I live out that season. In Advent, for instance, the focus is on waiting – joyfully and expectantly. In this season, I can practice patience and self-control, perhaps by waiting until Christmas to eat a favorite holiday treat or listen to a favorite carol. I learn again about hope, as I look forward with trust that Jesus is coming even when all around me seems dark.

The focus of the Christmas season is on incarnation – the incarnation of Christ in the person of Jesus, but also the incarnation of Christ in the heart and life of every believer. In this season, then, I seek union with God; just as Jesus was one with the Father, so I too can be one with Christ. I try to practice continuous prayer as a way of being united with Christ, so that he might truly become incarnate in me. (I find the ancient Jesus prayer – “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” – deeply meaningful and helpful as I attempt to pray without ceasing.)

The focus of Epiphany is on God’s glory made manifest to all peoples. On this day and in the weeks that follow, I can learn to practice hospitality, welcoming others – my family, my friends, and, yes, sometimes even strangers – in the name of Jesus. I can also practice following Jesus outside of the realm of the familiar, like the Magi did. For me, this usually comes in the form of creating new, more godly habits of relating to the people around me, especially my young children – habits like biting my tongue (sometimes literally) when I

am frustrated, or really listening to others when they speak, instead of only half-attending and letting my thoughts wander. Often, I find these new habits also make me a more hospitable person, able to see beyond myself and my own thoughts and emotions and to focus on the people around me.

During Lent the focus is on repentance—turning away from the sin that clouds our vision and encrusts our hearts and turning toward God who alone can redeem and transform us. I can learn patience in this season, too, by

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fasting from food or an activity. Fasting creates space in my life for God, so this season is also a time when I learn again to discern the still, small voice of God as he speaks to my heart and mind. Sometimes that voice speaks words of conviction, calling me to repent of some habit of thought, word, or deed. Sometimes, God's voice speaks words of comfort, reminding me how deeply and wholly I

am loved, regardless of what I do or don't do. Either way, listening to God's voice helps me to see myself more clearly and draws me deeper into relationship with Christ.

During Easter the focus is on resurrection—the triumph of Christ over sin and death. Throughout this season, I learn to rejoice (which does not come easily or naturally to me!) and to see beyond present darkness to the promise of new life. This season calls me to live a resurrection life: daily to die to sin and live the new life God has graciously given in Christ. This year, on Good Friday, my husband and I found out that our unexpected pregnancy was a two-fer: we are having twins, which is the last thing either of us expected. Though I cried the first few nights, I soon began to laugh—a lot—at the ludicrousness of the situation. Embracing laughter is my daily exercise in living the resurrection: as my old expectations of what my life would look like died, God raised up in me a spirit of laughter, like Sarah of old, to help prepare me for and carry me through what will be a difficult and exhausting season of life. I am not yet convinced that laughter is born of joy—more like desperation—but the lightness of heart all this laughter has engendered in me is a gift only possible because of the Easter reality in which we live—a reality that affirms that in Christ, nothing is lost, nothing is wasted; God will use it all to accomplish his good ends.

On Pentecost the focus is on God's Spirit—a Spirit of power and might who inhabits and empowers the people of God. On this day and in the

weeks and months that follow, I can incorporate all the disciplines I embraced earlier in the year, seeking to allow them to create space for God to work in and through me, transforming me into the likeness of Christ.

I have found that when I faithfully enter into each season and practice disciplines that open me to the spiritual truth and reality to which that season points, gradually, over the course of many years, I am becoming more like Jesus.



And this is why I order my life by the Church's marking of time. The church year continually pushes me back to Christ, to the stories of his life and to the rites—especially the Eucharist—by which we, his disciples, re-enact and enter into his life.

Since story and symbol are two of the primary means by which the church year points us to Christ, then the locus of the church year is Sunday, the day when the worshipping community gathers to hear the Word and partake of the sacrament of Communion.

The church year is therefore necessarily communal. Though some practices—continuous prayer, for instance—are individual in nature, to fully enter into the church year, and the life of Christ which is its heart, requires the community of believers gathered together in worship. This communal dimension of the church year is one of its most formative aspects. We live in a culture that is driven by individual needs, desires, and fears. Living the church year in community with other disciples of Jesus forms us as the people of God, the Body of Christ, as one part of a much larger whole. To be formed in community means our individual needs can be met by the community, our desires can be transformed by the vision of a larger purpose, and our fears can be assuaged by the assurance that we are not alone.

By returning week after week to the gathered community in corporate worship, we allow the community itself to form us. We are not the center; Christ is the center—the head and the heart; we are the body, bound to one another by our mutual sharing in the life of Christ in Scripture and sacrament. The church year deepens this community by calling us, both individually and collectively, year in and year out, to re-live and live out the life of Christ, to be formed in the likeness of Christ, to become the body of Christ incarnate in the world.



The church year is not a magic formula. It is a tool, yet another discipline, that I practice so I might become more like Christ.

Living the seasons of the church year is not always easy, especially during Advent and Christmas when our culture's siren song of consumption is particularly loud. It is, again, a discipline. Something I practice over and over because it forms me in the ways I want to be formed: into a faithful follower of Jesus, attentive to his presence in my life and the lives of the people around

me, even the life of the world, and willing to respond faithfully to whatever piece of his work and his Word that he places before me.

Such formation does not occur quickly, but accrues over time. It is only in looking back at the past fifteen years and seeing how much I have grown in my relationship with Christ, in my sense of who I am in him, who he has called me to be, and the work he has called me to do, that I am able to see how deeply the practice of the church year has affected me.

Like any spiritual discipline, living the church year is most meaningful, most formative, and most *transformative* when we keep at it, embracing its seasons and their rhythms, allowing the life of Jesus to speak again and again into our own lives, seeking always to follow in the way Jesus leads us, year after year.

NOTE

† For more sustained reflection on each season of the church year, see Kimberlee Conway Ireton, *The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

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