LCMS

Frequently Asked Questions

Worship/Congregational Life – Church Year

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Church Year

What is the history of Advent and the Advent wreath? (2 pages)

Q: ***Why does the church year begin at Advent, what is the history of Advent, and what is the history behind the Advent candles and wreath?***

A: The word "advent" is from the Latin word for "coming," and as such, describes the "coming" of our Lord Jesus Christ into the flesh.

Advent begins the church year because the church year begins where Jesus' earthly life began--in the Old Testament prophecies of his incarnation. After Advent comes Christmas, which is about his birth; then Epiphany, about his miracles and ministry; then Lent, about his Calvary-bound mission; then Easter, about his resurrection and the sending of the apostles; and then Ascension (40 days after Easter) and Pentecost, with the sending of the Holy Spirit.

The first half of the church year (approximately December through June) highlights the *life* of Christ. The second half (approximately June through November) highlights the *teachings* of Christ. The parables and miracles play a big part here. That's "the church year in a nutshell," and it should help reveal how Advent fits into "the big picture."

Advent specifically focuses on Christ's "coming," but Christ's coming manifests itself among us in three ways--past, present, and future. The readings which highlight Christ's coming in the past focus on the Old Testament prophecies of his incarnation at Bethlehem. The readings which highlight Christ's coming in the future focus on his "second coming" on the Last Day at the end of time. And the readings which highlight Christ's coming in the present focus on his ministry among us through Word and Sacrament today.

The traditional use of Advent candles (sometimes held in a wreath) originated in eastern Germany even prior to the Reformation. As this tradition came down to us by the beginning of this century, it involved three purple candles and one pink candle. The purple candles matched the purple paraments on the altar (purple for the royalty of the coming King). The pink candle was the third candle to be lit (not the fourth) on Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent. "Gaudete" means "Rejoice!" in Latin, which is taken from Philippians 4:4.

("Rejoice! . . . the Lord is near"). Hence a "pink" candle was used to signify "rejoicing." Some also included a white "Christ candle" in the middle to be lit during the 12 days of Christmas (December 25-January 5).

The concept of giving each candle a name, i.e., Prophecy, Bethlehem, Shepherd and Angel, etc., is a relatively novel phenomenon and probably originates with certain entrepreneurial publishers seeking to sell Advent candles and devotional booklets.

There are many beautiful customs and traditions surrounding Advent, as well as a load of history concerning its development. These matters would be better found in books than here. Here are a couple:

Lee A. Maxwell, *The Altar Guild Manual, Lutheran Worship Edition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996).

Lee A. Maxwell, *The Altar Guild Manual, Lutheran Service Book Edition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008).

Fred L. Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992).

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What is the significance of Ash Wednesday and ashes on the forehead?

Q: ***Would you please explain the significance of Ash Wednesday. I've seen some people in the past with black ash crosses on their foreheads.***

A: *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice, a commentary on Lutheran Worship*, one of our Synod's hymnals, says this about ashes on Ash Wednesday: "Other customs may be used, particularly the imposition of ashes on those who wish it. This ancient act is a gesture of repentance and a powerful reminder about the meaning of the day. Ashes can symbolize dust-to-dustness and remind worshipers of the need for cleansing, scrubbing and purifying. If they are applied during an act of kneeling, the very posture of defeat and submission expresses humility before God."

The use of ashes on Ash Wednesday is a more recent custom among most LCMS congregations, although some have done it for decades. The ashes are usually derived from the burned palms from the previous Palm Sunday. Experience will show, however, that in obtaining ashes this way, it doesn't take many ashes to "ash" a whole congregation. Like sin, they are very dirty and go a long way. One palm leaf will produce enough ashes for several years.

Usually the pastor takes the ashes on the end of his thumb and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of each worshiper, saying these words: "Remember: you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This follows most effectively prior (or as part of) the Service Corporate Confession and Absolution on pp. 290-291 of *Lutheran Service Book.*

For more information, read the Frequently Asked Question about Lent (see page 10).

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How do you determine the date of Easter each year? (3 pages)

Q: ***During our Bible study this past Sunday, someone asked how Easter can be on a different Sunday every year. Pastor said it had to do with the aligning of the moon, but didn't know the exact reason why. Can you please explain how Easter Sunday is selected every year and the theological reasoning behind it?***

A: When it comes to figuring out the date for Easter, there is really no simpler way than just looking at the calendar for the upcoming year. But how do the calendar makers know when Easter will be? For instance, in 1999, it was April 4. In 2000, it was April 23. How exactly is the date for Easter determined?

The early church had the same problem, and the root of the problem is this: How exactly do you date the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus? We know that he was crucified on a Friday and rose again on a Sunday, but since Sundays do not always have the same date, another system of calculating a date had to be devised.

How They Used to Do It

By the middle of the second century, there were basically two ways that Christians were dating their celebrations of Easter. Some, the Quartodecimans (or "fourteenthers"), celebrated the death and resurrection of our Lord according to the "fourteenth day of Nisan"—the day of the Jewish Passover (Lev. 23:5). Since this date was not always on the same day of the week, the Quartodeciman celebration did not always fall on a Sunday. The rest of the church, however, celebrated the passion and resurrection of our Lord according to a different formula which always placed Easter on a Sunday.

Needless to say, there was no little controversy over this discrepancy, and it wasn't until the Ecumenical Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 that the churches of the world finally got together and agreed on this rule: Easter Day shall always fall on the Sunday after the first full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox. That should have settled it, right?

Well, not exactly. You see, there was the little problem of determining when exactly the spring equinox would fall. Various astronomical and calendrical solutions have been used at different times down through the centuries, but even today there is still no unanimity among churches concerning the celebration of Easter.

Just Not the Same

For instance, the Eastern Orthodox Churches (Greek, Russian, Romanian, etc.) celebrate Easter according to the spring equinox on the older Julian Calendar. Lutherans in the Western Church (along with Roman Catholic and Protestant churches) celebrate Easter according to the newer Gregorian Calendar (in effect since 1582). What all of this means is that the eastern celebration of Easter usually follows anywhere from a week to several weeks after the western celebration.

So what's the solution? One possibility would be to go on celebrating our respective Easters and just not worry about it. A proposal as recent as 1997, however, has suggested that both east and west use a modern, scientific astronomical calculation for the spring equinox. After all, even our more accurate Gregorian calendar of the west was off this year, since the spring equinox actually occurred on March 20, and not the traditional March 21.

Most of the change suggested by this new proposal, however, would have to come from the Eastern Church, which isn't likely to happen.

The 'Easy Way' and the 'Hard Way'

So what's the easiest way to determine the date for Easter? In the two sections below, the Commission on Worship has provided the "easy way" and the "hard way." Since the chart in the front of The Lutheran Hymnal (p. 158) expires this year, the Commission thought it would provide a new chart through 2025. That's the "easy way." (A similar chart will appear in the new hymnal!) But if you want to do it the "hard way," see the next page where the Commission has also provided an algorithm for you to calculate, compliments of Dr. Luther Poellot, St. Louis.

Algorithm for Determining the Date of Easter (1900-??)

Note: Unless your calculator gives remainders, you will need to do most of this calculation in longhand. Math teachers, this could make a good problem for your class to solve at the pre-algebra level. At higher levels of algebra, it could serve as a good discussion question concerning the "why" of its various components.

Part I:

v = the remainder when you divide the number of the year (e.g., 1985) by 19. For 2001, v = 3.

w = the remainder when you divide the number of the year by 4. For 2001, w = 1.

x = The remainder when you divide the number of the year by 7. For 2001, x = 6.

y = The remainder from (19v + 24) ÷ 30. For 2001, y = 21.

z = The remainder from (2w + 4x + 6y + 5) ÷ 7. For 2001, z = 3

Part II:

y + z + 22 = date in March for Easter. If this number is greater than 31, either

a) subtract 31 = date of Easter in April;

b) or calculate y + z - 9 = date of Easter in April.

Dates of Easter

In the western church, Easter cannot be earlier than March 22 or later than April 25.

2011	April 24
2012	April 8
2013	March 31
2014	April 20
2015	April 5
2016	March 27
2017	April 16
2018	April 1
2019	April 21
2020	April 12
2021	April 4
2022	April 17
2023	April 9
2024	March 31
2025	April 20

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Please explain Epiphany and the Circumcision of our Lord.

Q: ***I was wondering if you could explain Epiphany to me a little better. Also, when was the Circumcision of the Lord?***

A: Epiphany is from a Greek word, meaning to "reveal" or "make manifest." The season of Epiphany is our time to focus on the revelation of "who" Jesus is: both true God and man. On the Festival of Epiphany, Jan. 6, we hear the reading of the visit of the wise men (Mt. 2:1-12). In that event, these foreigners bowed down in acknowledgement that this infant was indeed the Christ, the Son of God.

The Sunday after Epiphany we hear the story of the Baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3:13-17). Here, God the Father confirms that this man standing in the water is His beloved Son. The following Sunday we hear the story of the changing of water into wine at Cana (John 2:1-11). Through this event, Jesus revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him.

According to Jewish law, all males were circumcised on the eighth day--one week after their birth. We don't know the actual birth date of Jesus, so we don't know the day of His circumcision either. But since we have set aside a date for observing His birth, Dec. 25, we then set aside Jan. 1 (eight days later) as the date for the naming and circumcision of Jesus (Luke 2:21). The significance of this day is that our Savior began His long ministry of submitting Himself to the Law in our place. Also, this was the first shedding of His blood, and points, in a small way, to the ultimate shedding of His blood on the cross.

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Do Lutherans give up something for Lent?

Q: ***Do Lutherans have to give up something for Lent as some other denominations require?***

A: From the perspective of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, "giving something up for Lent" is entirely a matter of Christian freedom. It would be wrong, from our perspective, for the church to make some sort of "law" requiring its members to "give something up for Lent," since the Scriptures themselves do not require this. If, on the other hand, a Christian wants to give something up for Lent as a way of remembering and personalizing the great sacrifice that Christ made on the cross for our sins, then that Christian is certainly free to do so--as long as he or she does not "judge" or "look down on" other Christians who do not choose to do this.

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What is the significance of Lent?

Q: ***What is the significance of Lent?***

A: Early in the Church's history, the major events in Christ's life were observed with special observances, such as His birth, baptism, death, resurrection and ascension. As these observances developed, a period of time was set aside prior to the major events of Jesus' birth and resurrection as a time of preparation.

During Lent, the Church's worship assumes a more penitential character. The color for the season is purple, a color often associated with penitence. The "Hymn of Praise" is omitted from the liturgy. The word "Alleluia" is usually omitted as well. By not using the alleluia--a joyful expression meaning "Praise the Lord"--until Easter, the Lenten season is clearly set apart as a distinct time from the rest of the year. Additionally, it forms a powerful contrast with the festive celebration of Jesus' resurrection when our alleluias ring loud and clear.

Finally, the penitential character of Lent is not its sole purpose. In the ancient Church, the weeks leading up to Easter were a time of intensive preparation of the candidates who were to be baptized at the Easter vigil on Holy Saturday. This time in the Church's calendar was seen as an especially appropriate time for Baptism because of the relationship between Christ's death and resurrection and our own in Holy Baptism (see Romans 6:1-11). This focus would suggest that the season of Lent serves not only as a time to meditate on the suffering that Christ endured on our behalf but also as an opportunity to reflect upon our own Baptism and what it means to live as a child of God.

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What are the advantages/disadvantages of using the one-year or three-year Lectionary?

Q: ***At our last elder's meeting we discussed switching from the three-year series for the lectionary to the one-year series. Could you give me some guidance on the advantages of using the one-year series versus using the three-year series? I would also like to know the advantages of staying with the three year series which I know gives a broader base for various lessons on which to preach.***

A: There are benefits and drawbacks for both the one- and three-year lectionaries (appointed readings from Holy Scripture for every Sunday of the year). The chief benefit of the one-year series, which was used in the church with only minor variations for over 1,000 years, is its repetition of key Bible passages. In this day of increasing biblical illiteracy, some are beginning to recognize the importance of repeating key Bible passages on a regular basis. Other benefits include the fact that there are many supporting resources for the one-year lectionary, such as hymns that specifically fit with the appointed readings, and sermons written by Luther and others for the texts in the one-year lectionary. Drawbacks to the one-year lectionary include the fact that there are significant portions of Holy Scripture that are not included for reading in public worship. For example, the story of the prodigal son has not been traditionally included (though for the Synod's upcoming hymnal there are plans to include it as an option). Another drawback is the fact that a relatively small number of congregations in this country use the one-year lectionary.

The chief benefit of the three-year lectionary is that it does provide for a more comprehensive reading of Scripture. A significant number of additional stories from the Bible are included. The great majority of congregations in North America that use a lectionary use the three-year lectionary. The chief drawback to this lectionary is the lack of repetition. Each reading is heard only once every three years (except for readings for the major festivals of the church year which are repeated each year). The result may be a greater "breadth" in terms of how much Scripture is read, but this won't always translate into a satisfactory "depth" of reading. Add to this the fact that all it takes is being absent from church for one Sunday and the result is that a person will not hear the readings for that Sunday for another three years; hence, a six year hiatus before the text is repeated.

It is important to remember that neither lectionary is good or bad in and of itself. The unspoken element concerns how the pastor utilizes the lectionary in his preaching and teaching. To that end, God can and does use both lectionaries to deliver forgiveness and life to us.

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