

Excerpt (p62-67) from Chapter 4: Reclaiming Sunday Morning as the Church's Primary, Formative Event From *Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as if Spiritual Formation Mattered* by Rory Roland

### **Formative Aspects of the Church Year**

In addition to sermons, early church services imparted theological training through their prayers, Scripture readings, and creeds--elements the church eventually incorporated into a standard liturgy. Susan White contends that Christianity's liturgical tradition is based on the belief that the church's public worship constitutes the primary source of spiritual nourishment for Christian life. By the end of the fourth century the church had developed a three-year cycle of Scripture readings, which became known as the lectionary. Every Sunday four related passages were read -each one from a different section of the Bible such as the Old Testament, Psalms (spoken or sung), Gospels, and Epistles. Responsive readings, prayers, music selections, and even the sermon followed themes generated by the assigned Scriptures.

The lectionary was part of a seasonal cycle known as the "church year" or the "Christian year," which was developed explicitly with spiritual formation in mind. The church year captures the story of Jesus under three general headings: manifestation, resurrection, and indwelling Spirit. The church year presents the gospel, the story of Jesus, as the essence of Christian spirituality: Christ the Son manifests God the Father, Jesus rose from the dead and sent the Holy Spirit to indwell his followers. While most Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations still use the lectionary and follow the church year, many nondenominational churches are now adopting these proven tools as the framework for a spiritually formative approach to worship.

### **Church year spirituality.**

Because each season of the church year has a specific theme and emphasis, a distinctive spirituality developed for each of them. The Christian calendar divides into eight seasons: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, the Great Triduum, Easter, and post-Pentecost. Each season has its own unique spiritual flavor.

#### *Advent*

In the Christian tradition, the new year begins not on January 1 but on the first Sunday of Advent, which occurs late November or early December. Advent, from the Latin *adventus*, means "coming" or "approaching" and alludes not only to God coming into the world through Jesus but also to the risen Christ's second coming in triumphant glory. Lasting about four weeks, Advent is a time of waiting for the coming of Christ. For that reason churches following the church calendar do not sing Christmas carols during Advent for the simple reason that Christ has not come yet. Waiting to sing Christmas carols until Jesus is born is a countercultural statement in itself, but it also helps believers in our efforts to avoid the commercialism that typically surrounds Christmas. During Advent Christians get in touch with their desire for God and our longing for redemption, which, for example, could prompt believers to identify any areas of bondage in their lives that they yearn to be set free from. Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century monk, spoke of three comings of Christ related to Advent: in the flesh at Bethlehem, daily in our hearts, and in the fullness of his resurrected glory at the end of the age. "In the first,," writes Bernard, "Christ was our redemption; in the last, he will appear as our life; in the middle coming, he is our rest and consolation."

#### *Christmas*

The church began observing Christmas around the fourth century. But instead of honoring the Messiah's coming only one day out of the year, Christians have traditionally celebrated Christmas for twelve straight days. Importantly, Christ's coming in the flesh is not commemorated as some past event but as a present reality; for that reason the incarnation was established as a theme crucial for Christmas.

The original purpose of Christmas was not to fixate on the baby Jesus but instead to contemplate the implications of Christ's incarnation. The fact that God accomplishes for humanity what we are unable to do for ourselves is a bedrock principle of our faith. Throughout the Christmas season believers are challenged to live with an incarnational mindset--to continually allow Jesus to dwell in us. The incarnation also proclaims that God unites himself to us so we can be united with God. Christmas essentially invites believers into transforming union with Christ.

### *Epiphany*

After Christmas comes Epiphany, which means "appearance" or "manifestation. Churches in the East designated Epiphany as a celebration of Christ's baptism. In the West, however, Epiphany highlights the manifestation of Christ as realized in three major events: the visit of the Magi, Christ's baptism, and the marriage feast at Cana. Epiphany invites us to consider how Christ is manifested in us and through us. In the same way that Jesus manifested himself to us, we are to manifest him to the world by the way we live.

### *Lent*

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and is a time of repentance and only entails giving something up but also taking something on. A Lenten spirituality invites us to give up something that has too much control over us and replace it with a positive alternative such as a godly virtue. Lent therefore lends meaning and depth to Christian conversion by helping us to remain faithful in our commitment to follow Christ.

### *The Great Triduum.*

Next in the church year is the Great Triduum, also known as the Three Great Days, which include Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. The title for Maundy/Thursday derives from the Latin *mandatum*, which means "command" or "mandate," stemming from the new commandment Jesus gave the disciples during the Last Supper- to love one another as he loved them (John 13:34-35). A foot-washing ceremony and a solemn observance of the Lord's Supper typify a worship service on the Thursday of Passion Week. The cross is emblematic of Good Friday, for it captures all the spiritual themes of Jesus' crucifixion: sacrifice, self-giving love, obedience, redemption, and atonement. In Christian tradition the Easter Vigil summons believers to stay awake and keep watch for Jesus' resurrection. Vigil services usually begin in the dark hours of Saturday night, continue until sunrise on Easter morning, and include extended liturgical readings, baptisms, and the Lord's Supper. Worship services during the Three Great Days are specially designed to enable believers to participate in these redemptive events through a unified sequence of dramatic reenactments, embodied actions, Scripture, and prayer.

### *Fifty days of Easter*

In many nondenominational churches, Easter is a mammoth celebration -Christianity's great Super Bowl-but it lasts only one day. Churches adhering to the Christian Year, however, celebrate Christ's resurrection for a total of fifty days. The extended length is due to the fact that, after being raised from the dead, Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days, after which he ascended into heaven (Acts 1:3). Ten days later; according to Acts 2, the Holy Spirit descender at Pentecost, which marks the end of the church's Easter season. God's victory over the powers of evil, specifically sin and death, is the main theme of Easter. Throughout the fifty days of Easter, Christians are invited to walk in the newness of life in the Holy Spirit.

### *Ordinary Time.*

The period after Easter is called Ordinary Time or simply the season after Pentecost and focuses heavily on the practical aspects of living the Christian life. Lectionary readings during this post-Pentecost period cycle somewhat continuously through several books of the Bible, so they might not always relate to each other. For this season some churches take a break from following the lectionary and concentrate instead on a specific biblical book of their choosing. The season after Pentecost stretches through the summer and into the fall, ending on the first Sunday in Advent, when the cycle begins anew. Though it follows the same sequence of seasons every year, the church's calendar occurs in three iterations, cycles A, B, and C, each with its own set of Scriptures. Churches using the lectionary and following the Church Year go through the entire Bible then every three years.

### **Historical example of transforming worship.**

Robert Webber affirms that the original purpose of the church year was to guide Christians in their spiritual journeys. By inviting believers to relive the life of Christ, walk in Jesus' footsteps, experience what he experienced, and identify with his earthly life, the church calendar has proven to be a significant catalyst for spiritual growth. The church, then, has had a discipleship curriculum built into Sunday gatherings since its early stages. For two millennia the lectionary and the Christian Year have provided a framework for public worship that automatically generates a formative approach to corporate prayer, Scripture reading, confession, the Lord's Supper, and baptism. The early church, then, provides us with the finest historical example of a transforming worship service.