

Why the Christian Year?

by Robert C. Linthicum

Advent is the beginning of the Christian Year. The Christian Year and the Season of Advent both begin on the Sunday nearest to November 30. Thus, the Christian Year does not follow the Julian calendar, beginning on January 1, but follows its own calendar, beginning in late November or early December.

What is the Christian Year? It is simply the means by which the Christian Church, to one degree or another and in all of its traditions, remembers and celebrates the important events both in the life of Christ and in the church's formation of itself as a community of believers. Even the most nonliturgical of churches celebrate at least some part of the Christian Year – in that they will inevitably celebrate Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. The most liturgical of churches – Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican – will celebrate the Christian Year both in its entirety and throughout its worship. Other churches – like the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Reformed will use it optionally in worship so that, for example, you can attend worship in some Presbyterian churches that follow the Christian Year assiduously while other Presbyterian churches will follow it from time-to-time. But the point is that, to one degree or another, all churches will observe at least some portion of the Christian Year.

The formation of the Christian Year began at the very beginnings of Christianity while it was still a reform movement within Judaism. The very earliest Church would gather as a Jewish community on the Jewish Sabbath to faithfully worship as all Jews would in their synagogues. But they would also gather on “the first day of the week”, the day of Jesus' resurrection, to study together the Hebrew scriptures in the light of their experience with Christ, to enjoy table fellowship together, but most of all, to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in obedience to their Lord (Acts 1-9). This weekly gathering of Christians to celebrate that sacrament together – even before they had taken their leave of their Jewish heritage – was the origin of the Christian Year.

From that origin in the Christian communities of the earliest Church, the Christian Year began building. Likely, the first holiday (holy day) the Christians began celebrating as a special day within their year was Easter. Good Friday would have soon followed, then Pentecost, then Christmas. Gradually, more and more days of the year – both Sundays and other days (like the celebration of Christ's baptism by John the Baptist) – were intentionally celebrated by the Church. Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John and one of the earliest writers of the church after the writing of the New Testament, noted how the Christians celebrated Easter in the first century. By the fifth century, the Christian Year was well established, and has continued developing ever since.¹

The primary ways the Christian Year is celebrated today is through its seasons and the use of the lectionary. The seasons (e.g., Lent, Advent, Epiphany, Pentecost) provide a vehicle by which churches celebrate significant moments in the life of Christ and use those moments as

¹ Gibson, George M., *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 68=106.

vehicles for reflection, prayer, the observance of disciplines, or for merry-making! They will celebrate those seasons through music (e.g., Christmas carols, Easter hymns), through brightly colored banners, stoles and paraments (e.g., purple for Lent, white for Christmas and Easter, red or black for Good Friday – the choice of the appropriate color is obvious), and for some churches, through liturgies. But the most important way the Church observes the Christian Year is through the lectionary.

The lectionary consists of four passages of scripture used in every worship service of the Christian Year. Those scripture lessons are, respectively an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, a Gospel lesson and an Epistle lesson.

The choice of scripture in the lectionary is for a three-year period. Then it repeats itself. By assiduously using the lectionary over its three-year period, a church will have covered almost the entirety of the Bible.² The homily or sermon for the day is to be built upon the lectionary readings, so that what is preached is an exploration and explanation of those scriptures made relevant to life in today's world. Thus, use of the lectionary guarantees that the preacher will not end up pursuing a theological "hobby-horse", preaching on what most intrigues him or her. Rather, the lectionary forces the preacher to always be encountering scripture that he or she might not normally study, and allow God to speak to that preacher and through that preacher God's Word for God's people on that Sunday or holy day.

Each annual cycle specializes in specific scripture. Cycle A includes almost the entirety of the Gospel of Matthew and much of John. But it also contains major sections of Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Romans, I Thessalonians, I Peter and a third of the Psalms. Cycle B includes almost the entirety of the Gospels of Mark and a portion of John, as well as Ruth, II Samuel, Esther, Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Jonah, James and I John. Further, it includes much of II Kings, Isaiah, I and II Corinthians, Ephesians, Hebrews and another third of the Psalms. Cycle C concentrates on Luke and completes the study of John. But it also concentrates on I Kings, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Amos, Habakkuk, Galatians, Colossians, II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Revelation and the final third of the Psalms.

So here is *The Gospel of Shalom*, both for your reading pleasure and for your sharing of the biblical message as it deals with the social, corporate and justice dimensions of Hebrew and Christian faith. May you be greatly stimulated to act justly as a result of reading these scriptures.

² But it is intriguing to note the scriptures excluded from the lectionary. Some of those excluded are self-apparent, consisting of long genealogies or census figures. Others are passages that are somewhat "raw", like some of the imprecatory psalms (e.g., Psalm 139:19-22). But others are some of the most important passages in the Bible; however, they deal with political, economic or religious policies or actions of Israel that would prove awkward to be the focus of preaching in a sedate middle-class church. Because these passages are so important, this commentary on the lectionary includes a chapter (chapter six), entitled "Truly strategic scripture avoided by the lectionary". It examines those strategic passages that have been intentionally excluded because they prove too threatening to a genteel audience.