

**A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on November 20, 2022**

**RECLAIMING THE CHURCH YEAR**

One of the ways that the Christian faith is taught is by experiencing the Christian year in worship. Several years ago our junior and senior high youth created banners that represent the themes of the various seasons of the Christ year. Today we will review the meaning of these banners.

Many of you wonder why the colors and the pulpit and lectern change and why we sing certain hymns only at specific times of the year. This is because we follow a liturgical calendar. Since the early days of the Church, Christians have followed the liturgical pattern of the Church year. In the next few moments we will work our way through Scripture, hymns and banners to demonstrate the various aspects of the seasons of the church year. Please remain seated and sing the hymns that fit each season. We will sing a verse as the banners come to the front of the sanctuary and a second as they make their way out.

This is the last Sunday of the Church year. Next Sunday begins a New Year that begins with Advent.

**ADVENT**

Our Advent Scripture readings come first from the prophecy of Isaiah some 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

**Isaiah 40:1-5**

**Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.**

**<sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.**

**<sup>3</sup> A voice cries out:**

**"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.**

**<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.**

**<sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."**

**Hymn #9 "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" v. 1**

The Christian season of Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas. Words such as "Coming" "Expectation" and "Preparation" most accurately describe the focus of Christians at this time of year.

The story of the Old Testament is a record of God's interaction with his people. It tells the story of God's purpose in history. From very early on we see how the people of Israel came to understand God's nature more clearly. They gradually came to see that human beings could not save themselves with their own power. They began to look for the coming of one who would manifest God's power and love.

During the season of Advent, we remember how God prepared the world for his coming. The banner with the Advent wreath reminds us of the four weeks that we prepare for Christmas. These weeks during which we remember how God prepared the world for the coming of Jesus.

The second banner has a Jesse tree. If you will remember Jesse was the father of King David, the prophets in the Old Testament said that the Messiah would come from the stump of Jesse. So we remember that Jesus is firmly rooted in the history of Israel.

So during the Advent Season we are to prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Jesus.

### **Hymn #9 "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" v. 2**

#### **CHRISTMAS**

Our Scripture reading retells the story of the incarnation.

#### **Scripture Matthew 1:18-25**

**Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah<sup>[a]</sup> took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:**

**<sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"**

**which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;<sup>[b]</sup> and he named him Jesus.**

### **Hymn # 41 "O Come, All Ye Faithful", v. 1**

For many of us our favorite season of the Church year is Christmas. The season lasts from December 25th until January 6th. Our celebration of Christmas on the date of December 25th is simply a convenience which early Christians felt compelled to make in order to keep their followers from abandoning Christian teachings in favor of riotous living associated with the pagan celebration of the Winter Solstice. This does not change the truth that we remember during this season, that God took on human form and was incarnate in Bethlehem nearly two thousand years ago.

The banners that we use to remember this Season remind us of the intersection of two planes. The angels recall the heavenly nature of the Son, who was present at the creation of all things. The shepherds remind us that the Son took on human form in a stable so long ago.

At Christmas we ponder that central mystery of the faith "that the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth."

### **Hymn # 41 "O Come, All Ye Faithful", v. 2**

#### **EPIPHANY**

Our reading for the Epiphany comes from Matthew's description of the Wise Men and from Luke's description of Jesus' Baptism.

#### **Scripture Matthew 2:1,2**

**In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men<sup>[a]</sup> from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,<sup>[b]</sup> and have come to pay him homage."**

#### **Luke 3:21,22**

**When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased**

### **Hymn # 66 "We Three Kings of Orient Are", v. 1**

The Season of Epiphany begins on January 6. At first glance one wonders about the relationship between the story of the Magi and Jesus' Baptism. But we need to remember the meaning of Epiphany. It means manifestation. This season recalls the manifestation of the Son of God to the world. The story of the Magi reminds us that Jesus did not only come to the Jews but indeed he came to the whole world. Jesus was born to be a light to the Gentiles.

The banners, which were prepared, demonstrate this theme. One contains the Gentile wise men who came to find the newborn babe. The other contains a shell with drops water is an ancient symbol of baptism. We placed it over a cross on top of the world to symbolize that all can be baptized in Christ.

My friends we do not worship a tribal God who loves only Americans or Christians. We worship a God who came for all people across time and space. Christ came to save the whole world.

### **Hymn # 66 "We Three Kings of Orient Are" v. 2**

## LENT

The passage for Lent comes from the tenth chapter of Mark. Jesus speaks about his death to the disciples as they travel to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover.

### **Scripture Mark 10:32-34**

**<sup>32</sup>They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again, he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. <sup>33</sup>"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, <sup>34</sup>who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."**

### **Hymn # 100, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" v. 1**

Lent begins 40 non-holy days before Easter. Lent is ushered in on Ash Wednesday. Because Easter Sunday is determined by the position of the moon, we cannot assign a fixed date to the beginning of Lent.

Lent is traditionally a time to reflect on Jesus' suffering and His agonizing decision to follow through on his convictions even unto death. It has been popular in days past for Christians to celebrate Lent by some form of self-denial such as "giving up" smoking or candy. It has become more common recently for Christians to view Lent as a prolonged self-examination.

The banners for Lent call to our attention two of the central elements of this season. One pictures the Lord's Supper. On the night of his arrest Jesus gave the Lord's Supper to his disciples that they might have a way to understand what his death would mean.

The wounded Lamb also tells us of Jesus' Passion. He is called many times in the Scriptures the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This lamb has a staff of victory which reminds us that it was through his death that he gained victory over sin and death.

We move through Lent slowly but surely to the Cross.

### **Hymn # 100, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" v. 4**

## **EASTER**

Moving from Lent to Easter, we now read from Matthew's account of the resurrection.

### **Scripture Matthew 28:1-10**

**After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. <sup>2</sup>There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the LORD came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. <sup>4</sup>The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." <sup>8</sup>So the women hurried away from the tomb,**

afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me

### **Hymn #118, "The Day of Resurrection" v. 1**

Easter is the reason that we are all here today. If it were not for Jesus' resurrection men and women would have quickly forgotten the things which the Bible tells us about Jesus' ministry. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, people came to realize that he was truly the Son of God.

Easter Sunday was first determined by a formula accepted at the Council of Nicea in 325AD. According to our calculation of the calendar, Easter Sunday will be the first Sunday after the first full moon, after the vernal equinox. Since the moon month is 29 1/2 days long, we can have Easter Sunday as early as March 22 or as late as April 25. Easter tide lasts for seven weeks, ending on the Day of Pentecost.

The banners we will use for Easter remind us of the message "Christ has risen". The empty cross symbolizes the truth that death could not hold Jesus. The second contains butterflies and lilies and reminds us that resurrection is not mere resuscitation. We do not just take up life where we left off. We shall be like butterflies. They enter the cocoon as caterpillars and fly away as butterflies. So we will enter the cocoon of death and be raised with spiritual bodies fit for a new plane of existence

### **Hymn #118, "The Day of Resurrection" v. 3**

#### **PENTECOST**

The Bible tells us that Jesus was with his disciples for about 40 days following the resurrection. After Jesus returned to the Father, the disciples waited in the Upper Room. Luke tells us what happened next in the book of Acts.

#### **Scripture Acts 2:1-8**

**When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.**

**<sup>5</sup> Now there were dev out Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"**

### **Hymn #442, "The Church's One Foundation" v. 1**

As we just heard the Holy Spirit came upon that frightened group of disciples who were huddled in the upper room. The Spirit gave them the courage to share the message of the risen

Christ with the whole world. The Holy Spirit helped these disciples to plant churches from Spain to India in their generation. Pentecost begins 50 days after Easter. It marks the birthday of the Church. During this long season we remember all that God has done on and through his church.

The banner on this side reminds us of that first Pentecost so long ago. It places the dove which represents the Holy Spirit descending from God. The tongues of fire represent the Spirit dwelling in each one of us to give us power.

The other banner is a symbol of our Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. We are descendants of those first Christians in the Upper Room. The Holy Spirit was not only at work back then, but continues to be at work in our church today.

#### **Hymn #442, "The Church's One Foundation" v. 4**

There you have it; the cycle that we know as the church year. Why should we follow this year? What importance does it have?

You and I cannot focus on the whole Christian faith at one time. The Christian year forces us to look at small pieces of the Gospel at a time. Little by little we review all the major truths of the Gospel as the year progresses.

Remember one person overshadows the year. The year is shaped by the life of our Savior. We prepare for his coming, we celebrate his birth, we remember his mission to the world, we mourn his passion and death, and we rejoice in his victory over death and celebrate his church. As we move through this cycle year after year we can begin to be shaped by it. We can allow this pattern to shape our hearts and minds into the image of Christ himself.

May we allow the life of Christ to mold our lives.