

“Christ in the New Year”
John 5:39,40

January 1, 2012
New Year’s Day

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (Jn 5:39-40)

It is not enough that we as a church preach God’s Word. We must preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified for He is the Word who has become flesh and made his dwelling among us.

God’s Word is inerrant and infallible. Its witness is reliable and true. We can trust in the Word of God and lean on it with all our heart and not be led astray. But the Word of God isn’t just true and it isn’t just reliable. It wants to give us something. The Word of God wants to point us in a certain direction. It wants to give us Christ. It wants to point us to His life, suffering, death and resurrection as well as His promised return. As Jesus said, “It is they [the scriptures] that bear witness about me.”

The religious leaders of Israel knew their bible well. They knew the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Jesus even commends them for their diligent search of the scriptures. And why was their search diligent? Why were they so astute and learned in the scriptures? Because in them they thought they would find eternal life. They could have, they should have, and they would have found eternal life in the Scriptures, but first they had to come to terms with the man Jesus who was standing in their midst. They had to come to grips with His claim to deity and his forthcoming death and resurrection. So do we. We must come to terms with the person and work of Christ before we can correctly understand the scriptures. Christ is the key to Holy Scripture. Otherwise the bible remains a locked book. You can know your bible backwards and forwards, quote this chapter and verse against this chapter and verse, you can know your Greek and your Hebrew so well that you can translate the bible on sight, but if you have not Christ you reading God’s word in vain.

The Christmas angels made it clear to us that the baby born in Bethlehem was Christ, the Lord. The angel told Mary and Joseph to give him the name Jesus because he would save his people from their sin. John told us in his Christmas gospel that Jesus is “the word [that] became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (Jn 1:14) Jesus is the savior the Word of God promised. Not only that, he is the Word of God incarnate. He is the bible you can touch and see and which is put forward in story form in his life, death, resurrection and promised return. Jesus is one whom Moses spoke of when he said, “God will raise up from your brothers a prophet like unto me. You must listen to him.” (Deut 18:15) Therefore we listen to God’s Word. But we listen especially to Jesus whom the scriptures bear witness about.

THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR

For this very reason then we have a tradition in the church that follows the life of Christ. Obviously the Word of God is central to our worship services as the public reading of the scriptures and the preaching of God’s Word form the heart of our Lutheran worship. But the focus is on Christ who came for us to save us. We orientate our readings and our preaching on the life of Christ because Christ is the one the scriptures bear witness about.

Last night much of the world celebrated New Year's Eve. It is one of the few secular holidays that get celebrated internationally. Therefore you saw fireworks in Sydney Australia as well as New York's Time's square. We had a special service last night at Grace Lutheran church in which we anticipated God's blessings in the coming year. God brought us through the past year. He will bring us through the New Year. But for us as a congregation we began the New Year back in November. Do you remember when we all wished each other a happy new year?

Pastor Schulz said his congregation has the same tradition as our congregation. On the first Sunday of Advent we greet each other with the words, "Happy New Year!" So what's up with that? And what is the Christian calendar all about? While the world moves on with the month of January tomorrow, we instead move into the season of Epiphany. What is that? And why do we have this tradition of the Church year?

So what I would like to do this New Year's Day is take you not through the secular calendar which begins today on January 1st but take you through the traditional church year which began already in November. If you would like you can take our the hymnal and turn to the tenth page in the book which is Roman Numeral X. There you will find the Church Year laid out for you with its Sundays and seasons.

WHY THE CHURCH YEAR?

Before we take a more detailed look at the Church Year as it is laid out for you there I'd like to say two things first. The first thing is remind you that what we are talking about here is tradition of the church and not a doctrine of the bible. If you have some extra time look at our church's face book page and there you'll find an interesting blog on the church year from a non-Lutheran point of view. There are many protestant churches that don't even have services on Christmas day nor on Good Friday. That is because they do not recognize the church year. I'm not even following the church year today. Today should have been the First Sunday after Christmas. But in Christian freedom I am doing something different because Sunday just so happened to fall on a Sunday. And that's OK! The Church Year is one of those things that are neither commanded nor forbidden in scripture.

But it is certainly true that in the Old Testament God appointed certain days and periods of time for His people to observe. Like the festival of the Passover such days were set aside to teach God's people and remind God's people of His saving acts of mercy. In the New Testament no such days are commanded and we are even warned in the New Testament about being too centered on special days instead of on Christ! As we heard from our epistle reading today, "Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath." (Col 2:16) The apostle Paul is talking specifically to Christians who were allowing their consciences to be bound to specific festivals and days. You aren't a bad Christian if you don't observe Christmas. But you are if you deny the incarnation of our Lord.

But here is the thing....what are you left with if you don't have the Church Year? You are left with a secular calendar. Sure it was reformed by Pope Gregory in 1582, but much of it we inherited from the ancient Romans. So, for example, January is named after Janus the two headed god. He has two faces one that faces forward and one that faces backward. Hence the celebration last night of the new year. March is named after Mars the god of war because most military campaigns began in the Spring. Well, you get the picture. We use the Gregorian calendar because it works. It helps us organize our lives. How does one plan the planting of crops the meeting of conferences and the conducting of business without such a calendar? But one cannot make an appeal to it as a better more spiritual rule of thumb because it is really a pagan calendar.

Not so the church year. It wants to center our lives not on the four seasons but it wants to center our lives on Christ. This is the second thing. Like the scriptures that bear witness about Christ who is the Word become flesh, so too the church year would take us on a whirlwind tour of the life of Christ focusing our time together as a congregation on the significant events of his life...His birth....His baptism....His public ministry—teaching, preaching and performing miracles...and then especially His death and resurrection as well as His promised return. You can't plant crops by the church year. Don't schedule your conferences using the church year though you might want to avoid Christmas and Easter. But for our life together as a congregation coming together for worship each Sunday it is a great way to center our lives on the life of Christ.

SUNDAYS AND SEASONS

So where have we been and we are we going in the Church Year? Take a look at your hymnal Roman Numeral X. We have four seasons in in our secular calendar---Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. In the Church year there are three seasons---the time of Christmas, the time of Easter and the time of the Church. Right now we are in the time of Christmas. You can see we have just been through the season of Advent and are now leaving the season of Christmas.

Advent means coming. The focus is on the coming of the Lord both at Christ and at the last day. The color for Advent is Blue or Violet. Blue centers us more on the theme of hope. Violet or purple on the traditional color for repentance. Hence the ministry of John the Baptist is often focused upon in Advent because he is the one who went before the coming of the day of the Lord. He was the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord and call us to repent of our sins.

Christmas comes from the word Christ and the word mass. Christmas is the worship of Christ who came into our human flesh in order to deliver us from sin and death. White is the color you see out today. White is the celebration color and the color of purity. The focus of Christmas is upon the incarnation of our Lord and the fulfillment of God's gracious promise.

Epiphany is the season we are about to enter. If you have an epiphany in your life you have a revelation. It is a great "ah ha!" moment in your life when you finally see things right. So too in the Church year the focus is on the revelation of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. It starts with the visit of the Magi who come from the East to worship the Christ child. Pastor Steve is planning to focus our worship next Sunday on that event. But then the season of Epiphany moves us into the life of Jesus as an adult when he was baptized at the Jordan and then began His public ministry. There the color is green which is a color of growth---life, refreshment and regeneration. So too we see the ministry of Jesus growing and revealing itself more and more through out the season until we reach the great "ah ha!" moment of the transfiguration of our Lord. There we see Jesus clearly as the Son of God.

Then comes the time of Easter. It begins with the forty days and forty nights of Lent. Lent means spring time or renewal. It is a time when we prepare for the celebration of Easter with a call to repentance and renewed faith. The color is violet or purple, again, the color of repentance. If you read the four gospels there you will see an interesting chronology. Though Jesus lives on this earth for 33 years all four of the biographies spend 2/3 of their material on the last week of our Lord's life. The four gospels dwell almost entirely upon the death of Jesus and his resurrection. So too in the church year the main focus is upon the death and resurrection of Christ.

The time of Easter ends with the festival of Pentecost. After forty days our Lord ascended into heaven and then promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to his church. Then fifty days after the resurrection of our Lord....hence the word Pentecost meaning fifty....we have the fulfillment of this promise. Red is the color reminding of us the fire that danced upon the head of the disciples as the spoken in many languages that great things God had accomplished in Christ.

The last season of the Church year is the Sundays after Pentecost. This is called the time of the church. The focus is less on the life of Christ as a set chronology from birth to death to resurrection, but more on his public teachings. The bible readings during this season range out into a broad array of topics brought up by our Lord and by the apostles. I think of the what the apostle Paul said to his congregation in Ephesus, "I have not hesitated to declare to you the whole council of God." (Acts 20:27). In other words, the apostle made sure to tell his people everything God commands and not just share his favorite teachings.

Well, Happy New Year! But really it isn't a new year. We in the church said that a few months ago. Why? Because we wanted to center our lives on the life of Christ. The scriptures bear witness of him. (Jn 5:39). And so too we center our worship on Him. We orientate our preaching and teach on Jesus who came to suffer and die for our sins and rise again to give us the hope of the resurrection.

Maybe I can sum up what I'm trying to say with an illustration. If you walk into your living room, or anyone's living room, you'll probably find this modern phenomenon. In the days of old, before all our modern conveniences and technological advances the chairs in a living room would be orientated around the fireplace. Sometimes in a circle if the fire was centered there. Most times set up facing a hearth as that's where the warmth was coming from. Now when you walk into a living room you see the chairs orientated around the television. That says a great deal about our culture, doesn't it? Maybe we focus too much of our lives on entertainment.

The church year wants to focus our lives on Christ. For he is our savior. Our point of reference, the way we organize the spiritual furniture of our congregation, is Him who came to offer His life for us all. Therefore let the world gladly say, "Happy New Year!" But let the church year go and continue to go on that we might center our lives on Christ. In Jesus' Name. Amen.