

# The Christian Church Year

# 11

**For you died, and your life is now  
hidden with Christ in God. — COLOSSIANS 3:3**

Stories matter. When generations of Jewish children asked at the Passover table, “What does all this mean?” generations of Jewish fathers took their cue. Even when centuries had past, they answered: “We were in Egypt.” *We* were. The pronoun matters.

“This is *our* story. This is the story of *us*.”

That redemption story lived on in their annual remembering and reenacting. This perpetual telling and retelling forged a community and an identity that spanned generations. In fact, a whole Old Testament Church Year revolved around this same divine purpose. Passover, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement, and so on – these all came together in a brilliant system of remembrance, a yearly heartbeat of reenactments creating a people of memory and hope.

Their rituals and feasts all pointed beyond themselves to the true Redemption Story yet to come. The Christ would step from eternity into time and into this very world of weary frustrations and simple human pleasures. He came to do what he had always done. For timeless eternity, in glory unimaginable, the Son offered his pure adoration and his perfect song to the Father and the Spirit. Only now, he would do it *from here*.

But why? It is because Israel failed to be what it was always supposed to be. When its worship was not a shambles of neglect it was a sham of outward performance. They were meant to be a people living out the very dream of God, the shimmering light in his eye, and a beacon beckoning the world. Talk about a train wreck. Only one has ever lived up to all that expectation.

Jesus was “Israel reduced to one.”

Whether as a Jewish boy at Passover getting lost among his Father’s things, or the Lion of Judah flipping tables in the temple courts, he is the one who sent holy worship perpetually skyward while every other human voice failed and fell away. Beneath all human skin twisted a radical evil, a fist shaking insanely at the sky. He met it with a yet more radical grace. As horrors beyond all telling were gathering up like a storm, descending like

night, your Jesus prayed, “Father, let them know that you have loved them *just as you have loved me*” (John 17:23)

*Just as.* Only two words but I “scarce can take it in.” In an act of beauty and self-sacrifice to stop and start a heart again, this Jesus laid his body down.

There stands Christ, the Lamb of God, our true Priest, our true Temple. Truly he lives again and truly he casts his light backwards over the entirety of Old Testament revelation. All the lines of the Hebrew Scriptures meet in him. The Old Testament is the unfolding story of how God made for himself a people, found them some land, and raised up for them a king. He has done so again, and it is all Jesus. He is the true meaning and grand fulfiller of the whole Old Testament church year as well, that holy wineskin, and all its festivals and feasts. The thing just burst.

As you might imagine, it was the most natural thing in the world that a *new* Church Year would shape itself around this new mystery, this God in flesh. It happened virtually from the start. It came from freedom not compulsion. From the cross and empty tomb of our Lord, grace and truth poured like new Cana wine into the chalice of ancient liturgy. What emerged was the lovely annual reenacting of the life of Jesus Christ that we call the Christian church year. To choose to form your worship—and through it your life—to its sacred patterns is a matter of freedom. I, for one, would be a poorer man without it.

Advent stillness and waiting. The warm reaching for one another in that divine Christmas light. The “aha” of Epiphany. The dimmer lights and minor keys of Lent. The shock and weight of Holy Week. The kingly dignity and gift of Good Friday. Easter? There are no words, except to say what those Jewish fathers told their children: “We were there.” We were baptized into his death and resurrection. We are sustained in this new life by his own body and blood. In the readings selected for the Pentecost Season we learn how to live with what we saw in ancient Jerusalem, and with the news she could not contain.

Welcome to Lutheran theology poured into the brimming vessel of liturgical worship. These are the shifting moods and atmospheres, tunes and colors of the Church Year. In these days of fractured attention – when time is broken into bits and the self is mediated into distant strange devices – it is sweet relief to slip Sunday by Sunday, each a little Easter, into the cool stream of “Christian time.”

The Christian church year, the *Nacherzahlung*—the great Retelling—can serve as a symbol of deepest mystery: we have really hidden ourselves in Christ by faith. After all, this life of Jesus, the one we rehearse in the well-worn path of worship, is our true life. His dying and rising—our true

subject whenever we gather in his name—this is us dying. This is us rising. This is the story of us.

We are in him now, to pray and praise *from here*.

You, Christ, are the King of glory, the eternal Son of the Father...  
Come then, Lord, and help your people, bought with the price of  
your own blood, and bring us with your saints to glory everlasting. (From the Te Deum)

### **TO TALK ABOUT**

Without the Christian church year, might our focus on Christ crucified and raised begin to slip?

### **LET US PRAY**

Lord Jesus, we ask that by our annual celebration of your life and work you would be formed in us. We ask that you would be impressed ever more deeply on our hearts and minds. Please be, in your own person, our true love, joy and peace. In your name we pray. Amen.

# The Lord's Supper

# 28

**For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup,  
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. — 1 CORINTHIANS 11:26**

The pastor pauses as long as he can afford to. At this moment he always tries to take in as many of their faces as he can, daring to hope he might be Jesus to them. His gaze catches on a young couple not yet thawed from the long, tense drive to church. She is struggling to keep it together. He seems a thousand miles away.

“The Lord be with you.”

“And also with you.”

This simple exchange, like the one that follows, is an ember glowing with the fire of the second century Church. Lord, let it warm them. In every corner of the world grace has taken this very form as it passes between pastor and people. You have permission to savor here another small thrill of ecumenical joy, this knowing that we are part of something vastly larger than ourselves.

“Lift up your hearts.”

“We lift them up to the Lord.”

Lord, tilt our heads back. Let faith soar to realities unseen. The bread is uncovered. The wine is poured. Then a spine-tingling thing. To think that we sing at this particular moment—we have done so since Luther's Day—what Isaiah heard the angels cry to one another as the floors of heaven trembled and the temple filled with smoke. This is what they cried with those holy faces buried in their wings.

“Holy, holy, holy Lord God of heavenly hosts.”

In the plainest of sanctuaries a fusing of worlds. There the lightning and thunder. Here a baby fusses. Here is purple carpeting. There a sea of glass. “Blessed is he, blessed is he, blessed is he whom comes in the name of the Lord.” Lion of Judah! King above all kings! He came, as I say, all the way down, and all the way in, to share our flesh and blood, to know what a real human life in such a world is like and to know it from the inside. Lord, does he know.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed...” The pastor wonders when his own preaching has ever climbed to such heights. It a cherished little sermon to which he brings nothing of himself at all. “This is my body which is given *for you*...this is my blood which is poured out *for you*.” What mystery! What beauty! Surely, this is what we have each craved, though we could never have named it ourselves.

“The peace of the Lord be with you always.” As for this sentence, it has hung in the air wherever this Table has been set for some thirteen hundred years. The liturgy does not only express wonderful things about Jesus. Now we turn inwardly to him, to God come near, and sing him a song. “O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy upon us.” The melody is a vehicle to carry this ancient text to our heart’s foundation in order to settle there. To settle us.

“Grant us your peace. Amen.”

Now for the towering grace of God made intimate, personal, sudden, tangible. “Take and eat, the body of Christ...Take and drink, the blood of Christ poured out for you.”

This is the Sacrament of the Altar. The awareness seeps in again, like blood amidst the stones, what Jesus has done. *Christus Victor*—Christ Conqueror of every last thing that stood against us!

*He has conquered our past* with his astonishing grace. Though we have examined ourselves again, and again have found ourselves wanting, we have taken our very salvation into these frail bodies of ours again. The last word is his.

*He has conquered our future* with promises unbreakable. Fears dissolve in that ocean of mercy. Beyond our dying there is a warm banquet, a glad feast, at which God our God will wait on us, at which God himself will tilt his head back to sing. So say the prophets.

In conquering our past and our future, he has given us a *Now* in which we, such as we are, may enjoy him, taste him, be with him without shame or fear. He gives us back ourselves.

Not only so, but he gives us one another.

There is a power here that conquers us, as well as the ugly spaces between you and me that sin is always wanting to open up. The pastor had his eye on that couple, feeling the cold of them as he first greeted them at the door. But they have come to the table and there they stand, shoulder pressing

on shoulder, side by side, with a shine in their eyes. There is no closer they could possibly be.

Just two sinners with their hands held out.

Is this for me? I am forgiven and set free!

I do believe that I receive his very body and his blood.

O taste and see the Lord is good. (What Is This Bread?, stanza 5)

## **TO TALK ABOUT**

The Common Service couches the Lord's Supper in words and songs that represent distant centuries and link countless cultures and Christian traditions beyond our own. What does this distinct feature of Lutheran worship mean to you?

## **LET US PRAY**

We praise you, O Christ, for the gift of faith by which we recognize your true body and blood in, with and under the bread and wine. By these humble means, your Spirit moves us, draws us and sustains us in ways beyond our understanding or perception. May it ever be until that day when we will sit down at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In your name we pray. Amen.