

## **Journeying through the Christian Year**

The Christian Year begins with the First Sunday of Advent and ends with Christ the King Sunday (or Thanksgiving Sunday). Yet the development of that calendar has its roots in the Hebrew faith, marking days both according to the lunar calendar and naming specific calendar days.

First century Christians followed pretty closely to the Calendar of Feasts and Celebrations found in Leviticus, holding on to their Jewish heritage with the addition of three high, holy days that were distinctively Christian: Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany.

By the middle of the second century, **Easter** (John 20:1-18) had moved into the forefront of Christian celebration by separating itself from the Passover. The day of resurrection (Sunday) became the sacred weekday instead of the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday). Easter became the central day of celebration. Themes within the Easter cycle include appearances of the risen Christ and the promise of his continued presence with us. **Ascension** Sunday (Luke 24:44-53) is the last Sunday of Easter and marks Christ's ascension into heaven. From Easter grew the time of Holy Week (as a time of pilgrimage to Jerusalem) to Palm/Passion Sunday (Mark 11:1-11) and the celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry and his final week on earth. The Season of **Lent**, beginning with **Ash Wednesday** (Joel 2:1-2, 12-17) marked the time of preparation for baptism for new converts to Christianity. Themes throughout Lent focus on the teachings of Jesus and our personal relationship with him.

**Pentecost** (Acts 2:1-21), also with its roots in the Jewish calendar, was the culmination of the Easter Season (or cycle) and became distinctively Christian as it celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church. The **Season of Pentecost** lasts from **Trinity Sunday** (the first Sunday after Pentecost; John 3:1-17) until the last Sunday of the Christian Calendar which is usually Thanksgiving Sunday. Themes throughout this season focus on the life of the church.

In the late second century the Christmas cycle grew out of the day of **The Epiphany**. The Epiphany is the time when the Church celebrates God's manifestation to all humanity through the birth of Jesus Christ, particularly through the story of the magi (Matthew 2:1-12). The Season of Epiphany focuses on the

life, teaching, and ministry of Jesus. From Epiphany, the church began to celebrate **Christmas** (the nativity) as a separate day, so that by the fourth century the Church marked December 25 and January 6 as those key Christian days set against the pagan celebrations of the winter solstice – the Festival of the Unconquered Sun. It seemed appropriate that the Christian understanding of God’s light conquering the darkness of the human heart should find its place in the darkest part of the year. **Advent** developed as the time of anticipation and expectancy for the Church as we awaited the coming of the Christ. The Four Sundays of Advent focus on the prophecies of the Messiah and the Gospel fulfillment of God’s word.