

## Seasons

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Happy New Year Family! No, I am not a month or so early. I am referring to the Church year, which begins with the start of Advent.

Not every Church recognizes Church seasons. My wife and I have attended a few different churches over the years, as I am sure many of you have as well. They are all different, and yet serve the same Lord. They do not all recognize the seasons of the Church year, but they do all celebrate Christmas, when we celebrate the Lord's birth, and Easter (or resurrection Sunday) when we celebrate the Lord's resurrection. But no seasons of Epiphany, Advent, Lent, although many of them celebrate the day of Pentecost. And for some churches, they don't recognize seasons because, for them, to do so would be too liturgical, or too Catholic.

However, I quite like having seasons, because they remind us that God is the God of order. Certainly, we see this in nature. Four seasons, almost winter, winter, still winter, and construction, at least that's how it is here in Western New York! So, we have Spring, when the temperatures are getting warmer, plants start to grow, new plants develop. Lovely! Summer, when its hot, plants really photosynthesize and produce fruit. Autumn, when it starts getting cooler, we have harvest time, plants start to go dormant. And Winter when plants take a vacation from producing, we get snow. And Winter is important because the snowpack adds moisture to the ground and takes nutrients with it. And new seeds that fall into the ground need the cold in order to grow into new plants in the Spring. We need all four seasons for a healthy ecosystem.

In the same way I believe that we need to have seasons in the Church year to have a mature and healthy Church. Why? Because the seasons help us to focus. They are there to remind and teach. Advent reminds us of the importance of always being prepared for the Lord to come. Christmas teaches us that God the Son, Jesus Christ, was incarnate from the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit. Epiphany teaches us the importance of telling others that Christ came, and the importance of seeking after Christ. Lent teaches us about selflessness, perseverance, suffering for God. Easter teaches us that God has the power over death, and that because Christ rose from the dead, we know that He will raise us up too on the last day (1 Corinthians 15). The resurrection is real! Pentecost teaches us that in order to live this life to honor the Lord we must rely on the Holy Spirit. The season after Pentecost is all about Spiritual growth, which is why we wear green. The seasons teach us and remind us of all of these things that we need in order to grow in our faith and be mature disciples of Christ. Collectively they remind us that we are to be about Christ.

One of the reasons that I'm an Anglican is because of the seasons in the liturgy. There is beauty in it. There is theology in it. There is encouragement in it. There is order in it. To me it isn't Catholic, as in Roman Catholic, but it is catholic, little c, or should be. It should be Churchwide. We need order. It keeps us from going nuts trying to control chaos. Talk to any parent and ask them if they would prefer their children to be nice and orderly or if they would

prefer their children to engage in din and chaos and make messes with reckless abandon. I guarantee you that they will tell you that parenting gets easier as chaos decreases.

This life has seasons. Parenting is just one of those seasons. Some seasons are tougher than others. For example, we are in a season right now that is very tough. But if we can learn to grow in faith and to trust God in all the seasons of our life, we will mature as disciples of Christ.

A well-known song that highlights the fact that life has seasons, would be the song, "Turn turn turn" by a group called The Byrds. I'm sure many of you now have that song in your head, and probably will for the rest of the day. You're welcome! It was released in December of 1965 and is actually based on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—<sup>2</sup> A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. <sup>3</sup> A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up. <sup>4</sup> A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance. <sup>5</sup> A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing. <sup>6</sup> A time to search and a time to give up as lost; A time to keep and a time to throw away. <sup>7</sup> A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak. <sup>8</sup> A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace.

What the song does not include is the punchline, as it were, in Ecclesiastes 4:1 which states, "He has made everything appropriate in its time." The Triune God has created everything with order. Where we mess up, is when we try to control things rather than allowing God to reign in our lives.

But God says, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) The NASB says, "Stop striving and know that I am God." God is not saying to do nothing. What He is saying is to chill out. Relax. Know that He is God. We can trust Him, be proactive and do what He says, learn. Realize that what we are going through is just a season. It will pass.

What's so special about the season of Advent? Simply put, Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas. Most people tend to prepare in a very materialistic and human way rather than primarily in a spiritual sense. So, we put lights on the house. We put lights around in the house. We go shopping for presents. We get a Christmas tree. Maybe we have a tradition where we watch Christmas movies and Christmas TV specials. We bake cookies, now that is my favorite part because then we can eat them! (My favorite are chocolate chip! And I have it on good authority that they are Santa's favorite too!)

None of those things are wrong to do. They are all nice things to do, in fact. But the bigger issue is what are we doing Spiritually to prepare for Christmas? And what are we doing to prepare for Christ's second coming?

As I have already mentioned, Advent is the start of the new Church year. It is a new beginning. It is a wonderful time to engage in good Spiritual disciplines afresh, or for the first time. A good reference book for understanding the Spiritual disciplines is "Celebration of

Discipline” by Richard Foster. In the book Foster explains the Spiritual disciplines, what they are and what they are for. The bottom line is the more disciplined we are in our Spiritual lives, the closer we get to Christ, and the more contentment we will have. Because our contentment is not found in the things of the world. True contentment comes from Christ, being in relationship with Him.

I’ll give you a sample of one of the disciplines, namely meditation. When Foster talks about meditation, he isn’t talking about it in the sense that Eastern religion talks about it. This is not Yoga and Hinduism. He is talking about dwelling on God’s word, listening to the Holy Spirit speak to us, and perhaps putting yourself in that time period. Can you imagine what it must have been like in the years leading up to Christ’s first coming? Imagine living in the First Century B.C. and knowing all of the Messianic prophecies about how the Messiah was to rescue Israel. The Romans take over the land, and appoint Herod as king, who was not a full Jew of David’s line. How upset are you about that? What do you want God to do for you? Are you expecting the Messiah to die on the cross to take away your sins or are you expecting the Messiah to overthrow the Romans? Doesn’t this give us more clarity as to what the Jews were expecting? Their expectations were not met. Christ died on the cross and the Romans were still in power. They were thinking about worldly issues rather than their spiritual needs. Do we have that same issue? Do we rely on and listen to the Holy Spirit as much as we should?

Engaging in the Spiritual disciplines helps to focus us on Christ. And that’s the goal, to get closer to God in Christ. There is no better way to prepare for Christmas than to get closer to Christ, the reason for the season. And there is no better way to prepare for Christ’s return than to get closer to Him.

You have heard us say this many times, that Christ is coming back. He will come back to take us home at the end of this life, and if we live long enough to see it, He will return to the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem at the end of the age to put a stop to evil and to all the worldly nonsense and rule from the throne of David as has been prophesied.

And it is important for us to understand the signs of the times. Jesus spent time talking about them, and we have them recorded for us in the Gospels. Remember Jesus even asked the Pharisees how it was that they understood the signs in nature and yet were unaware of the signs of the times. Paul talked about the signs in his epistles, and John saw them and wrote them down in Revelation.

There have been differing interpretations throughout history of what the signs really are. We could talk about the signs and what they mean and how they might be manifested. (And since the Bills played on Thursday and aren’t playing today, we have extra time in which we could do that.) However, we aren’t going to do that, at least not now. For now, it suffices to say that we need to understand the big picture. We need to read the Scripture, as part of our Spiritual discipline, know that it is a fact that the Lord is coming back, and know what the signs are so that we are not caught unaware of what is going on when they come to fruition.

One final thought about Advent, and I’ll close with this. Advent teaches us to persevere in the faith. Think back again to the Jews in the time before Christ was born. The Romans took over the land and they could have given up. They could have instead become Roman citizens

and taken part in Roman rituals. But they did not. They maintained their discipline in the faith, still going to synagogue and to the Temple. They maintained their faith in God through that difficult season. They knew that the Messiah would come and continued in that belief. As a result, many put their faith in Christ as the Savior and Lord.

We are in a season that has been difficult (I mean Covid, not Advent). There seems to be a lot of uncertainty. But if we focus on what is certain, if we maintain our Spiritual discipline, if we seek to get closer to Christ, if we persevere in Christ, we too will be blessed. Therefore, I urge all to persevere in Christ. Never give up, never surrender; except in surrendering ourselves to Christ. Fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith. Know that Jesus Christ is Lord, that He came the first time to deal with sin, and that He will return in power and glory to establish His Kingdom.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!