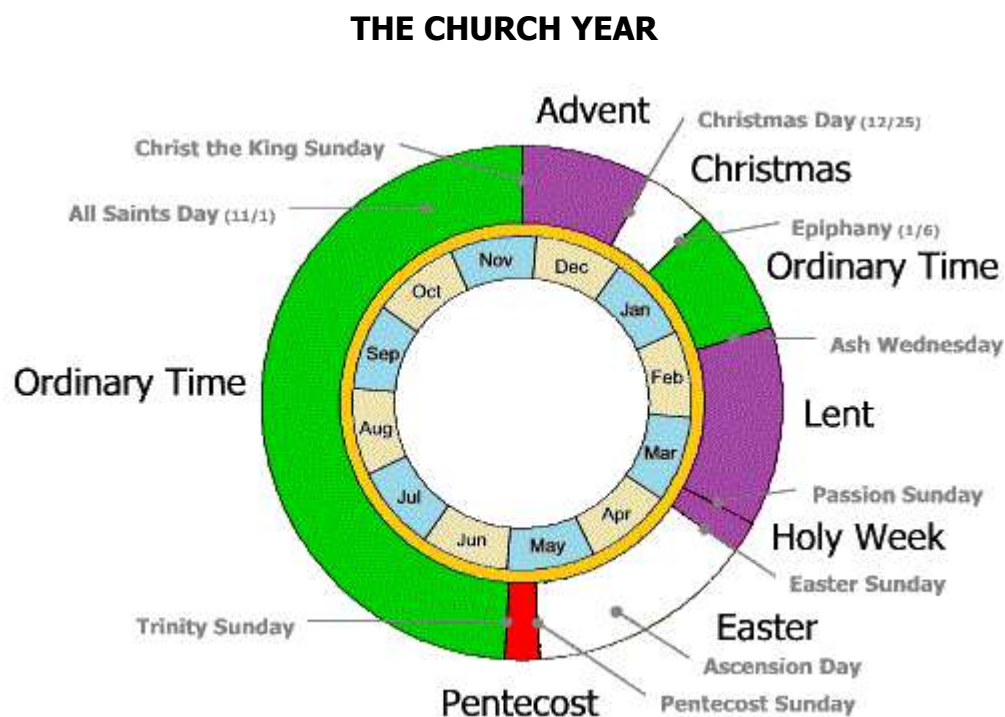


Over the holiday season I was able to see the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life.” In it is a character called Uncle Billy Bailey. He always has strings tied around his fingers. The reason he has all those strings around his fingers is that he has a hard time remembering what he’s supposed to be doing. So each string is for something that he’s trying to remember. It’s a wonderful movie. If you haven’t seen it, it’s a wonderful movie to see, especially around the holidays.



This chart is in some ways like strings around our fingers. What it represents is the church year, and we go around the circle clockwise. You might have noticed that the paraments, the banners hanging from the pulpit and lectern, change now and then. Sometimes they are green; sometimes they are white, sometimes purple. This chart is a representation of all the Sundays in the church year. It can also be called the liturgical calendar. I would like to talk about why it has these different calendars and what it means for us.

One other thing that you might recognize is that for each Sunday of the year there is a set of scriptures that has been chosen, and it is called the lectionary. The lectionary follows this pattern of the liturgical calendar. We haven’t always been following the

lectionary recently, but it's a way of helping us get through a lot of scripture over the course of a year and enter into particular parts of the year.

One of the interesting things about the church year is that it doesn't start today. It actually started in December, on the First Sunday in Advent. You notice that we start with a purple section for Advent, then we have Christmas and Epiphany, which are white. Then we have a time called Ordinary Time, green. Then we go into another purple time, which is Lent, followed by white for the Easter season. This red one is Pentecost, then we go into a long time of green, which is Ordinary Time.

There are a couple of things about ordinary time. It comes from the word *ordinal*, which means simply "to count." I'm guessing that *ordinary*, as we use it today, comes from the fact that they used it in the liturgical calendar for the time that wasn't special. It was ordinary, or ordinal—time just to count off until the next holiday.

So that's the framework around the church year, but why do we have it? Why have all these different colors and follow these different seasons? One reason is, it's our way of remembering. It helps us remember important things in Jesus' life: his birth, his death and resurrection, the beginning of the church. There are special Sundays like Christ the King Sunday at the end of the church year, Transfiguration Sunday right before Lent, and Trinity Sunday right after Pentecost. It helps us remember different parts of Jesus' life. As we go into ordinary time, it takes us into the teachings, so it's the time when we follow what Jesus did.

I think there's a particular way that this church year works if we think about the Christian life. I think it is in some ways a description of the Christian life. We start with Advent, and if you have read the lectionary texts for Advent, there is all this stuff about the end of the world. We don't usually like that because we are looking towards Christmas. The reason I think it fits with the Christian life is that those are the times when we are in a sense of real doubt, before we even know Christ. The world can look like it's ending. It's full of struggle and strife. In a way, that's what Advent is about. It's recognizing that struggle and strife, and then something incredible happens. We meet Christ, born to us on Christmas. So not only do we remember Christ being born all those years ago, but how he was born in us, to us, as we encountered Christ.

Then there is this special time, the twelve days of Christmas, which are those days where we just live in that joy of Christ's birth. Then we realize that we want to live this faith out. We want to try to follow Jesus, so we have this ordinary time. It's a short ordinary time. It's that initial time when we are full of energy and we are motivated to follow Christ.

Then we get to the beginning of Lent. What do you often do when you get to Lent? Give something up. That's what happens, I think. We are full of excitement about being a Christian and then we realize that we have to start giving things up. Our life really has to change. It's different. So we enter into this time of introspection and, I would even

say, struggle with what it means to follow Christ. We go through the forty days of Lent, patterned after Jesus' forty days in the wilderness.

We go through those forty days and then we have, in that last week, Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. What it feels like to me is that day, Palm Sunday, is when we try to make Jesus be what we think he should be, an actual King. But the week falls apart because that's not what Jesus is here for. They kill him off, but sometimes I wonder if in our own walk of faith we don't get to the point where we would just as soon push him away, kill him off. We're not ready to really make the changes it takes to follow him. But, you know, once you've met Christ, I don't think you can kill him off. There is resurrection. Christ is present.

It's interesting, if you read the scriptures in the Easter period, a lot of them are about the disciples wondering about what happened. What's going on? Thomas: I won't believe unless I see the marks in his hands. The guys walking to Emmaus don't even recognize him until he breaks bread with them. Peter is out fishing, sure that it's over, or at least trying to do something normal. It is at this time that the reality of who Christ is, I think, really begins to sink in. We see that for the disciples at that time. They really begin to recognize who Christ is, and in allowing this recognition to happen they meet Christ and witness the ascension. They then can go on to allow, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit to enter their lives and begin a new thing, begin the church.

As we celebrate Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday the following week, we begin to recognize the incredible nature of who God is and begin again to try to follow and live out what it means to follow Christ. So we have this long period of Ordinary Time where we read scripture and think about what it means to be a follower of Christ. The final Sunday of the church year is Christ the King, where we have gone full circle.

Now the thing we know about our lives is that they never stay exactly the same, so we always have a period where there's a struggle again. We may not always follow this pattern exactly the way it is on this chart, but the components of it, I think, show up in our lives. Our struggle and reencounter, our struggle with the encounter, and what we are going to do about it in allowing Christ again to become Lord.

The one thing I would say about this is that I hope it's not just going around in circles. That's what it feels like if you just look at this chart, but this is one-dimensional. Our lives are three-dimensional, and so is our faith. What I think is that this allows us to recognize that we do hit these different seasons but hopefully, instead of just being a circle, it's more like a spiral. You can think of it as going up, or going deeper, or going further in to the life of faith.

So I see this calendar as a gift to us that helps us work our way through the life of faith and deeper into our faith in Christ. I haven't had the chance to explain that or describe how I look at it before. It's a gift to us, this church year, that we work through and I thought it might be a gift for you today.