

Introduction

We're normally used to celebrating the New Year when December turns over to January, but today toward the end of November, we are celebrating the last Sunday of the *church* year. When we gather for worship here at Good Shepherd, we follow a special calendar that's been in place in the Christian Church for 1,500 years. The church year is a cycle of seasons and readings that follows the life and teachings of Christ. It keeps us from hearing the *same* things or things that are random and disorganized every Sunday, and it's designed to help guide our worship through the whole story of Jesus and his work to save us. The different seasons of the church year explain why we have different colored banners and altar cloths, why we celebrate different festivals, why we worship the way we do.

Today, on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year, we will see how Christ reigns as King throughout all the seasons of our Church Year. In fact, that's what it means to be the "Christ" – he is our anointed Prophet, Priest, and *King*. Every good king governs his people with wisdom and good counsel; he guards and protects his people against anyone or anything that would try to harm them; and he provides a kingdom where they can live in peace and safety. In our worship today, through songs and readings, we'll retrace the steps that the Church has walked in God's Word over the past year to celebrate how Christ does all that for us as our perfect, heavenly King.

Advent

The first season of the church year is Advent—it starts next week. The word Advent means "coming," so for four weeks each year God's people prepare for Christ's coming at Christmas with humble repentance for our sins and eager anticipation for our deliverance. And how did God deliver us from our sins? By becoming human to save us. Through the miracle of the virgin birth – being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary – the Son of God, Jesus Christ, came to earth to live and die and rise again, and all of it in our place and for our sake. The season of Advent is about humbly yet joyfully preparing our hearts for the King who for us and for our salvation came once in lowliness to redeem us, comes to us still now by faith through his Word and Sacraments, and is coming again one day in glory to bring us to his kingdom forever. *Our Advent lesson comes from Luke 1:26-35.*

Christmas

The season of Advent culminates in our celebration of Jesus' birth at *Christmas* – that's a word that simply means the day of Christ's Mass, the day when God's Church gathers in worship to celebrate that Christ the Savior is born. But let's not just think here of a cute little baby placed in a manger. Let's remember that that baby had the job of governing the world on his shoulders with peace and justice and righteousness, like no one else possibly could but the Son of God himself. But if he was to be our true, proper King, then he needed to be one of us – so that's exactly what he became for us. The God of all the universe took on our human flesh and was born in Bethlehem so that one day everyone would acknowledge him as the Prince of Peace and our almighty, eternal King. *Our Christmas lesson comes from Isaiah 9:6-7.*

Epiphany

Twelve days after Christmas begins the next season of the church year on January 6th: Epiphany. The word Epiphany means "appearing" or "revealing," and in this season of the church year we see Jesus begin to reveal to this world just who he really is through his miracles, through his preaching, and through the divine love that could only come from the Savior so long promised. And here in this reading, we see three wise men from the east come to help with that process. They bow down and *worship* Jesus (something only the true God is worthy of!), and they offer gifts fit for the greatest king of them all – and that teaches us the all-important truth that Jesus is the Savior-King not just of the Jews, but of the whole world. And he spent the rest of his life proving it. So friends, let's follow the example of the Magi here. With joy and reverence, let's worship Christ our King. *Our Epiphany lesson comes from Matthew 2:1-2, 9-12.*

Lent

The season of Lent comes when the spring days begin to lengthen – and that’s exactly what that old-English word *Lent* means, “Lengthen.” Just as the sun is getting higher and stronger at that time of the year to leave behind the winter’s darkness, so also that reminds us that the Light of the world came to shine through the darkness of sin and death – but the way he did that was by *bearing* sin and *suffering* death for us. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, that day when Christians all over the world put ashes on their foreheads as a reminder that because of our sins, “dust we are and to dust we will return.” This is a season of solemn repentance as we watch our innocent Savior arrested and beaten and crucified for sins *we* committed. Yet through it all, Christ remained the King we truly needed – one who was clothed in purple like real royalty deserves, even if the soldiers only meant to mock him; one who wore a crown, a crown of thorns; one who reigned not from a ruler’s throne but from a criminal’s cross; and one who didn’t expect his people to sacrifice themselves for him but rather gave himself over to death in sacrifice for us, so that one day we could live with him in his heavenly kingdom forever. There on the cross, Jesus proved himself the greatest King of all. *Our Lent lesson comes from John, chapters 18-19.*

Easter

After the solemn remembrance of Jesus’ suffering and death, the church bursts out in joy on Easter morning to celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord. And you remember how that greeting goes, don’t you? Can we say it together? *Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)* The Resurrection of our Lord is the highest festival of the Christian church year, because on Easter Sunday, Christ our King rose victorious from the grave to prove that our sins are forever forgiven; that he really is the Son of God and our Savior, just like he promised, and so our faith in him is well-founded; and that he has power over all creation to even destroy death and all our spiritual enemies and deliver eternal, resurrection life to us and all his people as well. *Our Easter lesson comes from 1 Corinthians 15:17-26.*

Pentecost

The name Pentecost simply means “fifty,” because 50 days after Easter another history-changing event happened in the life of the Church: just as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit came to give his people the gifts they needed to carry out Jesus’ Great Commission and take the Gospel message of forgiveness, life, and salvation by faith to the ends of the earth. Because of that, we remember Pentecost as the birthday of the Christian Church, the day when the message of Christ our Savior-King first went out to the world and eventually came even to us. And so we spend the rest of the summer and fall celebrating that the King who *died* for us now wants us to *live* for him, and he is reigning on high to keep our faith growing and active in this world until he finally delivers us home to the heavenly kingdom he’s preparing for us. *Our Pentecost lesson comes from Ephesians 1:15-23.*

End Time

Finally we’ve come to the last part of the church year, the time that we’re in right now. In this last month of the church year, we look ahead toward the End Time of this world and into eternity. It’s a season that can be a little unsettling for a lot of people because there is so much that is unknown and even scary about the Bible’s picture of the future. But the ultimate point of it all is that just as our King Jesus came once to save us, so also he will surely come again one day to win the final victory for us. And like a loving father always does for his children, like a good, strong king always does for his people, he will stop at nothing to fight for us, to deliver us from the forces of evil in this world, and to finally bring us home to the glories of his heavenly kingdom. And the way he does that is the same way he’s been working in our lives from the beginning: with the sword from his mouth, the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. So let’s keep using it friends, faithfully and fully, because this is how Christ will continue to reign as King in our hearts, in our lives, and in our eternities. *Our End Time lesson comes from Revelation 19:11-16, 19-21.*