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# LIVING CHRIST

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EMBODYING **JESUS' LIFE IN WORSHIP**  
THROUGH THE **CHRISTIAN YEAR**

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**DANIEL L. RIFE**

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To my parents,

    who instilled in me wonder and creativity;

to my colleague and friend, Emily Vermilya,

    who introduced me to the Christian Year;

to my wife, Jordan,

    who manifests the Christian Year in our church and community;

and to the people of College Wesleyan Church,

    who played a premier role in forming this resource and me.

# CONTENTS

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<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	
Why a Book about the Christian Year?	7
<b>MOVEMENT I</b>	15
<b>ADVENT</b>	
<i>The Invitation to Anticipate Christ's Coming</i>	
<b>MOVEMENT II</b>	25
<b>CHRISTMAS</b>	
<i>The Invitation to Celebrate Christ's Presence on Earth</i>	
<b>MOVEMENT III</b>	37
<b>EPIPHANY</b>	
<i>The Invitation to Wonder at Christ's Work on Earth</i>	
<b>MOVEMENT IV</b>	49
<b>LENT</b>	
<i>The Invitation to Reckon Our Life with Christ's Life and Death</i>	
<b>MOVEMENT V</b>	67
<b>EASTER</b>	
<i>The Invitation to Triumph with Christ over Sin and Death</i>	
<b>MOVEMENT VI</b>	87
<b>ORDINARY TIME</b>	
<i>The Invitation to Commit to Christ through the Church</i>	
<b>TELLING CHRIST'S STORY BEYOND THE SUNDAY GATHERING</b>	103
<b>EPILOGUE</b>	151
<b>NOTES</b>	153
<b>FOR FURTHER STUDY</b>	157
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	159

# INTRODUCTION

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## Why a Book about the Christian Year?

**E**very worship service tells a story. But what story is it? Whose story is it? And what type of person is that story forming us into? Could it be possible that we are unaware of what story we're telling each Sunday, and therefore unintentional in how our congregation is being formed by our worship practices? But what if we *were* aware? What if we *could* be intentional? For Christian worship, by its name alone, is called to tell one story: the story of the living Christ.

This isn't as easy as it sounds. I've been a worship practitioner just under a decade and still have to fight the temptation to include certain songs, elements, or people just because I can. It's easy to get swept up in the hype, the emotion, and the intellect of popular Christian culture. But as soon as the purpose of Christian worship digresses from telling the story of Christ to our own motives and aspirations, we have lost the very center of our existence. Therefore, this book is my attempt to offer a method by which worship planners can reorient their weekly services to accomplish that ultimate goal—telling the story of Christ.

There are numerous ways a church could remember and celebrate the life of Christ in worship. So, please, do not consider this book prescriptive. Nor should you consider it a historical exposition. There are many excellent authors, more qualified than I, who can explain the historical background and traditions mentioned in this book. I've included a list of them in the bibliography. So, this is neither a history book nor a rule book. I do hope, though, that it is an inspiring

book—one that stirs in you new ideas of how the life of Christ might permeate your own life and the worshiping life of your context.

This book is for the current and future worship planner who wants to center a community on the life of Christ. Whether you are a senior pastor, worship leader, ministry leader, or student in training, I hope this book will offer accessible and practical ways to corporately live Christ's life over the course of a year. Though many of the examples offered in this book lend themselves to the Sunday morning service, several of the ideas could easily translate to age-specific ministries, small groups and Sunday schools, or even the family living room. For the layperson who just wants a simple introduction to the Christian Year or the person seeking to establish sacred rhythms in their own life, I hope that—between the more instructional sections—this book will pass on the essence of Christ's life and invite you to deeper fellowship with him.

Each chapter is ascribed to a particular season of the Christian Year—which I'll explain more in depth in the following pages. Beneath the chapter header you will find a short description of the time frame of the season within the year, its associated symbolic color, as well as any special days to note. Within the introduction of the season you will find a schedule of readings from what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary.<sup>1</sup> Every Sunday and some special days are assigned a reading from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Epistles. As I mentioned earlier, I offer these not as prescriptions but inspiration. These assigned readings match the particular season of the Christian Year in either content or theme and can therefore be immensely helpful in bringing focus to your service planning. After giving a brief overview, I offer a couple possibilities as to how you might join the spirit of the season. I conclude each chapter with a list of either a special focus you might promote, or special services you might consider offering your congregation in the particular season.

The final chapter, "Telling Christ's Story beyond the Sunday Gathering," is perhaps the most instructive within the whole book. The

Christian Year has multiple special days on which it is appropriate to offer a corporate worship service in addition to the weekly gathering of believers. Planning a service that isn't confined to a regular order of worship can sometimes be overwhelming. This chapter offers some methods for planning special services, as well as multiple service outlines for you and your team to either contextualize for your own people or inspire you to create your own original services.

Whether you read the whole book at once or read each chapter separately as you prepare for an upcoming season or plan a special service, I hope that you come back to this book time and time again. The story stays the same, but we don't. Our lives are ever-changing—our relationships and our work is often filled with new trials and adventures. But, year after year, as we continue to return to Christ, who is our life, we learn to see the things he sees; we learn to hear the things he hears; we might even find ourselves doing the things he does—and we join God's testimony in saying, "He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 John 5:11).

## CALENDARS

Everything we do is making us into someone. What we eat, how much we sleep, the people we interact with in our communities, what we do with our free time—we are but the result of choices we've made and the habits we've grown accustomed to. Whether we literally write them down or not, it is these choices and habits that make up our calendar. So, if you were to show me your schedule, I could probably tell you what you value, because we make time for what's important to us. Whether it's actually the meeting we value or the job we'll lose if we don't attend the meeting, our calendars reveal a lot about our value system.

If I were to replace your calendar with my calendar, and you went to all my appointments, met all my deadlines, and celebrated all the

birthdays of people close to me, your life would eventually look a lot more like mine than yours. Even on a physical level, if I took on the calendar of an Olympic athlete, my arms might actually fill my sleeves and I might not be as self-conscious at the pool. Calendars reveal a lot about us, because it is not enough for me to simply say, “I want to be an astronaut.” I have to make time to do the things that astronauts in training do. If I don’t, then I won’t be an astronaut.

So, if this argument stands, it is not enough to simply say, “I want to be like Christ.” Rather, we must integrate Christ’s calendar into our own lives—his habits, special events, conversations, the journeys, the waiting, the meals, and so on. If we do this, in time, our lives will begin to look like his. And eventually, if we consistently enact the habits of Jesus, we would likely no longer be copying him; instead, we might actually take on his values. When we live the life of Christ—that is, when we are *living* Christ—we become like him. Thomas Howard, in his book *Evangelical Is Not Enough*, writes,

“There is a profound mystery at work here, touching on the threefold sense in which the gospel is true for Christian believers. Everything recorded in the Gospels happened once in actual history; but these events must be translated by the Holy Ghost into the Christian’s own life (Christ must be born in us; we must be circumcised in the inner man; we must be crucified with Him and raised with Him and ascend with Him); and, thirdly, we must perpetually keep coming back in our minds to these events, marking and remembering them, and meditating on them.”<sup>2</sup>

This is salvation: not one single moment, but the summation of a life characterized by Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection in the



choices, habits, sacrifices, and relationships of a person. The more we learn to integrate our calendar into Christ's calendar, the more we might discover how Christ would live our life.

## THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

The Christian Year or Calendar (Liturgical Year or Calendar) is a historic method of remembering Christ's life on earth. Just as you might divide your own life into seasons of childhood, teenage years, college days, and early, middle, and late adult life, Christ's life is likewise remembered in six seasons. In **Advent**, we remember the expectation of his arrival; in **Christmas**, his birth; in **Epiphany**, we see him grow up and begin his ministry; in **Lent**, his journey to death; in **Easter** (spoiler alert), we see him live again; and in **Ordinary Time**, we see his church established.

Chances are, even those who have never heard of the Christian Year still celebrate it in part. Christmas and Easter are perhaps the most commonly celebrated days of the Christian Year. However, as seen above, they are not just singular days but entire seasons. In fact, the entire Christian Year can be divided into two cycles: the **Christmas Cycle** (Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and the **Easter Cycle** (Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time). Both cycles have a season of preparation, then a season of realization, and end with a season of implication.

In reference to the actual length of time of the seasons, the Christian Year can be divided into two parts of revelation and response. Close to six months (December through March/April) focus on the revelation of God in the man Jesus Christ (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter), while the last six months (May/June through November) focus on the response of the church to go and make disciples (Ordinary Time). It is appropriate that this annual calendar follows the model of divine dialogue as this pattern of revelation and response is consistent with God's activity throughout the biblical narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Though each season has a title, more important is the ethos or disposition of the season. In a way, Christ even teaches us emotional competency as we journey with him through excitement, joy, determination, pain, and sorrow—all very real human emotions that a church may not regularly focus on. So, you will see that each season is titled not only with the traditional label, but also an invitation that encapsulates the ethos of that particular time within the Christian Year. Just as a sonata—a specific type of classical music composition—is made up of different movements, the life of Christ is made up of narrative movements that, when performed in succession, complete the work. These movements are:

- **Advent:** The Invitation to Anticipate Christ's Coming
- **Christmas:** The Invitation to Celebrate Christ's Presence on Earth
- **Epiphany:** The Invitation to Wonder at Christ's Work on Earth
- **Lent:** The Invitation to Reckon Our Life with Christ's Life and Death
- **Easter:** The Invitation to Triumph with Christ over Sin and Death
- **Ordinary Time:** The Invitation to Commit to Christ through the Church

Similar to a musical composition, one living the Christian Year will experience the evolution of rhythmic variations, the emergence of dynamic differentiation, a *mélange* of textures and forms, with cascading melodies that diversify into complex harmonies, fluctuating keys, skipping from consonance to dissonance, while never losing the original motif. In the simplest terms: the Christian Year is a journey. Things will change along the way—things as simple as colors, symbols,

dispositions, and main supporting characters—but God’s original purpose never changes: redemption for all of creation through the life of Christ.

In his book *You Are What You Love*, James K. A. Smith argues the premise of his title by quoting Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, writing, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”<sup>4</sup> This is the goal of Christian worship, not to simply call people to tasks and work, but to teach them to long for the endless immensity of Christ. Building a ship is second nature to someone who values the sea. Perhaps the pursuit of Christ would bear in us a new nature entirely. So, I invite you on this journey of embodying Christ’s life in worship. May you know him more as you walk with him and may you be “filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God” (Phil. 1:11 CEB).



# ADVENT

The Invitation to Anticipate  
Christ's Coming

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## TIME

4 weeks  
*beginning on the fourth  
Sunday before December 25  
through December 24*

## COLOR

Blue  
*(color of hope)*  
or purple  
*(color of penitence and royalty)*

## SPECIAL DAYS

- **Gaudete Sunday** (the third Sunday of Advent)
  - **Christmas Eve** (December 24)
- 



The story begins, as many ancient stories do, *in medias res* (in the midst of things). Prophecies of a major plot twist are announced, and anticipation rises. The Creator of all things is stepping into the time and space of his creation. Isaiah announces, “Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you” (Isa. 35:4). Isaiah is echoed by Jeremiah, Micah, Zephaniah, and Malachi. Something new is about to happen that neither Israel nor the world fully understands. Hope is ignited, peace is promised, joy is alive, and love has a name.

In the reenactment of the season of Advent each year, the church emerges from the previous year’s prolonged season of Ordinary Time. Throughout Ordinary Time, we have become more aware of and burdened by the brokenness around us and even *in us*. We join the psalmist in crying out, “O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way?” (13:1). But we have hope: “The day will come, says the LORD, when I will do for Israel and Judah all the good things I have promised them” (Jer. 33:14). “At just the right time God’s voice breaks into the ordinary, “Look, I am making everything new!” (Rev. 21:5). “Comfort, comfort my people” (Isa. 40:1). And yet, God does not simply pull his people out of the darkness. Rather, the Light steps into the darkness in the form of a weak, vulnerable, and dependent newborn baby. God took on the likeness of humanity, so humanity could take on the likeness of God.<sup>1</sup>

Advent is a season of liminality—a transition period. We join the ancient cries of Israel longing for a Savior, and yet we live in the time after the revelation of the Christ. On this side of the incarnation, we not only remember Christ’s first coming, but we also look forward to his second coming. Therefore, it is appropriate to merge these two

narratives. Though they occupy different spaces of cosmic time, they both reveal a Creator that identifies with his creation and has not left us alone; one who promises to wipe every tear from our eyes and make all things new.

	YEAR A	YEAR B	YEAR C
<b>WEEK 1</b>	Isaiah 2:1–5 Psalm 122 Romans 13:11–14 Matthew 24:36–44	Isaiah 64:1–9 Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 1 Corinthians 1:3–9 Mark 13:24–37	Jeremiah 33:14–16 Psalm 25:1–10 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 Luke 21:25–36
<b>WEEK 2</b>	Isaiah 11:1–10 Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19 Romans 15:4–13 Matthew 3:1–12	Isaiah 40:1–11 Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13 2 Peter 3:8–15a Mark 1:1–8	Malachi 3:1–4 Luke 1:68–79 Philippians 1:3–11 Luke 3:1–6
<b>WEEK 3</b>	Isaiah 35:1–10 Psalm 146:5–10 <i>or</i> Luke 1:46b–55 James 5:7–10 Matthew 11:2–11	Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11 Psalm 126 <i>or</i> Luke 1:46b–55 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 John 1:6–8, 19–28	Zephaniah 3:14–20 Isaiah 12:2–6 Philippians 4:4–7 Luke 3:7–18
<b>WEEK 4</b>	Isaiah 7:10–16 Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 Romans 1:1–7 Matthew 1:18–25	2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16 Luke 1:46b–55 <i>or</i> Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26 Romans 16:25–27 Luke 1:26–38	Micah 5:2–5a Luke 1:46b–55 <i>or</i> Psalm 80:1–7 Hebrews 10:5–10 Luke 1:39–45 (46–55)

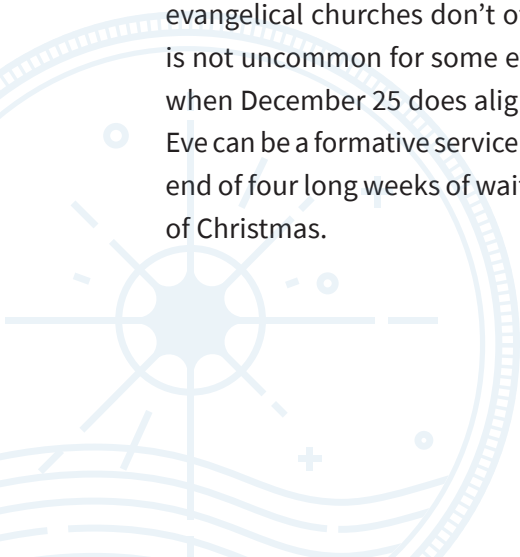
Paraphrase used in the assigned psalm indicate a shorter selection of verses that could be read in place of the entire psalm. Paraphrase used in all other references indicate optional additional verses that could be included with the assigned readings.

Blue or purple are the colors used to signify this season. Purple has been traditionally used in Advent, and blue is a more recent addition to the Christian Year color scheme, offering a unique expression of the season. Blue is the color of hope, while purple (also used in Lent) is

the color of both penitence and royalty. Both colors are appropriate for Advent. We are penitent as our heavenly King takes on human form, yet we are hopeful for his presence and salvation. Coming from a tradition that emphasizes the hope of transformation, we are inclined toward the use of blue during this season. But remember, you are seeking to retell the story of Christ in your context; to get stuck on what color should or shouldn't signify a season is to misunderstand the color's function. The color your context uses is a backdrop to the season—setting the scene for this part of the story and developing an ethos for this specific movement within the entirety of Christ's sonata.

Two days stand out in this four-week-long season: the midpoint and the end. In the middle of the season, the church celebrates **Gaudete Sunday** (gäōōdetā), or in English “Rejoice!” If you have ever witnessed the lighting of an Advent wreath, you may have noticed a pink candle among three blue (or purple) candles. No, the church staff didn't just run out of one color of candles. On the third week of the season of Advent, a pink candle is lit in contrast to the other candles lit on weeks one, two, and four. This is because the ethos shifts on this third Sunday from an anticipation grounded in promise to an anticipation grounded in realization, therefore, we rejoice!

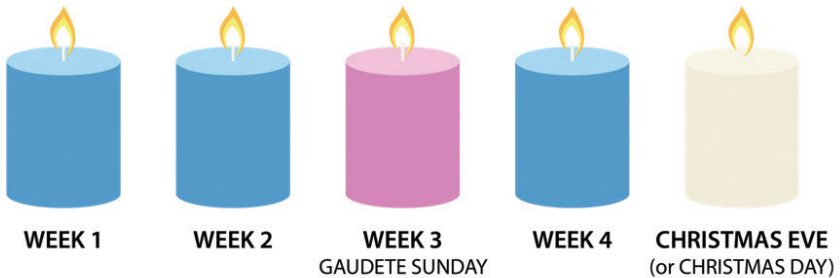
The second day that stands out in Advent is the final day of the season: **Christmas Eve**, December 24. Many congregations will gather together on this day to welcome the season of Christmas. Many evangelical churches don't offer a service on Christmas Day, and it is not uncommon for some evangelical churches to cancel services when December 25 does align with a Sunday. Therefore, Christmas Eve can be a formative service for your people to commemorate at the end of four long weeks of waiting, inviting them into the celebration of Christmas.



## WAYS TO JOIN THE ANTICIPATION OF ADVENT

### ADVENT WREATH

A common tradition of the church is to place four candles along the border of a wreath on the altar (three blue or purple, and one pink). Each week one additional candle is lit so that, on the final Sunday of Advent, all four candles are burning. You might choose to include an additional larger white candle in the center of the wreath to be lit on Christmas Eve or on the first Sunday of Christmas. This candle is often called the Christ candle. If the Christ candle regularly sits on the altar in your context, the story of the Christian Year can interact with it on a couple different occasions, as it represents the light Christ brought into the world.



During Sunday services in Advent, you may choose to simply have the appropriate candles already lit, or you could include a time to light the candles within the service. Many traditions will include a verse of Scripture or song to be paired with this element. You could include a portion of the assigned lectionary texts for these days. You could have different congregation members offer testimonies each week about a time they waited on something from



God, perhaps without ever sharing if they received it, concluding with a scriptural affirmation of God's nature. Perhaps you could use an Old Testament prophecy to remember Israel's waiting for Christ's first coming and a New Testament exhortation to anticipate his second coming. You could even use an Old Testament text about Christ's first coming to encourage your congregation as you anticipate Christ's second coming. Imagine, for example, pairing James 5 with Isaiah 40:

**EPISTLE:**

Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen. You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near.

—James 5:7–8

**PROPHECY:**

“Comfort, comfort my people,”  
says your God.

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.  
Tell her that her sad days are gone  
and her sins are pardoned.

Yes, the Lord has punished her twice  
over for all her sins.”

Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting,  
“Clear the way through the wilderness  
for the Lord!

Make a straight highway through the  
+ wasteland for our God!”

—Isaiah 40:1–3

After these readings, a testimony, or a song, the appropriate candle can be lit. Depending on your context, a bell could be rung while the candle is lit to enhance this element. The ringing of a bell is a historic symbol. It is a “joyful noise” that calls our attention to Christ’s mysterious presence, often rung in correlation to the eucharistic prayer. Just as a candle is lit to symbolize the coming of the Light, a bell can toll to symbolize the ever-presence of God among us as we wait for the return of the incarnate Christ. This element is an excellent opportunity to include small groups or families in your services as well. Each week, the readings could be divided between different readers, while another person lights the candle and another rings the bell.

## **PRACTICE SILENCE AND WAITING**

With the use of Scripture, we can tell the story of Israel’s waiting and make connections of their yearning with our own lives. Yet, so often, our services are filled instead with elements to be accomplished—every second is accounted for, and any moment absent of activity causes people to wonder, “What’s going on? Did someone miss their cue?” The season of Advent teaches us that something is happening in the waiting, in the longing, in the silence—that even nothing is indeed something. Advent reminds us that we can be confident, even hopeful, in waiting, anticipating the manifestation of God’s redeeming work, as we quietly continue in faithfully living amidst his perceived silence.

Waiting is not a message the world teaches us. We are taught to take control, to act, to react. But it is often in waiting that our true heart shows through. When we are left without instruction, without control, without knowledge of what comes next, we might just find ourselves melting down our gold to create a god that will fill the silence (see Ex. 32). Counterculturally, Advent invites us to practice corporate waiting.

Explaining and incorporating regular moments of silence throughout the four Sundays is very appropriate. Perhaps silence could occur after the Advent readings to allow the congregation to center themselves within the gathering, maybe before the Scripture presentation or the sermon, as a preparation for the Word, or maybe after the sermon to consent to the Word. We are rarely taught to simply sit and wait, trusting that God can work even when we are not. This is a necessary practice and posture for the church as we seek to reenact the story of God. He does not move at our pace; often we must slow down to keep up with him.

## SPECIAL SERVICES

There are numerous opportunities to incorporate special services within the season of Advent, and the final chapter of this resource offers a collection of these services and others in greater depth. Here let me offer a bird's-eye view of some of the common Advent services. A **Hanging of the Greens** service is a service of preparation, as the church is decorated for the season throughout the service—each decoration symbolizing a portion of the larger story. Amidst the season you might consider including a service of **Lessons and Carols**: a conglomeration of Scripture texts (lessons) and carols paired to retell the story in simple revelation and response pattern. You could use the **O Antiphons**, the names of the promised Savior used in the carol “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” to structure a service of hope. The United Methodist Church even has a service order for an Advent service of lament called “**A Blue Christmas**,” for those who—because of loss or suffering—find the season more painful than hopeful.

Advent ends on Christmas Eve and is often commemorated with a **Christmas Eve service**. This service acts as a doorway into the celebration of Christmas and sometimes actually goes through

midnight when the season of Christmas is welcomed in. For traditions that don't stay up this late and don't offer a service on Christmas Day, a Christmas Eve service may function more as the opening celebration of Christmas. If this is the case in your context, you may want to look ahead in the next chapter to the lectionary texts prescribed for Christmas Day. The lectionary offers three sets of texts for the first day of the season of Christmas, which could be beneficial in planning a Christmas Eve service that welcomes in the Christmas season.

In the season of Advent, we are taught to anticipate God's activity. We are taught to wait well. This often requires us to slow down so we can know what we're actually waiting for and learn to hope like Isaiah (see Isa. 64:1–9); to stop talking so we can hear what others are saying and learn to listen like Zechariah (see Luke 1:8–20); and to surrender what control we think we have and learn to trust like Mary (see Luke 1:26–38). When your corporate worship services are built to practice these habits of Advent, don't be surprised when you begin to see Christ come in the lives of your people.