



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## Preaching the Word (Homiletics)

### Lesson #14

#### **D. Preparing to Preach the Word**

Step 1: Begin with Prayer

► **Step 2: Choose a Text**

Step 3: Study the Text and Context

Step 4: Look for Law and Gospel

Step 5: Find the Main Point

Step 6: Determine the Order of Presentation

Step 7: Apply the Word to Your Audience

Step 8: Choose the Right Words

Step 9: Prepare an Introduction and a Conclusion

#### **2.1 The Church Year**

Starting in the early days of the church, the Christians gradually developed the so-called church year. The purpose of the church year is to remember certain events in the life of Christ at specific times of the year. The first festival started by the early Christians was probably the celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Since the resurrection took place in the spring of the year during the Jewish Passover season, the Christians celebrated the resurrection of Christ at that time. Actually, there were serious arguments among the Christians as to when the resurrection took place. The Christians in Europe and the West agreed that Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. For this reason, Easter may be celebrated as early as March 22 and as late as April 25. On Easter, most Christian preachers probably will choose texts that speak of Jesus' resurrection, such as texts from Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21, other New Testament texts that refer to Jesus' resurrection, or even Old Testament texts that foretell His resurrection.

The early church then began to think of the weeks before Easter as days of penitence and preparation. Based on Jesus' forty-day temptation in the wilderness, they decided this period would last for forty days and would all the days before Easter, excluding the Sundays. This period became known as the season of Lent or the Passion season. It begins on Ash Wednesday and includes Holy Week – the week before Easter. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and includes Maundy Thursday, the day of the Lord's Supper, and Good Friday, the day of our Lord's crucifixion. Sermons during Lent center on Jesus' suffering and death for our sins and what this means for us today. In addition to texts from the four Gospels, there are many New Testament passages that explain the significance of Jesus' suffering and the many Old Testament passages that foretell Jesus' suffering, such as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.

Forty days after Easter, the early Christians celebrated the day that Jesus ascended to heaven on a Thursday called Ascension Day. Ten days later, on the fiftieth day after Easter, the early Christians remembered the day of Pentecost, the day on which the risen Savior sent the Holy Spirit to His disciples in a miraculous way to initiate the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world, beginning at Jerusalem and going out to all nations. Sermons during the season of Pentecost usually emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit and His use of the means of grace to bring people to faith in Christ. The book of Acts contains many texts that are suitable for sermons during the Pentecost season.

Another festival that gradually developed in the early years of the church was the Epiphany festival. This festival took place on January 6 and celebrated the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of His public ministry among the Jews. Epiphany means manifestation or appearing; it refers to Jesus' showing of Himself as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Today Epiphany is celebrated by remembering the visit of the Gentile Wise Men from the East to worship the young Christ child. The Epiphany season is a good time to celebrate the spread of Jesus' Gospel to all the various nations of the world. The book of Acts is a good source of texts for this season, as well as other texts that emphasize Jesus' great commission to preach the Gospel in all nations of the world.

For over a hundred years the early Christians did not have a particular day for remembering the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. But eventually they chose such a day, the day we call Christmas, which we celebrate on December 25. This day is celebrated throughout the world even more than Easter, with many celebrations that really have little to do with Jesus or His birth. In many countries Christmas has become a time of the year when merchants do whatever they can to induce customers to buy gifts for their family and friends. The four weeks before Christmas comprise the Advent season. During Advent it is good for Christian preachers to prepare Christians for a spiritual celebration of Jesus' birth as the day on which God became man in order to save humankind.

From these major festivals the entire church year has developed, with each Sunday being given a name. The church year begins with the four Sundays in Advent (which means "coming") before December 25. In most years there is a Sunday after Christmas. New Year's Day is one week after Christmas. On New Year's Day, the Christians celebrate the circumcision of Christ, as well as Him being given the name Jesus.

Epiphany follows on January 6, although this festival is not often celebrated in our time with a special service if it does not fall on a Sunday. The following Sundays are known as the Sundays after Epiphany. The number of these Sundays varies, depending on whether Easter is early or late. The last Sunday in the Epiphany season is sometimes celebrated as Transfiguration Sunday to remember when Jesus appeared in His glorious form in the presence of Peter, James, and John. Some congregations have three special Sundays after the Epiphany season before the Lenten season begins. Other congregations extend the Epiphany season right up to Ash Wednesday. There are six Sundays in Lent, and the last Sunday in Lent is Palm Sunday. Holy Week follows, with special celebrations on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, or both days, leading up to Easter Sunday, the great day of Jesus' resurrection.

There are five Sundays after Easter before Ascension Day. Then one Sunday after Ascension before the festival of Pentecost. So the three major festivals of the church year are Christmas, when we celebrate the love of God the Father in sending His Son as our Savior, Easter, when we remember the work of God the Son on our behalf, particularly His death for our sins and His resurrection, and Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of God the Holy Spirit. It is fitting, then, that the Sunday after Pentecost is Trinity Sunday, when we summarize the work of all three Persons of God in our salvation.

The Sundays that follow Trinity Sunday are called the Sundays after Trinity. There may be as many as 27 Sundays after Trinity, depending on the date of Easter Sunday. During this season of the year you have the opportunity to speak on many topics in Christian doctrine and on living the Christian life. In the United States, Lutherans generally celebrate several special days during the Trinity season, for example, Mission Festival, the Reformation Festival, and Thanksgiving. No doubt other countries have their own special days that people celebrate with special church services and celebrations.

Using the church year helps you cover the main teachings of God's Word over the course of a year. This follows Paul's desire to "**declare...the whole counsel of God**" (Acts 20:27). Otherwise you may be tempted to preach only on your favorite topics or on your favorite Bible verses. This can lead you to neglect some of God's word. Following the pattern of the church year is a good way to ensure that your sermons have variety and cover many different topics.

We need to understand that God has not commanded that we use of the church year. In the Old Testament God Himself established a church year that the Israelites had to follow. They were not permitted to choose alternate festivals or follow a different pattern. But now in the New Testament we dare not establish laws that God has not established. For it is written: **“Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ”** (Colossians 2: 16-17). Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain”** (Galatians 4: 10-11). We are free to use the whole church year or part of the church year or none of the church year. But most Lutheran preachers of the Word use the basic pattern of the church year, and most Lutheran congregations approve of its use.

### Questions

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1. What are the main festivals of the church year?
2. How did the church year come about?
3. What are the three main festivals of the church year?
4. What is the preparation period for Christmas, and how long does it last?
5. What is the preparation period for Easter, and how long does it last?
6. What is meant by Holy Week?
7. Why are there more Sundays after Epiphany in some years than in other years?
8. What are the benefits of using the church year?
9. What are the disadvantages of using the church year?
10. What is the difference between Old Testament festivals and New Testament festivals?