



Why do we change colors on the altar and pulpit - green, red, purple, etc...?

The colors on the altar change with the changing seasons and celebrations of the Church Year, so maybe it would be best to start with a little explanation of the Church Year - what it is and why we have it.

Just as our calendar year is divided into months and seasons that repeat each year, the Church Year is divided into seasons and festivals that we repeat each year. The six seasons are: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. The purpose of the repetitive festivals and seasons is to make sure that we don't forget to commemorate important events and teachings in the life of Jesus. e.g. In the Old Testament God commanded His people to celebrate the Passover every year at a certain time, so 1) they would never forget what God had done for them and 2) so they would be forced to tell their children about it when the kids ask "Why are we doing this?" We celebrate Christmas and Easter each year for the same reasons.

The idea of a "church year" can't be attributed to a certain person who "sat down one day and came up with the idea." Rather, the idea of a "church year" developed slowly. At first the Good Friday-Easter event was thought of as being commemorated every week at Sunday worship. Eventually, the Resurrection of Christ became the first event celebrated annually.

From early days Easter was preceded by a period of preparation called Lent. The season of Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday (so called from the custom of daubing the foreheads of worshipers on that day with ashes of the previous year's palms, in token of penitence and human mortality), is a period of penitential reflection. The custom of fasting during this time also began at an early date, but the length of the fast varied. Finally, the fast was extended to 40 days (excluding Sundays), to remind us of the 40 days of Jesus' fasting and temptation in the wilderness.

The celebration of Pentecost (the 50th day after Easter), the day the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, can be traced to the 3rd century. It begins the half-year long season of Pentecost during which time we have no major festivals but instead focus on the teachings and acts of Jesus during His 3-year ministry on earth.

In the early church less stress was laid on the birthday of the Lord than on the fact that the Son of God became man (Jn 1:14). Accordingly we find a festival celebrating this fact as early as the beginning of the 3rd century. By the end of that century the 6th of January was the accepted date for the Festival of Epiphany, or the Manifestation of the Lord. It commemorated not only the birth of Christ, but also His baptism and, in some cases, His first miracle, thus expressing very well the idea of the revelation and manifestation of the divinity of Christ in His humanity.

Today the Festival of Epiphany still begins on January 6 and ushers in the season of Epiphany during which we celebrate the many ways that Jesus was revealed as true God in human form.

As Easter had its special season of preparation, so a similar period (Advent) was set aside to prepare us for our celebration of Christmas. The early part of this season is devoted to discussion of Christ's second coming. ("Advent" means "coming")

The Christmas Festival, December 25, is the first of the major festivals. This festival begins the 12-day season of Christmas (the shortest of the Church Year).

Now, for the colors that change with the seasons. Little is known of the origin of the use of colors for the various seasons and festivals, but here's what they stand for.

White symbolizes innocence and holiness, majesty and glory, festivity and joy. Thus, white is the color of the Christmas and Easter seasons. It is also used on All Saints day and days of giving thanks (like Thanksgiving).

Red, the color of fire and blood, symbolizes the Holy Spirit, martyrdom, fervor, and love. Red is used on Pentecost Day, confirmation day and Reformation Day.

Green symbolizes life and growth. It is the color used during the Pentecost and Epiphany seasons when we focus on the words and actions of Jesus that bring life and growth.

Violet is the color of penitence and mourning, so it is the appropriate color for the Lenten season.

Black symbolizes humiliation, sadness, deep mourning, and death and is only used on Good Friday.

Blue is the color of hope and thus is used for the Advent season, the season of hope for the coming of Immanuel, the God who came to be with His people.

New Years Day, Mothers' Day, weddings and funerals are not part of the church year and thus have no special colors. The color of the season they occur in is used.

One very important thing to remember about the colors and seasons and festivals of the Church Year. Their use is not commanded by God, rather they are used to help us remember God. That means using a certain color on a certain day isn't as important as always keeping our focus on Jesus in everything we do.

Thanks for asking,
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Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net