

As we begin a brand new church year, we read: **The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.** Does our lesson sound mysterious to you? What does it mean? What is it talking about?

Because if it did, there's something else that might be just as mysterious to you here in church. The colors have changed. Last week, everything was white. Now, everything is blue. The paraments on the lectern, altar and pulpit and my stall ... why did they change to blue? What does it mean?

Why don't we explore these **Two Mysteries** together? Now, the appeal of a mystery is that it's just that, a mystery. And yet, you expect your pastor to explain and help you understand mysteries ... whether from God's Word, or in the life of the church. My prayer is that after today, you'll appreciate God and these **Two Mysteries** even more.

Let's start with the mystery of the colors. You've probably noticed that the colors up here, in the chancel area, change during the year. They change when the seasons of the church year change.

In December, we begin a new church year. The seasons of the church year help us learn, then review the great big things God has done for our salvation. There are 6 seasons and 3 big festivals during the church year. To keep track of them, follow along on the screens.

ADVENT is the first season of the Christian church year. "*Advent*" is Latin for "*coming*." This is when we focus on Christ's triple coming: on Christmas Day, through his Word and sacraments and on Judgment Day. Blue is the color of anticipation and the color of the sky from where we anticipate Christ coming again. The 4 candles on our Advent wreath count down the weeks until Christmas.

During Advent we also have a concert with our Adult and Children's choirs. I'm glad we do. It

makes us stop decorating and shopping and baking for an evening to get us ready, with songs and Scripture readings, for Jesus' coming at Christmas.

CHRISTMAS is the next season. It only lasts 12 days, hence the "*The Twelve Days of Christmas*" song. Christmas is the first of the "Big 3" festivals. It is God the Father's big day. He sent the Son he loved into our world, so that we could become the sons and daughters he loves. For Christmas, the colors change to white to signify the perfect Son of God in the manger.

EPIPHANY is the third season of the church year. "*Epiphany*" is Greek for "*revealing*." Epiphany is when Jesus reveals himself as more than just a baby in the manger. His miracles show that he is also God. For Epiphany, the colors change to green, the color of life. We celebrate Christ revealing he's the Savior who brings eternal life for all people, not just the Jews, but also the Gentiles with the visit of the Magi.

LENT is the fourth season of the church year. "*Lent*" is Latin for "*springtime*" which is kind of odd. Around here we usually still have snow on the ground. During Lent we look at Christ's final hours. The colors change to purple, the color of royalty. Jesus is our King, but not the kind who bosses us around. He's the kind who leads us and protects us and defeats our enemies.

Lent lasts 40 days and during that time we gather for an extra hour on Wednesdays to review Jesus' arrest, his trials, his sufferings and his death for us. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, this year that's Feb. 14. It ends on Good Friday, when we turn off the lights in Tenebrae to meditate on our terrible sinfulness and Jesus' terrific love for us.

Two days after Good Friday, we meet to celebrate the second of the "Big 3" festivals, **EASTER!** It is the biggest celebration of the church year! Jesus is alive! He buried our sins in his tomb. He crushed our enemies of sin, death and Satan. Easter is God the Son's big day, and the reason we worship on

Sunday, and why every Sunday is considered a "little Easter" for Christians.

Besides a day to celebrate, **EASTER** is also the fifth season of the church year and it extends for the next 6 Sundays. The word "Easter," refers to the direction ... the east ... where the sun dawns every day. The colors change to white, the color of purity. That's how we look to God because of Jesus' resurrection.

PENTECOST, 50 days after Easter, is the third of the "Big 3" festivals. This is God the Holy Spirit's big day. He descended on Jesus' apostles with the wind, the fire and the ability to speak languages they never studied. Like Christmas and Easter, Pentecost is both a day to celebrate as well as a season. The season of Pentecost celebrates how the Holy Spirit descends on us in less spectacular ways, but still powerful. He enters our hearts through Baptism, through the Scriptures, and through Communion. He convinces our hearts to believe that Jesus is our Savior. The color changes to red, the color of fire when the Holy Spirit came to the Apostles.

ADVENT to PENTECOST covers the 26 weeks from December to May. It's called the Festival half of the church year because it revolves the "Big 3" festivals of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The message and music of our worship celebrates the Triune God's work for us.

The other 26 weeks, from June to November, are called the non-festival half of the church year. The message and music of our worship urges us to respond with grateful lives lived for our Savior Jesus. The colors change to green, as we live and grow in Christ.

Let's back up to the first mystery we're trying to unravel: Why the change in colors? Why the church year with 6 seasons and 3 festivals? God's saving actions for sinners is the key to unlocking that mystery. Jesus! Jesus is the key! He's the solution to color changes! We focus on him so we never lose sight of why we love him and why we gladly serve him. He loved and saved and served us first.

Now on to that second Mystery, the one from God's Word: **The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.** What's that all about? What does that mean?

The setting for Genesis 49 is about 4,000 years ago and a 150-year old man named Jacob is on his deathbed in Egypt. Yes, the one from the Abraham, Isaac and Jacob fame. His 12 sons are there. The Lord is using Jacob to prophesy about the descendants of each of his 12 sons.

Our lesson is what Jacob said when he got to Judah. Even though Judah was not Jacob's oldest son, he prophesied that Judah would carry on the covenant blessing. **The scepter will not depart from Judah ...** a king uses a scepter, a line of kings will come from Judah's family ... **nor the ruler's staff from between his feet ...** similar to the first line ... **until he to whom it belongs shall come ...** but it will only be temporary, until the permanent king arrives ... **and the obedience of the nations shall be his ...** that permanent king would be Judah's greatest descendant of all. He'll rule as a King forever and ever.

What's the solution to this second mystery? Who is the King in this prophecy? The key to unlocking this mystery is the same key that unlocked the church year color changes mystery. Jesus! He's the key! Again, he's the solution! **Two Mysteries and a Single Solution.**

Here's the thing. We want to be kings. Our entertainment, our happiness and our comfort is all that matters to us. It's King Jesus who forgives us and rescues us. He pulls us in close and whispers:

"I still cherish you. I've gone to great lengths to rescue you. At great personal cost, I've saved you. Trust me."

And gladly, we will. Our King Jesus loves us. He forgives us. He rescues us! And that is well-worth reviewing every year. It's his grace and mercy to us that's a mystery we may never quite figure out!