

Two Mysteries & a Single Solution
Sermon on Genesis 49:10
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Introduction: Two Mysteries

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

God's Word for our little bit of a special consideration during this first week of the new church year is Genesis chapter forty-nine, verse ten: ***The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.*** This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear fellow followers of Christ—through another church year:

It's a little mysterious, isn't it?—that prophecy, I mean. *The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.* What exactly does it mean? What exactly is that talking about?

And then, there's a little more mystery today—in church, I mean. The colors have changed. All of a sudden, everything is blue. And as you know, then the colors will turn to white, then they'll turn to green, then they'll turn—well, you get the idea. And why is that? What exactly does all of that mean?

Well, today I'd like to explore with you those two mysteries, if you will. On the one hand, I'm conscious that a part of the appeal of mysteries is that they remain a bit mysterious. On the other hand, I know that one of the things you expect of your pastors is that we help explain mysteries—both from God's Word, and in regard to the life of the church. After all, the Bible makes us “servants of Christ, and those entrusted with the secret things of God.” My hope is that you'll get to appreciate these mysterious things – and God himself – all the more.

Part One: The First Mystery—the Christian Church Year

So, let's start with the mystery of the colors, first of all. (And this is going to take a little bit of time...) You know that the colors up here, in what we call the chancel area of the church—these colors change throughout the year. Probably a lot of you know that they change with what we call the seasons of the church year.

See, every year – about this time of year – we begin a new church year. And so, every year, we determine to cover a certain fixed set of themes from the Bible during the year. Not every church does that—although probably most of the churches with which you are acquainted do. Some churches just preach through books of the Bible, and they probably interrupt that only for Christmas or Easter. But we observe seasons of the church year: because that helps us, every year, to keep our eyes focused on the very big things God has done for our salvation.

I like to think of these, basically, in terms of six seasons and three large festivals during each church year. And it might help you to pull out the bulletin insert I've put together as I go through these—in order to help you keep track of them.

ADVENT, along with Christmas, is the first season of the Christian church year. “Advent” means “coming”. And Advent is when we consider Christ's coming: as he once came on Christmas Day, as he still comes by his word and sacraments, and as he will come on the Final Day of this world. Blue is the color for Advent: because blue is the color of expectation, the color of the sky—from which we expect Christ to come again. Advent always starts four Sundays before Christmas.

Now, during Advent we have midweek worship services. Lots of churches don't have those. But we do, and I'm glad we have them. Those midweek services stop us from decorating and shopping and cooking—to get us ready, by God's Word, for the arrival of Jesus at Christmas.

Christmas, of course, is the first big festival of the Christian church year. I like to think of it as God the Father's big day—when his amazing, forgiving love for us led him to send into the world the Son he dearly cherished: so that we also have become his adopted children. For Christmas, by the way, the colors change to white.

EPIPHANY is the second big season of the Christian church year. “Epiphany” means “appearing”. And Epiphany is when we remember especially that Jesus appeared to reveal himself as God and Savior of all people. During Epiphany we consider everything from the Baptism of Christ through the Transfiguration of Christ—and especially Jesus' miracles, by which he proved himself to be the good God who has appeared to help us. Green is the color for most of Epiphany. Green is the color of life, like a tree which is ever-green. And it celebrates that: during Epiphany, Christ appeared in order to bring us evergreen, eternal life.

LENT is the next season of the church year. “Lent” actually means “springtime”—which is a little ironic, since around here there is often still snow on the ground. But more to the point: during Lent, we consider Christ's sufferings. That's why the color is a rich purple, the color of royalty. See, Jesus is our King—but not the sort of king who is always bossing us around, rather the sort of king who earned the right to lead his people by defeating our enemies for us.

During Lent the Sunday services tend to focus on Jesus' victory over Satan. The midweek services have us taking an extra hour every week: usually to review Jesus' arrest for us, his trials for us, his sufferings for us, and his death for us. Lent starts with Ash Wednesday, when we contemplate our terrible sinfulness; Lent ends with Good Friday, when we contemplate what our terrible sinfulness did to Jesus—and what his terrific love did for us. On those days the liturgical color is black.

And then, very suddenly, we celebrate **Easter**. Easter is the second big festival of the Christian church year. In fact, it is *the* big festival of the year. Christ has risen! He left our sins buried in his tomb. He carried us on his shoulders to an entirely new life. He trampled under his feet our chief enemy, Satan. Easter is God the Son's big day—for which we worship him every week – each Sunday is considered a “little Easter” – and even eternally.

The **EASTER** season – Easter Sunday and the half a dozen Sundays that follow – especially celebrates Jesus' resurrection, and its meaning for us. The word “Easter”, by the way, actually does refer to the direction—to the east: where the sun dawns and new light for each day appears. The color for Easter, by the way, is white—the color of purity: perfect purity which is ours now in God's sight for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Pentecost is the third of three big festivals in the Christian church year. It is God the Holy Spirit's big day.

On Pentecost itself, God the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles with the sound of a wind, and tongues of fire, and the ability for them to speak foreign languages they had not studied. But Pentecost also celebrates that God the Holy Spirit has descended upon us—less spectacularly, but just as effectively: entering our hearts through Holy Baptism, through the Scriptures, and through Holy Communion, convincing our hearts that Christ is our Savior.

“Pentecost”, of course, means “fifty days”—and it refers to the fact that Pentecost Sunday comes fifty days after Easter Sunday. The color for Pentecost, by the way – and for several other minor festivals during the church year – is red. Red is the color of fiery holiness, which the Holy Spirit has come to bring to us.

The **PENTECOST** season is the longest of all. It stretches from Trinity Sunday through as many as two dozen Sundays that follow it. Sometimes this is called the non-festival half of the church year. The festival half of the church year – from November or December through May or June – celebrates Christ’s work for us: his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection. In contrast, the non-festival half of the church year urges us to respond by living our lives for Christ.

Finally, the **END TIMES** season comes during the final four Sundays of the church year. It’s our annual reminder vigorously to preach the gospel: because Christ is returning in judgment, and by his grace he will reward with glorious eternal life the people he has chosen to be his own.

And that’s it. That’s the first mystery I promised to unravel for you a bit today.... Why the change in colors? Why the Christian Church Year? Well, God’s great and saving activities on our behalf are the key to unlocking that mystery. It’s Jesus’ life that we focus upon every season of the church year: so that, while we seek to serve him, we never lose sight of the fact that he served and saved us first.

Part Two: The Second Mystery—the King to Come

Now, how about that other 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 comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.* What’s that about? What exactly does that mean? Well, the key to unlocking that mystery is the same as the key to unlocking the mystery of the church year. The key is Jesus....

You see, the setting for this Word from God is some nearly four thousand years ago—almost as many years before Christ as we live after the time of Christ. The century-and-a-half old patriarch Jacob is lying on a bed, on his deathbed, in Egypt. His twelve sons are gathered around him. And the Lord is enabling Jacob to prophesy regarding the descendents of each of his twelve sons.

Jacob comes to Judah, his fourth son, who however was to receive some of the rights of a firstborn. And in the middle of other words, Jacob utters these words—prophesying a string of kings from Judah, which would culminate in the arrival of the greatest King of all.

The scepter – by which a king can punish his people – *will not depart from Judah* – a string of kings will come from him – *nor the ruler’s staff* – by which a king governs his people – *from between his feet* – from among his descendents – *until he comes to whom it belongs* – Judah’s kings will have only temporary custody of the ruler’s stick, until the permanent ruler arrives from Judah’s descendents – *and the obedience of the nations is his* – also we owe it to this King to listen to him.

So, what’s the solution to this second mystery? To whom, exactly, does this prophecy refer? To Jesus, of course!

It’s Jesus who is the King whose people have gone astray. And it’s we who have rebelled against him. We wanted to be our own governors. We wanted to be our own kings. It’s our entertainment, our perceived happiness, and our comfort that matters to us. And so – out of a sense of justice, and out of his great love for us – Jesus has to crack down the ruler’s staff of his Law and say, “Enough!”

But Jesus is also the King who has rescued us. With the crook in the end of his shepherd’s staff – the Gospel message! – Jesus has drawn us close to himself to whisper, “I still cherish you. I have rescued you. I’ve gone to great lengths, I’ve sought long and hard to find you, and at a great personal cost, I’ve saved you. Trust me.”

And it is Jesus who is the King that now rules us. To him we'll pay attention when we come to worship—whether that meets our entertainment needs or not. To Jesus' house we'll come, week by week—whether it fits really well into our schedule or not. To Jesus' service we'll give ourselves—whether that contributes to our happiness or not, but we'll find out that finally it will make us very content....

Conclusion: A Single Solution

And we'll do it all because Jesus is our King—our loving, rescuing, forgiving King!—something we review for ourselves every year. And Jesus' amazing mercy to us is a mystery that we may never unravel.... Amen.

The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.