

Easter already: Living with the church calendar

by [Joanna Harader](#) in the [March 2, 2016](#) issue



Thinkstock

In December, my Facebook friends and I voted to move Easter back to April this year, where it belongs. But apparently the liturgical calendar is not determined democratically, because here we are, already well into Lent.

It's bad enough that we have to begin the church year with people fainting from "fear and foreboding" (Luke 21:26). After Advent's doom and gloom, we get only a few days of Christmas cheer before the blood of babies runs in through the cobbled streets of Bethlehem. It's pretty brutal stuff. We usually have a couple of months to get our bearings.

But not this year. This year we were rending our hearts and not our clothing scarcely a month after the Magi's visit. We barely had time to get the nativity sets put away before Jesus was whisked away to the wilderness. It's enough to give a pastor spiritual whiplash.

Orthodox Easter is in May this year. I considered converting, just for the year.

I also considered ignoring the official calendar altogether. In the liturgically unenlightened Baptist church of my youth, we sang Christmas carols during Advent. Lightning never struck. Honestly, with my low-church Mennonite congregation, as long as I keep Christmas and Easter on the assigned days, they wouldn't notice a bit of calendar finessing. I could get away with 30, or even 20, days of Lent. No one but me is counting.

Still, every year we observe Advent, four weeks of “O Come, O Come, Immanuel” before we let ourselves sing “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” This year we dutifully rent our hearts on February 10. Right now we are plodding along toward the cross, forcing ourselves through the death before we celebrate the resurrection.

Why do we do it? Why do we let our congregational lives be dictated by an ancient and rather arbitrary calendar, a calendar that thwarts our celebratory tendencies and forces joy on us at inopportune times?

It's not because of the liturgy police. I am here to tell you that they do not exist. As a teenager I presided over an impromptu New Year's communion with saltines and soda pop; nobody showed up to arrest me. Nor is it because our liturgical calendar is historically accurate. We all know Jesus wasn't born on December 25, and the resurrection did not necessarily happen on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox.

I can speak only for this low-church Baptist Mennonite. I follow Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days (not counting Sundays) before Easter because I want to participate in the divine story. I want to be a character in the narrative of peace and justice and love that God is writing today. I want the life I am living to be part of the holy work God is doing now.

The problem is that I don't really know how to do this. I have a seminary degree; I should have some inside knowledge here. But I often feel just as lost and confused as the poor souls who never got to take a class in systematic theology. It's hard to participate in a story that is still being written, to improvise all of your lines, to make decisions without knowing what the other characters are going to do. I want desperately to participate in the divine story, but it isn't always easy, because I don't know the story yet.

The story I do know is the biblical story. I know that God created the world—order from chaos, substance from void, light from darkness, humanity from the stuff of the earth. I know that God rescued the people from slavery in Egypt, that God called the people to repentance and justice through the prophets. I know that in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent to Mary in Nazareth. I know Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John and was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. I know about the calling of the disciples, the ministry of the women, the conflicts with the religious teachers, the farce of a parade on Palm Sunday, the arrest and trial and execution.

And, thank God, I know about the resurrection.

I may stumble around trying to get my footing as I participate in the story God is writing today. But I am more sure-footed when it comes to the story God has written over the centuries. This is the script I know, the lines I rehearse month to month and year to year. These are words I can speak in my sleep. This is the story of God I can walk around in without fear of getting lost.

The biblical story is the part of God's story we know best. And somehow, by following the contours of this ancient narrative, we are better able to navigate God's mysterious drama unfolding in the world today. The ancient script we rehearse in church gains new voice in the world—where there is still a creation to care for, still oppressed people longing for freedom, still fear and confusion and temptation and conflict, still death. Where there is still God's life springing forth when we least expect it.

Yes, I wish we had been able to linger in Epiphany a little longer this year. I could have used some extra time for my spirit—and my worship planning. But ultimately I am grateful for the rhythms of the liturgical seasons, however inconvenient they may be. I am grateful to be able to participate, even in symbolic ways, in the ancient story of God at work in the world. Walking through that story each year in worship, together, may enable us to participate more faithfully in the story God is writing today.