

Beginnings: An early Lent

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

Those of us who spend a major portion of life in church keep track of time by the sequence of the liturgical or church year as well as by the calendar year. The calendar year begins on January 1, the church year begins with Advent at the end of November or the beginning of December. One is stable, the other moves. As I write this my calendar says mid-February, and in Chicago that means cloudy days, melting snow already turned black, and the prospect of at least another month of winter. The liturgical calendar tells me it is Lent (a term which, if memory serves, has something to do with an old English word for spring).

This year Lent has arrived about as early as it can. That means not much of Ordinary Time fell between the frenzy of celebrating Christmas and the intensity of marking our Lord's journey to the cross. Not much time for the preacher to catch up on some reading, even enjoy a novel or two.

The reason, of course, is that the date of Easter is not fixed but is determined on the basis of an ancient formula. For some reason I always have to consult the experts to verify what that formula is. In 325, the Council of Nicaea stated that Easter shall be celebrated on the first Sunday that occurs after the full moon that appears on or after the vernal equinox. The vernal equinox is March 21. Therefore, Easter falls on a Sunday between March 22 and April 25.

There you have it. My life would be more orderly if Easter were always the last Sunday in April. In Chicago that would mean at least the possibility of warm weather.

So this February we are well into Lent. But by another reckoning we are at the beginning of another calendar by which some of us also mark time. Pitchers and catchers report to spring training in February. Their teammates will soon join them. Baseball season is on the horizon. In Chicago, this is an occasion of hope—sobered hope, but hope nonetheless. As is the case with New Year's Day and the first day of Advent, creation tilts forward in anticipation.

The late A. Bartlett Giamatti, onetime president of Yale and then commissioner of Major League Baseball, wrote in *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games*

that "sports represent a shared vision of how we continue, as individual, team or community, to experience a happiness or absence of care so intense, so rare, and so fleeting that we associate their experience with experience otherwise described as religion." Baseball, Giamatti observes, is the only major sport played without the benefit of a clock, played in the context of eternity, until it is over. Another season of eternity is about to begin.