



# RENOVARÉ

A Resource for Spiritual Renewal

## *Explorations*

## *Rhythms of Life*

*Series 1 • Part 3*

by Christopher S. Webb



# Rhythms of Life

## III. Seasons

### *Living by Seasons*

I was enjoying an hour with a new friend last winter, watching flakes of snow flutter past the coffee shop window as he described the outline of his life: his career, his family, places he had lived. A native of Colorado, he had spent a number of years living in southern California but had returned to Denver a couple of years ago. I asked him why he had moved back – a work opportunity?

He looked thoughtful, then replied, “Actually, I got tired of the weather.”

“But isn’t the weather there pretty good?” I asked him. I’d only been living in the States for a couple of years, all that time in the shadow of the Rockies, but even I knew part of the draw of California was the bright sun-filled skies.

“It was always good weather,” he replied. “Always sunny, always hot. Every day was perfect. That was the problem. I realized I was really missing the cold mornings, the frosty air, the snow. I wanted to watch the Aspens change in the mountains. Something happens when you come out of a long, dark winter into a fresh, green spring; I can’t explain it. I knew I needed *seasons*.”

This year in *Explorations* we’ve been exploring our rhythms of life: the patterns of living through which, intentionally or otherwise, we express our desire to follow Jesus Christ, to be his disciples and apprentices. In the first issue we considered the rhythms of our individual lives, seeking to understand how our daily routines can be molded around our longing

for God, allowing us to become increasingly open to the work of God's grace. The second issue looked at our communal life and reflected on ways in which the shape of our life together might be more than an accident of history and culture, instead allowing us to become communities of intentional discipleship.

In this, the final issue of our series on rhythms of life, we step back to take the long view, as we look at the ways in which our months, years, and ultimately our whole lives, are shaped by seasons – and how we can become more intentional about using those seasons to live out our passion for Christ.

## ***The Christian Year***

For many centuries, the wider rhythm of Christian living was shaped by the Christian Year: a pattern of seasons and celebrations that dramatized the gospel story, incarnating it into people's everyday lives. As winter drew around them, people waited expectantly with the prophets for the coming of the Messiah. In the midst of the deepest, darkest nights, the birth of Christ was celebrated with light and pageantry. Spring began to thaw the ground, and

***Understanding the Christian Year can help us participate in it more fully...***

people allowed their hearts to be warmed, melted, renewed by God's love, hearing the call to conversion of life. As new life burst forth in the fields around them, God's people gathered for the Easter festivals, rejoicing in the news that Christ had erupted from the tomb as victor over death itself. Then, through the long days of summer and into the autumnal months, the insights gained from meditating on the gospel were worked into the fabric of daily life – until the nights began to grow long, and the cycle began afresh.

Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary Time - this pattern of seasons can speak usefully to all of us, whether our churches still consciously follow the rhythm of the Christian Year or not. Keeping Lent, for example, is a good spiritual experience whether we do it at the traditional time of year (early spring) or not – Francis of Assisi used to keep Lent twice every year, once during spring, and again in October and November! Understanding the Christian Year can help us participate in it more fully, if we are in a community which keeps these seasons. Even if

not, it can help us understand the patterns and rhythms of a gospel life, and perhaps consider how we might intentionally engage with each season in turn in our lives, our families, our communities, and our churches.

### ***Early Winter: Advent***

Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas (usually at the end of November), and continues until nightfall on Christmas Eve. The traditional beginning of the Christian Year, it is marked by anticipation: a period of looking ahead, a time of hope – but hope not yet fully realized. The familiar Advent hymn, “O come, o come, Emmanuel” (an English translation of Latin refrains used in the church’s worship for centuries), perfectly captures the spirit of this season; even though Jesus is among us, and we dwell in his presence, still we long for a nearer and greater vision of him, for his return among us.

Bernard of Clairvaux, the great twelfth century Cistercian abbot, once wrote about Advent:

“During my frequent ponderings on the burning desire with which the patriarchs longed for the incarnation of Christ, I am stung with sorrow and shame ... Very soon now there will be great rejoicing as we celebrate the feast of Christ’s birth. *But how I wish it were inspired by his birth!* All the more, therefore, do I pray that the intense longing of those men of old, their heartfelt expectation, may be enkindled in me.”

*(Sermons on the Song of Songs, 5:1)*

Many of us, watching the unfolding of the early winter months, might share Bernard’s wish that the seasonal celebrations be a little more Christ-centered. Shop windows fill with fluffy snow and angels. Lights festoon houses, lamp-posts, and stores, and wind in long bright strings overhead in the streets. Santa is everywhere: handing out gifts from grottos, ringing his bell outside grocery stores, falling into unlikely scrapes on the television – and taking every opportunity, presumably, to keep an eye out for who is naughty or nice. Carolers in flickering lamplight sing of joy to the world and of sleigh bells ringing. Children wait breathlessly for school’s end and the promise of toys and candy.

Where in all this, we might wonder, is Jesus? Confronted with an increasingly secular celebration – a Christless Christmas – it would be easy to sigh along with Bernard: “How I wish this were inspired by his birth!” But the abbot points us away from such lamentation, and towards a more positive road. For us, even if for no-one else, the Advent season is a time when our longing for God can be enkindled in us, when the fires of our passion for Christ can be stoked until they blaze.

Advent calls us to disciplines of *expectancy*:

- *Meditation on scripture*, especially the prophetic books (the back third of the Old Testament). Many liturgical churches will spend a good part of this season reflecting on the second half of the book of Isaiah, which is filled with longing for the coming of God and his Messiah. The Song of Songs is also deeply expressive on desire and yearning.
- *Worship* helps turn our hearts towards God, and in the weeks leading up to Christmas opportunities to sing and pray with others abound. Last year I spent a winter evening singing Handel’s *Messiah* with the local Mormons. I don’t agree with their theology, but was still able make the experience an offering of love to Christ. Likewise, that school choir concert can become so much more, if we open ourselves to God’s presence in it.
- *Compassion to the poor* can help us refocus on the values of the coming Kingdom of God, for which we fervently wait and hope. An evening in a homeless shelter or soup kitchen; a shared meal in a senior center; volunteering in the thrift store; participating in a political action group – all this and more serves to recall us to life in the Kingdom, the radical and transformative reality which Jesus came to inaugurate.

Advent stirs up the restlessness and homelessness in our souls, reminding us that we are “strangers and foreigners on the earth,” (Hebrews 11:13) whose only true home is in God. Maria Boulding, a contemporary English Benedictine nun, once wrote:

“If you want God, and long for union with him, yet sometimes wonder what that means or whether it can mean anything at all, you are already walking with the God who comes. If you are at times

so weary and involved with the struggle of living that you have no strength even to want him, yet are still dissatisfied that you don't, you are already keeping Advent in your life. If you have ever had an obscure intuition that the truth of things is somehow better, greater, more wonderful than you deserve or desire, that the touch of God in your life still you by its gentleness, that there is a mercy beyond anything you could ever suspect, you are already drawn into the central mystery of salvation.”

*(The Coming of God, Chapter 1)*

## ***Late Winter: Christmas and Epiphany***

Christians have historically celebrated a Christmas and Epiphany season which begins on Christmas Day and ends on February 2. The latter date was the celebration of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (described in Luke 2:22-38); during the celebration candles would be blessed as a symbol of Christ, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32), and so the festival was also known as Candlemas – the mass (or communion service) of the candles. Partway through the season, on January 6, fell Epiphany, a feast day marking the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus.

The common element linking all these holy days was *revelation*; the very word ‘epiphany’ means ‘to make known’ or ‘to reveal’. At Christmas, God makes himself known in human form: “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14) The Presentation showed Christ being recognized by Simeon, a model of the prophets of the Old Testament, faithfully waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promises; as he cradles the child Jesus in his arms, he speaks from Jewish expectation: “my eyes have seen your salvation.” (Luke 2:30) Epiphany looks to an even wider canvas: since the Magi were almost certainly Gentiles, Epiphany became a celebration of Christ being revealed not only to the Jews, but to the whole world.

One of the great themes of these various celebrations was *light*. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it,” wrote John, reflecting on the significance of that first Christmas morning. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:5,9). In past generations, this imagery had perhaps more resonance than it does for many of us today. Just a few generations back, our ancestors experienced the long, dark winter nights without the benefit of electric light. Flickering lamps and

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candles softened the gloom, but hardly pierced it. All around, the darkness was cold and dangerous. Thomas Cranmer adapted an ancient prayer for the English church's *Book of Common Prayer* which was used at every evening service; it caught well the menace of twilight:

*Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord;  
and by thy great mercy  
defend us from all perils and dangers of this night;  
for the love of thy only Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The image of Christ as light bursting into the darkness and shattering it was, then, both powerful and reassuring. These late winter celebrations were alive with light: burning fires, generous swathes of candles, singing by lamplight. Our gorgeous winter displays of light – fireworks, street and house illuminations – echo the same instinct.

Christmas, then, can invite us to disciplines of *illumination*:

- The practice of *hospitality* – opening the light and warmth of our homes to others – helps remind us that Jesus and his parents were dependent on the hospitality of others, both in Bethlehem and during their exile in Egypt.
- *Friendship* can be an intentional practice as well as an accidental delight. During the winter months many people experience acute loneliness and deep depression; the suicide rate typically peaks once the Christmas festivities are over and the dreariness of the long march to spring sets in. A vast number of people in our society ache for companionship – including many elderly people, migrant workers, homeless travelers, and those who have been bereaved. We can bring light into their darkness by reaching out a hand of warm friendship.
- *Evangelism* – sharing the light of Christ with others – can be natural, easy, and life-giving during the Christmas and New Year seasons. As our culture focuses on some of the foundational narratives of the gospel, we are present with a remarkable opportunity to tell the whole story of Jesus, from this beginning point onwards. Why not dream with others in your local church of creative, provocative, and inspiring ways to communicate Christ at the heart of Christmas?

I once attended a Christmas carol celebration in south Wales. A choir of local school children treated us to beautiful songs, thoughtful readings, and a series of delightful skits on the Christmas narrative. Afterwards, a preacher stood up to say “a few words” . . . and proceeded to preach for half an hour about the crucifixion. “Remember,” he warned us sternly, “the child in that crib became the man on the cross.”

He was right, of course. But perhaps we are too eager sometimes to rush from Bethlehem to Calvary. The manger is not the mercy seat. But it is an astounding revelation of the love of God reaching out into our world and our lives. There is something profound here to mark and to celebrate. Light has dawned.

### ***Early Spring: Lent***

Lent comes around when the world is emerging from the darkness of winter and throwing out signs of new life everywhere. The Christian season reflects this spirit: it is a time of repentance, an opportunity to experience the mercy of God, to be set free from past patterns of behavior, and to embrace a life of joyful holiness. The pattern for Lent was set by Jesus during his forty days of fasting and solitude in the Judean desert, an essential period of preparation for his public ministry during which he laid aside all other distractions and gave himself fully and attentively to his Father. The season stretches across six long weeks from Ash Wednesday to the Saturday before Easter Day – forty six days in all, rather than the original forty, since at some point it was decided to exclude Sundays from the fast. The Christian gospel is, after all, rooted more in hope than negation, so celebrating the resurrection trumps our own ascetic endeavors.

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Self-denial is a poorly understood virtue in our indulgent and hedonistic society, and it seems that even many Christians have little understanding of the importance and value of fasting and relinquishment. Perhaps this is why we have such difficulty in reading the temptation narratives in the gospels. We tend to assume that the devil, coming to Jesus at the end of his forty day fast, finds him weak and vulnerable. That sneaky fiend! He creeps up on Jesus at his lowest moment, trying to kick a man while he’s down . . .

The truth, though, is quite the opposite. Jesus, we are told, is led into the wilderness by the Spirit, the voice of his Father still ringing in his ears: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22) Jews

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saw the desert as the realm of the demons and evil spirits, a godless and lifeless place far from civilization in which the malevolent forces of chaos could fester. Jesus is heading into the wilderness to confront evil in its stronghold. And so he

prepares himself. He dwells in silence, in prayer, in the presence of his Father. He fasts, building resistance to the demands of the very appetites which Satan will use to tempt him later. And after forty days, he is tired and hungry – but he is also *strong*. He is ready to confront evil on its home turf. It’s a mistake to believe the devil sneakily attacks Jesus at his weakest. It is Jesus who is active – Jesus who crosses the border, Jesus who confronts, Jesus who is the force to be reckoned with. “The gate of Hades,” Jesus once said, “shall not prevail”; it’s worth remembering that when the enemy’s gate is being battered down, it is not you who is under attack.

Lent summons us to practice disciplines of *abstinence*:

- *Fasting* is probably the central discipline of self-denial, and has strong historical associations with Lent. Some of us have become so fond of pointing out that fasting can mean withdrawing from any significant aspect of life (fasting from television, or email, or restaurants, for example) that it might be worth reminding ourselves of the basic meaning of fasting: withdrawing from food. Fasting from food during Lent (whether from certain types of food, or an appropriate fast of total abstention) can help us reprioritize our lives as we place our passion for God on a higher level even than the bread that sustains our physical existence.

- *Solitude* is necessary for a full and healthy spiritual life. Periods of withdrawal from the company of others draws our hearts and souls back into the vibrant presence of the living God. Many people plan to take a retreat during spring, often in Lent itself, to help them refocus for the coming year.

- Practicing *silence* helps us to step back from the constant flood of words and noise generated by our culture, our environment, and by ourselves, and allows space for us to be attentive to the still, small voice of God. Silence is hard for those of us taught that stillness equates to inactivity, which amounts to little more than unproductive laziness. We might want to consider, though, whether an hour spent without agenda in God's presence is time wasted or time *invested*.

St Benedict, reflecting on the particularly ascetic and self-denying lifestyle of monastic life, wrote in his *Rule*: "The life of the monk is to be a continual Lent." While we may not all be called to such an austere existence, we do need to recognize that growth into mature faith will summon every one of us to periods of withdrawal, denial, fasting, and penitence from time to time. It is these seasons that strengthen our souls.

### ***Late Spring: Easter***

Easter defines Christianity. Paul writes straightforwardly to the church in Corinth: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). If there had been no resurrection, then, our faith would be worthless. But since Christ has been raised from the dead, our world has been shaken and redefined. The empty tomb is the geographic center of creation; the risen Jesus is the focal point of history. We are an Easter people.

Even if we downplay the celebration of the rest of the Christian Year, every Christian and every church should raise a holy hullabaloo over Easter. The author Frederica Mathewes-Green once received this letter from a Jewish friend at Christmas:

"The big celebration in Christianity should be Easter. No Easter, no Christianity. So all the focus on Christmas, at least to me, seems misdirected. Why Christians don't whoop it up more at Easter is a mystery to me. How inspirational! How joyful! That is the time to toast each other, lay on gifts, attend worship services, pack in the rich food. Something really substantial and holy to remember."

*(Easter Changes Everything)*

The significance of Easter is huge, and it calls us to huge festivity. The dark night is over! Death has been conquered! The grave has been shattered!

***Celebrate Easter.  
Celebrate boldly, and  
loudly, and passionately.***

No more need we live in fear of extinction, of the borderland between life and the afterlife: Christ is risen! How are we to mark this extraordinary moment? With chocolate eggs and a special Sunday service? When we consider the hoopla we

invest in Christmas, we might believe we could go a little further. Perhaps it's time to find ways to remake the Easter season as a sustained, explosive carnival of hope and joy.

Easter, then, draws us into a period of *celebration*:

- The discipline of *festival* is too much neglected by today's church, and is in urgent need of recovery. Our ancestors used to celebrate their faith in the open, with riots of color, music, and gaiety. Perhaps we could learn, in our churches and in our families, how to put joy back onto the streets. How about an Easter carnival on the church grounds, or even down Main Street? As winter eases off, we might think of holding an Easter party in the front yard. We could head out to the diner and buy dinner for a few friends. We have so much to celebrate – let's not hold back!
- Easter is a great time to offer *praise and thanksgiving*. We could deliberately lace our prayers with more gratitude than intercession. It is so easy to lapse into a life of prayer which is little more than informing God of our needs, wants, and desires. Perhaps this season provides an opportunity to ask a little less and thank a little more.
- The practice of *Sabbath rest* fits perfectly with the spirit of Easter. We are often pushing ourselves so hard to achieve, to succeed, to be significant – even in our churches – that we lose sight of the fact that *everything we have is a gift of grace*. The discipline of Sabbath reminds us to take time for God, and time for one another, remembering that our lives are in his hands, and that his purposes for us are all good. To keep Sabbath is to demonstrate trust, and to grow into that trust.

Celebrate Easter. Celebrate boldly, and loudly, and passionately. The resurrection of Christ is everything; without it, humanity is lost forever, death wins, and we are without hope. The German theologian Karl Barth said powerfully in one of his sermons:

“Resurrection – not progress, not evolution, not enlightenment, but a call from heaven to us: ‘Rise up! You are dead, but I will give you life.’ That is what is proclaimed here, and it is the only way that the world can be saved. Take away this summons, and make something else of it, something smaller, less than the absolute ultimate, or less than the absolutely powerful, and you will have taken away all, the unique, the last hope there is for us on earth.”

*(Threatened by Resurrection from Come Holy Spirit: Sermons)*

## ***Summer and Fall: Ordinary Time***

‘Ordinary Time’ is the name given to the long months between Pentecost and the beginning of a new year at Advent. During this period, we turn ourselves back to the day to day business of our world – but with a renewed commitment to live from a gospel perspective, to live intentionally as disciples and students of Jesus Christ. The experiences of Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, have changed us, refreshed us, remade us. Now we discover what that means in *life*.

The months of ordinary time draw us to disciplines of *incarnation*. There are countless incarnational disciplines, but they are a little more difficult to enumerate – they are disciplines of the long-term, the large scale elements of our life which give it shape and substance.

*Raising a family* is one such discipline.

Year upon year we invest ourselves in someone’s life – first a baby, then a child, a teenager, a young adult – guiding their

growth and development, helping to nurture their growing independence, fostering their faith and prayer. *Developing a career* is another, as over the years we learn to use our unique skills and talents in the service of God and others. *Participating in the local neighborhood* is the work of many years, as we look for opportunities to serve, to volunteer, to make a difference in people’s lives, to share, to laugh and weep together with those around us. In the end, these are perhaps the disciplines that count the most. Shaping these



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aspects of our lives as expressions of a deep-seated intention to devote our entire lives to Christ is the great work of discipleship. The greatest saints are not spectacular. They are those whose ordinary lives have become nothing less than an offering of love to God.



We all live by rhythms. But the way we structure our days not only reveals our character and priorities, it can also help to shape them. We can intentionally pattern our lives as a loving response to the grace of God in Christ. In this series of Explorations we look at how the wisdom and practices of the ancient church can help us to form Christ-like rhythms of living even as we wrestle with the pressures and challenges of today's world.

*“Explorations is a wonderful companion on the spiritual journey for those who long for a deeper and richer experience of life with Christ.”*

*– Richard J. Foster*



*Chris is President of Renovaré USA. A graduate of the University of Wales and Trinity College in Bristol, England, he served for eleven years as an Anglican priest in various parts of Wales. He lives in Castle Rock, Colorado, with his wife, Sally, and their four children.*

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