

The Colors of Worship

The cloths displayed on the altar, pulpit and lectern change throughout the year. Did you every wonder why? These cloths, called *paraments*, are tied to the seasons of the church year. The actual dates on which the colors change are different each year, based on the church calendar. The general time frames are mentioned for most colors below.

Green--is the color of plants and the color of "life." The length of time green is used can vary with the pastor and the church, but it is generally the color used in the season of Epiphany (January-early February) and the Season after Pentecost (late May-November). Both of these seasons are called "Ordinary Time," not because there's nothing unusual about them but because the Sundays in these seasons have no names, just ordinal numbers.

Purple--In the days of the early church, purple dye was very expensive and came to signify wealth, power and royalty. It makes sense, then that purple is the color for the seasons of Advent(December) and Lent(40 days, excluding Sundays, before Easter), which celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ as King. As Christians, we prepare for the coming of Christ through reflection and repentance so purple has also become a color of penitence.

White--The New Testament uses white to describe angels and the risen Lord. In the ancient Church, people were given white robes when they emerged from the waters of baptism. White is the color for the seasons of Easter and Christmas. White is also used for secular holidays that are observed in the church and for funerals, since it is the color of the Resurrection.

Red--is the color of blood and therefore the color of martyrdom. Red is the color for any service that commemorates the death of a martyr. It is also an alternative color for the last week of Lent, which is called Holy Week. Red is the color for Pentecost Sunday (mid-May) and for ordinations because it is the color of fire and therefore also of the Holy Spirit. Some pastors and churches continue to use red throughout all or part of the Season after Pentecost instead of returning to the green mentioned above. In our church, red is used from Pentecost Sunday until September.

Black--Before modern dyes were available, all dress clothes were black. Black signifies formality. It has survived as a formal color only at extremely solemn occasions, such as funerals. Black is sometimes, but rarely, the color of funeral services or Good Friday.

Rose--is sometimes used on the third Sunday in Advent to signify joy. (We use a rose candle in the Advent Wreath.)

Gold--is sometimes used as an alternative to white.

Blue--is an alternative to purple during Advent(December). Blue represents the Virgin Mary, because she is known as the Queen of Heaven and the sky is blue. Some churches use blue during Advent to avoid the penitential connotation of purple.

For more information about the symbols of worship,
visit the website of Rev. Kenneth W. Collins at www.KenCollins.com.