

UNDERSTANDING LUTHERAN WORSHIP

Gathering

We come to worship from different places. Some directly from work, others out of weekend activities. Some live around the corner and others from another county. We gather to "do liturgy", which means literally, the "work of the people". We gather to do the work of hearing the Scriptures read and proclaimed. We gather to act out the Gospel in the ritual drama of the meal. As we gather, God is at work also, making the Good News come alive in our midst. We gather on Sunday. It is not the Sabbath. Sunday is the "eighth day", the day our Lord was raised from the dead. We come together each Sunday to remember what happened on that great day.

Confession and Forgiveness

From the earliest days of the church, it was taught that Christians "assemble on the day of the Lord, break bread and celebrate the Eucharist; but first confess your sins, that your sacrifice may be holy." This confession was for centuries private and seen as a preparatory rite, before one gathered with the assembly. The confession of sins concludes with the declaration of forgiveness spoken by the Pastor. This form of forgiveness is based on the office of the keys, which takes Christ's words that declared that whoever's sins you forgive, they are forgiven (John 20:23). The minister, in declaring absolution, is speaking on behalf of Christ.

Gathering Hymn

This hymn sets the tone of the worship service, and is chosen to reflect the theme of the day's worship. Not only should the words be appropriate, but it should also be very sing-able. During this time the crucifer carries in the cross and then places it in a prominent place at the front of the nave.

Apostolic Greeting

We call this the Apostolic Greeting because it comes from the Apostle Paul, who gave a similar greeting in his correspondence with churches. Note that, as in many portions of our liturgy, it expresses the fullness of the trinity.

The Kyrie

This sung piece of liturgy is considered optional in the Lutheran Book of Worship, and is most often used in the seasons that are not "green" in the church year. The Kyrie is not a time for us to ask for forgiveness. That has already been done! It is a reminder of God's infinite kindness to us, the world, and the church of God. Note that the hymn of praise is not used during the seasons of Advent and Lent. It is another piece of liturgy with early roots in the Christian church.

Prayer of the Day

Led by the pastor, the prayer of the day is the bridge from the gathering portion of worship to the Word. These prayers are written especially for the day, and have been crafted and refined for centuries in the church. This prayer collects the thoughts of the assembly into one central theme, and prepares the worshiper for the readings that follow.

First Reading

The first reading is generally from the Old Testament, and the reading is intentionally connected to the Gospel for the day.

Psalm

The psalms have been used for millennia in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Most were designed to be sung, though they may also be spoken. As many hymns are based upon the psalms, congregations sometimes opt to substitute a hymn.

Second Reading

In the early church, letters from the apostles began to be read along with the Jewish custom of reading Scripture. Often the epistles are read in continuity from one week to the next.

Gospel Acclamation

Old Lutheran liturgies often call this verse the "Gradual" which is based upon a Latin word meaning "step". We step up, with the Gospel acclamation, to hear the words of eternal life. During Lent, we omit the alleluias. In their place is the "Return to the Lord" which comes from the prophet Joel.

Returning to God is the focus of Lent.

Gospel Reading

We stand for the reading of the Gospel, which is the representation of the presence of Christ himself among us. We stand as we would when a person is introduced, out of respect. So much more, we rise to honor the Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine Jesus himself has entered the sanctuary and is now standing before you and speaking to YOU. Lay aside every distraction. Focus. Hear. Observe. Let the Gospel become good news to you.

Hymn

the hymn of the day is the chief hymn of the service and may be sung before or after the sermon. As such, it is a comment on the readings and the sermon in relation to the church year.

The Creed

The Nicene Creed is generally said on Festival Sundays and in Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. An easy way to remember it is that The Apostle's Creed is said when the color of the day is green. You might think of the creed as the universal mission statement of the church. Creed is from the Latin word meaning "I believe". The creeds stress the "one God in three persons" concept of the Trinity. The Nicene and Apostle's Creeds come from the 5th and 8th centuries, respectively, and are an excellent educational tool as a summary of what Christian persons believe.

Prayers of the People

The second chapter of Acts describes the early believers in Christ as persons who devoted themselves "to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." The prayers include petitions and thanksgivings, prayers for the whole church, the nations, those in need, the congregation, special concerns, and the faithful departed. The congregation may be invited to offer their own petitions and thanksgivings.

The Peace

From the times of the apostles, Christians were asked to greet one another with a holy kiss. More than a traditional greeting, for Christians it symbolized the love Christians have for one another. Though our culture is different from that of people from the middle-east, as we express the peace, we turn from hostility and resentment, grudges and anger toward one another. The Scriptural basis for this portion of liturgy comes from Jesus' words in Matthew 5, admonishing "when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." The sharing of the peace of Christ is the bridge to the "Meal" portion of worship.

The Offering

The offering is an opportunity to pray through our actions. It is an opportunity to give back, in

grateful response, the "first fruits" of all that God has given us. Not only are our financial gifts for the ministry of the local and global church lifted up at the altar as a sacrifice of thanksgiving, but also our gifts of bread and wine, transformed by our hands and feet from God's gifts of grain and grapes.

Choir Anthem

The choir's function in worship is not to perform but to lead the liturgical responses, sing special liturgical responses, and offer special songs of praise within the liturgy. As worship leaders, they, like the pastor, assisting minister, acolyte, and crucifer, are dressed in albs, which are the oldest form of worship vestment in the history of the Christian church. The alb is white, or off-white, and represents the baptismal gown worn as a symbol of our being clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Great Thanksgiving

One name we use for Holy Communion is the "Eucharist" from the Greek word meaning thanksgiving. Giving thanks for Jesus Christ is central to this meal. In it, we lift our hearts to make room for God. The preface appropriate to the day is sung or said. It changes according to the season of the church year. Listen for the words peculiar to Lent, reminding us to cleanse our hearts and renew our zeal. The Great Thanksgiving concludes with the "Holy, holy, holy". This "Sanctus" is the song of the angels in Isaiah 6:3. The congregation exults as did the crowd when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This is the most ancient of Christian hymns.

Words of Institution

Previous Lutheran Worship books (until the Service Book and Hymnal) contained no other communion liturgy except the words of institution because Dr. Luther wanted to stress that the Sacrament was a giving on God's part, not on ours.

The Lord's Prayer

We pray this prayer because Jesus commanded it. Furthermore, God has promised to hear and answer our prayer. Although the "traditional" version of this prayer is preferred by many to the "contemporary", the latter is actually a more accurate translation from the Greek manuscript. We sometimes alternate from one version to another in order to focus on the substance of the prayer rather than the form.

Communion

All one needs to be prepared for Holy Communion is a believing heart, that this body and blood of Christ is shed "for me" for the forgiveness of sins.

Communion Hymns

Hymns and songs may be sung by the congregation during the distribution of communion. Others may choose, in the midst of this music, to engage in prayer or meditation.

Blessing

Known as the "benediction", which means "good word", we depart with a Good word from God, that we are loved, blessed, and constantly in the company of our God.

Dismissal

The intent of Dr. Luther was that we leave with haste from this meal to become food for the world. We gathered. We were fed by the Word and Sacrament. Now we depart, thankful to God, ready to serve as needed.

Written by Ken Albright with the help of three resources: [Exploring Our Lutheran Liturgy](#) by Dennis R. Fakes; Rubrics from the [Lutheran Book of Worship](#); [Baptized We Live](#) by Daniel Erlander.

