

THE DIVINE SERVICE

Biblical Roots of the Lutheran Liturgy

Throughout the Divine Service, God lavishes His gifts on His people. The Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament to bring Christ and His gifts. The response of God's people — their prayers and thanksgiving — is also caught up by the Spirit and carried to the Father's throne. The words spoken call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify God's people. God's people are given a kingdom. They receive the gifts of God, which bear fruit in their world and in their vocation. God indwells them. The Holy Spirit makes them His temple. The Son makes them His brothers and sisters and gives Himself to be joined with them. The Father gives them His name. They go forth into the world as gifted people, for through God's gifts of Word and Sacrament, they have been remade to be His very own.

Confession and Absolution

It is important that worshipers take time to prepare themselves for the Divine Service. Get acquainted with the order of worship, and take a moment to ask God's blessings for the pastor and musicians and for yourself as you prepare to enter into His presence. Listen to the prelude, which is not intended as mere background music, but helps to draw us into an attitude of prayer and praise. The ringing of the bells are a call to God's people "to enter the Lord's gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise" (*Psalms 100:4*). While God's forgiveness is offered throughout the service, here at the beginning the spoken absolution is a most appropriate preparation for entering into His presence.

Hymn of Invocation — We are a singing church, so we follow the advice of the apostle Paul to teach and admonish "one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (*Colossians 3:16*). This hymn may be one of praise, prayer, or reflection upon the season of the church year.

Invocation — The Invocation separates the gathering of God's people from all other human gatherings. To be gathered in the name of the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is to be identified as one of His own. Just as God's name was placed on us at our baptism, so is His name placed on us as we prepare to come into His presence.

[Matt. 28:19; Matt. 18:20; Eph. 2:18]

Confession of Sins — We examine ourselves and publicly confess our sins. Since we ask everyone present to join in the confession, we do not craft confessions of specific sins that may or may not apply to each individual. Such a confession at the beginning of the service provides a climate of acceptance. In spite of our sins, God accepts us. In Lutheran theology and practice, the main emphasis, however, is always on the absolution.

[1 John 1:8-9; Rom. 7:14-8:4]

Absolution — Christ said to His disciples, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven" (John 20:23). The pastor speaks for God according to His command, and announces God's cleansing forgiveness to those who made confession.

Service of the Word

From the time of the apostles down through today, an important part of the service has been the reading of the Scriptures. The reason for including these readings is the Scriptural principal that God's Word is the only rule and guide for Christian faith and living. The primary focus of the Service of the Word is on the reading of Holy Scripture and its exposition in the sermon. Other parts of the service prepare for hearing the Word (*e.g.*, Introit, Kyrie, etc.) and leading the congregation in its response (*e.g.*, Creed, Prayer of the Church, Offering, etc.).

Introit — Introit is a Latin word meaning “he enters into.” The Introit is a psalm or a short series of verses that announce the theme of the day and begins the Service of the Word. Many years ago the faithful would meet outside and then proceed into the church. The pastor and the people would chant psalms as they entered the sanctuary. Having led the Preparation outside the chancel or communion rail, marking it as a rite that is distinct from the rest of the service, the pastor enters during the Introit to signal the beginning of the Service of the Word.

[Rom. 16:27; Eph. 3:21; Phil. 4:20; Rev. 1:6, 8]

Kyrie — This prayer differs from the repentant prayer spoken in the confession of sins. Freed and absolved, we now enter the Lord's presence in confident prayer. In ancient times, as the king entered a city, the people greeted Him with the words “Kyrie eleison” (Lord, have mercy). Their cry for mercy expressed their trust in the ruler to provide for their every need. As our Lord comes to us through His Word and Sacraments, we call on Him to show mercy to us and, indeed, to the whole world.

[Matt. 9:27; Matt. 15:22; Matt. 20:30-31; Luke 17:13]

Hymn of Praise — The hymn of praise, “Glory to God in the highest,” repeats the song the angels sang at Christ's birth. It gives the congregation the opportunity to praise God and express joy because Jesus is our victorious Savior. The cry to God for mercy in the Kyrie is, in effect, answered in the Gloria as we sing of the triune God and, more specifically, the person and work of the Son, Jesus Christ, who takes away the sin of the world. While other hymns may be substituted, not just any hymn will do. American Lutheranism has made a unique contribution to the Church's liturgy by substituting the *Dignus es* (“Worthy is Christ”). This hymn of praise, based on the heavenly song of Revelation, is a fitting substitute as it extols the work of Christ on our behalf.

[Luke 2:14; Rev. 5:12f]

Salutation and Collect of the Day — In the Salutation, the pastor and the congregation greet each other in the Lord's name followed by the Collect of the Day, the first prayer in the Divine Service. Unlike the Prayer of the Church, in which petitions are offered for the specific needs of the congregation and the world, the Collect of the Day focuses our attention on what God has promised in His Word and asks for His grace and strength to live accordingly. This prayer is not determined by the changing needs of God's people; rather, it is derived from the content of God's self — revelation in His Word.

[Ruth 2:4; Luke 1:28; 2 Thess. 3:16; 2 Tim. 4:22]

Old Testament or First Reading — The first reading is from the Old Testament, except during the Easter season when it is from the book of Acts. This reading usually relates to the Gospel of the day.

[1 Tim. 4:13]

Gradual — Gradual, a Latin expression meaning “step,” is normally a psalm, which is best understood as a prayer. In most cases, the Gradual is intended to be a commentary or reflection on the Old Testament reading.

Epistle or Second Reading — The second reading is from one of the epistles (letters) in the New Testament, generally those written by the Apostle Paul; or sometimes Peter, John, James, or the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Alleluia and Verse — The Alleluia and Verse, also known as the Gospel Acclamation, points to the Gospel of the day, which follows. There are general verses as well as specific verses for the seasons of the church year. During Lent, the Alleluia is omitted, and sometimes replaced with a seasonal verse or hymn.

[John 6:68; Joel 2:13]

Holy Gospel — The Gospel is the chief reading of the service from the accounts of the life of our Lord recorded by the four evangelists, St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John. Because Christ is with us in the Gospel reading, we stand to honor His presence.

Hymn of the Day — The Hymn of the Day, a uniquely Lutheran contribution to the life of the Church, is the principal hymn of the Divine Service. This hymn usually follows the theme of the readings, and sets the stage for the sermon.

Sermon — The Pastor proclaims God’s Word and applies it to modern life and problems. He stresses both what God demands of us (the Law) and what God does for us through Jesus Christ (the Gospel). To preach on the assigned readings is, in a sense, to submit to the discipline of the lectionary. While this practice may, at first glance, appear rather limiting, there is great value in such an approach. The benefit of following the lectionary is that both the pastor and the congregation are guided by a larger vision — one that has been shaped by countless individuals over a long period of time. And on those occasions when the preacher finds the assigned readings difficult to expound upon, rich blessings are often reaped by wrestling with the texts.

Creed — After hearing the Word of God, the worshipper responds with his or her confession of faith. (It is customary for the Nicene Creed to be confessed when Holy Communion is celebrated. The Apostles’ Creed is used at other times.) For more than 1,600 years the Nicene Creed has been confessed by the Church. Its clear, bold statements concerning the triune God are still relevant in our day as the Church struggles against those who reject the truth concerning our God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Placing the creed immediately after the readings, as we sometimes do, suggests a different purpose. By confessing the creed prior to the proclamation of God’s Word in the sermon, the creed serves as an interpretive lens by which the preacher expounds on the readings.

[1 Cor. 15:1ff; 1 Pet. 3:18ff; 1 Tim. 3:16]

Prayer of the Church — This prayer in the service follows the directive of the Apostle Paul to young Timothy, a pastor: “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone — for Kings and all those in authority, that we may live in peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Without careful planning, the Prayer of the Church can be reduced to a few petitions based on local needs, rather than an array of petitions for the whole Church. Our prayers include the Church, our congregation, our district and the Synod, as well as those called to serve at those levels, our nation and its leaders, the nations of the world, people in every kind of need (*e.g.*, homeless, addicted, lonely, despairing, wavering in the faith, etc.). We pray for peaceful times, good weather, godly society, and on and on. Through these prayers we are serving our neighbors and the whole world.

Offering — The gifts of God’s people are a response to God’s blessings “as God has prospered them” (1 Corinthians 16:2). Our free-will offerings are for the support of the church. They enable the church to provide the written and spoken word of God, Christian education, and pastoral care, as well as food, clothing, shelter, and a helping hand to those in need.

Offertory — As the worshippers give their gifts of tithes and offerings, they sing the offertory to express gratitude for all God’s blessings, to dedicate themselves to God, and to request His continued blessings.

[Ps. 51:10-12; Ps. 116:12-13, 17-19]

Service of the Sacrament

The church has confessed its sins and been forgiven, and its faith has been nurtured through hearing the Word. The church now reaches a climax of the worship experience in the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion, also known as “The Lord’s Supper” or “The Sacrament of the Altar.” The following parts of the liturgy are designed to help the worshippers partake of the holy meal thoughtfully, thankfully, and joyfully.

Preface — Preface means “introduction.” The Preface begins with a repetition of the Salutation, “The Lord be with you.” Here the Salutation points the worshiper to an even more concrete aspect of God’s presence: the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Holy Supper. The following versicles and responses invite the worshippers to prepare their hearts and to give thanks for the gracious gift our Lord gives in this sacred meal.

The “proper” Preface continues the thanksgiving theme as it draws our attention to God’s goodness as revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ. These seasonal prefaces provide the rationale for our thanksgiving and praise, as they point us to the particular gifts of God we remember during the changing seasons of the church year. The Preface concludes with a grand invitation for all those assembled to join their voices with the whole company of heaven, including those who have gone before us in the faith, in praising God for His goodness.

[Lam. 3:41; Ps. 86:4, Ps. 69:30; Ps. 95:2; Ps. 100:4; Ps. 107:22; Ps. 116:17; Ps. 147:7]

Sanctus — The Sanctus is the grand hymn of the Service of the Sacrament, for it acknowledges a reality our senses cannot experience, namely, that we are as near the presence of God as the angels were, as recorded in the vision of Isaiah’s call (Isa. 6:3). There is only one mystery more demanding of faith, and that is belief in Jesus’ promise that under the bread and wine He is present in His body and blood. As we join our voices to the unending hymn of praise that swirls around God’s throne in heaven (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8), we experience a reality unlike anything else in this world. This is truly heaven on earth.

Joined to the words of Isaiah 6:3 is a portion of Psalm 118:26, the *Benedictus qui venit*. These words were spoken by the people of Jerusalem who welcomed Jesus during His triumphal entry just days before His crucifixion (Matt. 21:9). It is difficult to miss the obvious connection between “He who comes” and Christ’s coming in His body and blood in the Sacrament.

[Is. 6:3; Matt. 21:9 (Mark 11:9); Ps. 118:25-26]

Prayer of Thanksgiving — Like early eucharistic prayers, the Prayer of Thanksgiving brings together the Old Testament imagery, the person and work of Christ, and the Lord’s presence in His body and blood together with the benefits given those who eat and drink in faith.

Lord’s Prayer — We pray to God as our Father using the prayer of the family of God because the Lord’s Supper is our family meal.

[Matt. 6:9ff; Luke 11:2ff]

The Words of Our Lord — The pastor speaks the words that Jesus spoke when He instituted the Supper with His disciples in the Upper Room. This is Christ’s Supper, not ours, and His words are the heart and core of the Sacrament. With these words, the bread and wine are consecrated; that is, set apart for God’s use in the special meal.

[1 Cor.11:23-26; Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20]

Pax Domini — The peace of the Lord is a public absolution of the sins of the communicants, the true voice of the Gospel announcing the remission of sins. The greeting that Jesus spoke on the first Easter is shared before we approach the altar to receive His true Body .

[John 14:27; John 20:19-21]

Agnus Dei — Agnus Dei is a Latin phrase meaning “Lamb of God.” John the Baptist spoke these words as he pointed to Jesus (John 1:29). As Christ comes to us in the Holy Supper, we recognize Him as the Lamb of God, sacrificed for us to free us from the bondage of sin and death.

[John 1:29; Is. 53:7]

Distribution — As we come to the Lord’s Table, the pastor invites us, “Take, eat; this is the true body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, given into death for your sins. Take, drink, this is the true blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.” After we receive the Sacrament we hear the comforting words spoken by the pastor, “The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life everlasting.” We respond, “Amen,” for this is our sincere desire.

Post-Communion Canticle — “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,” or an appropriate post-Communion hymn is sung. The purpose is to offer our thanks and express our faith in what God has done for us, and has promised to do for us in the future.

[Luke 2:29f]

Post-Communion Collect — The Pastor gives thanks to our gracious and merciful God for giving us this Holy Meal through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Benediction — The blessing spoken by the pastor is the Aaronic benediction, the blessing God first gave to Aaron and the other priests to speak to the people of Israel. Just as the service begins with the name of God being placed on His people, so it ends with the assurance that we are His own. The blessing is God’s promise that Christ will go with us as we leave the church and return to the world to serve Him. We sing “Amen” to affirm the blessing; “So be it -- it is true!”

[Num. 6:23-27]

Closing Hymn — The divine service is concluded in much the same way as it was begun, worshipping our Lord through song.