

**Worship Notes: What the Service is All About!**  
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*The Confession and Absolution*

Almost every Sunday we begin our worship by confessing our sinful nature to the Lord, professing that we are “unclean.” Why begin our worship with these same, familiar words that may sometimes seem so “depressing?”

When Isaiah saw a vision of the Lord in the Temple of Jerusalem 3,000 years ago, his first words were not, “Praise the Lord! Alleluia!” but “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (Isaiah 6:5). Before we presume to enter into the presence of a holy God, we admit that we have no rights to claim, or privileges to exercise. If our worship, our hymns, our prayers, and our offerings are to be acceptable to God, then he will have to MAKE them acceptable. We too have unclean lips, and live among a people of unclean lips.

Our words of confession are not meant to depress, but to bring joy. We can confess our sinfulness to the Lord, because Christ still touches our lips with the hot coal of his forgiveness, reminding us that “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” (Isaiah 6:7). That “hot coal” is the pastor’s announcement that our sins are forgiven in Christ. Despite our sinfulness God will permit us to stand before him, to hear his Word, and receive his own body and blood. Then we can truly and rightly sing, “Alleluia!”

*The Introit and the Gloria Patri*

The word *introit* comes from the Latin for “entrance.” It was originally a psalm sung during the procession of the clergy into the sanctuary and up to the altar. The final words of the *introit* are always “Glory be to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.” The first words of the phrase in Latin are *Gloria patri*. At St. Mark’s the *introit* has been split into two parts – the opening hymn, which gets the pastor up to the front steps of the chancel, and what we call the *introit*, which gets him up to the altar. In some liturgies, the entrance hymn is sung after the confession and absolution, replacing the chanted psalm *introit*. In other churches, such as the Eastern Orthodox, a long *kyrie* serves the role of an *introit*. We’ll learn more about the *kyrie* next week.

*The Kyrie*

*Kyrie* is Greek for “Lord,” and it is the only portion of the service whose liturgical title is in Greek, and not Latin. The full title for this cry to the Lord for mercy is “Kyrie Eleison,” which means “Lord, have mercy!” Although it would seem that the three verse *kyrie* we usually sing is a cry of supplication, much like the confession and absolution, it is actually a song of triumph. When a Roman emperor returned to the capital from battle, he was greeted by cries of “Lord, have mercy,” a request that was expected to be fulfilled by the Emperor’s granting of justice to the one crying out.

The three-verse form of the *kyrie* we use at St. Mark’s – Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy – is not the only form. Some liturgies repeat each verse three

times. Eastern Orthodox churches have a lengthy *kyrie* made up of a number of petitions, with the congregation responding “Lord, have mercy” to each one. This *kyrie* serves as an *introit* in some churches (see last week’s bulletin!). We will be using a prayer similar to this type of Eastern *kyrie* in this week’s Wednesday evening service. Next week, we will look at the hymn of praise which follows the *kyrie* in our liturgy.

### The Hymn of Praise

Most Lutheran churches have come to expect an “opening hymn” at the start of the service, and rightly so! What better way to start our worship than to sing praises to God, and sing of his glorious work on our behalf? We have also come to expect a different hymn each week. The earliest Christians, however, did not have the luxury (or burden?) of hymn books and printed bulletins. They had to stick with something they could memorize, such as a psalm, or a set piece of music. The Roman liturgy from which our Lutheran liturgy comes used a hymn based on the song of the angels at Christ’s birth: “Glory to God in the Highest” – in Latin, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. This hymn was written to honor Jesus Christ as God, Lord, and Savior. Since about 500 AD the service of morning prayer – *matins* – used Psalm 95 as the hymn of praise. The hymn came to be known by the Latin for its first word, “O Come” – *Venite*. We still sing this hymn at the beginning of every *matins* service. A new *hymn of praise* was written for the 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship, and was based on the words of Revelation 5:11-14. It has become quite popular in many churches, and is called by its first words: “This is the Feast.” This *hymn of praise* is often used at Easter and on communion Sundays. So even though we have added an extra “opening hymn” to our service, the true “first hymn” of our morning worship remains the *hymn of praise*!

### The Collect

In the ancient liturgies of Africa every worship service started with a simple prayer before the appointed Scripture lessons for the day were read. This simple prayer ‘collected’ the thoughts of the people and focused their attention on the Word of God. In our worship this simple prayer or *collect* now comes after the *confession and absolution*, the *introit*, the *kyrie*, and the *hymn of praise*, yet it serves the same purpose. It moves us from our own praise and worship of God to an attitude of attentive listening to God’s Word to us.

A *collect* prayer has a specific form developed over the centuries. It begins with an address to God, normally the Father. We then praise God for his promises and steadfastness toward us. The *collect* then petitions God for his assistance. This petition for assistance is almost always related to the praise we have just offered God. As Luther was so fond of pointing out, we pray to God not because we are worthy to ask him for anything, but because he has made so many promises to us which he delights in keeping. The *collect* then concludes with the acknowledgment of God’s Trinitarian nature.

### The Readings

Perhaps it is self-evident that worship should include the reading of the Scriptures. Yet in a time when more and more churches have limited their Scripture readings to only one passage, it is worth considering why we have Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel

Scriptures on Sunday. In the old synagogue worship service at the time of Jesus, readings from the Old Testament Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Rabbis were interspersed with psalms. The Christian assembly continues this tradition. After singing psalms of praise (our *introit*, *kyrie*, and *gloria*), and praying the collect, the pastor would read chapters from the Old Testament. A psalm would be sung (a *gradual* psalm), followed by a reading from one of the Apostles (an *epistle*, or letter, reading), and another psalm (our *alleluia* verse replaced this psalm). Then would come the highlight of the first part of the worship service: a reading from the life of Jesus, from one the Gospels. For this the congregation would stand out of respect for the words of the Savior. Lastly, the pastor offered an explanation of what all these words mean. Our service of readings is much the same. Consider next time you worship how everything in the first half of the service – the Service of the Word – moves to the climax of the reading of the Gospel!

### The Sermon

Despite what you might expect, the sermon is not the highlight of our worship service. While it is usually the longest part of the service, it actually serves much the same purpose as the distribution of Holy Communion – which is usually the second longest part of the service! The sermon is the “delivery of the goods” we have received in the Gospel.

In the early church, sermons were delivered with the preacher sitting down and the congregation standing – a novel idea! John Chrysostom, a famous 4<sup>th</sup> century preacher, once said that he prepared preaching notes for his sermons only when he planned to preach longer than 1 hour! Luther’s sermons were typically an hour. Until the last couple of hundred years, sermons were always on the Gospel for the main Sunday service (yes, there was often more than one), and on the Epistle lesson or some catechism topic for the other services. As a reflection of that tradition, I have been preaching on the Gospels on Sunday, and on the Epistle lessons on Wednesday nights.

Good Lutheran sermons are to rightly divide “Law” and “Gospel” – convicting us all of our failings (Law), and strengthening and forgiving us through the proclamation of God’s grace and mercy in Jesus Christ (Gospel). Consider Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:17-36. Try and listen for the “Law” and “Gospel” elements in any sermon.

### The Creed

You may ask why we spoke of the Sermon last week, when the creed usually comes before the sermon in the worship service. Actually, in our newer Lutheran orders of worship, the creed comes after the sermon and not before. The creed then serves as an affirmation of our faith in what we have heard in the entire first part of the service. Having the creed – and a hymn – before the sermon can sometimes make it hard to remember the Scripture lesson the pastor is supposed to be preaching about! Nevertheless, for now, the creed remains before the sermon.

Creeds have existed in the church since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. They served as convenient summaries of the most important parts of Christian doctrine. The Apostles’ Creed, used in Rome at least 1,800 years ago, was used at baptisms. The Nicene Creed in the form we use it was finalized in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, and emphasizes the divinity of Christ and

of the Holy Spirit. It is the only creed recognized by both the western (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed) churches and the eastern (Coptic and Orthodox) churches. The Athanasian Creed was written in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century to reflect the faith of Athanasius, an African bishop who helped write the Nicene Creed. All three of these creeds have always been, and continue to be, rich sources for understanding who the church confesses God and Jesus Christ to be.

### The Offering

It may be surprising to learn that 55% of Jesus' messages were about money. Perhaps his best known verse is Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." Paul spoke at great length about the importance of the offerings of the church. He told the Corinthians "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come." (1 Cor. 16:2).

It may also be surprising to learn that there is no proscribed "amount" that is ever suggested in the New Testament to be given to the church for its mission. In the Old Testament 10% of one's income is the mandated tithe. But under the new covenant of Christ, Christians are not to calculate how much they should give, but how much they need to retain for themselves and withhold from God.

The offering is purposefully taken up after the hearing of the Scriptures and the Sermon. After hearing of the wonderful works of God on our behalf, and of the suffering and death of his only Son, what will we offer to God in return? Perhaps it is good to think about the words of the psalmist, "What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?" (Psalm 116:12).

### The Prayers

The prayers in the service that usually come after receiving the offering follow the directive of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, a pastor: "I urge then first of all that requests, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Prayer forms one of the essential elements of Christian worship described in Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (scripture readings and sermon) and to the fellowship (coming together to worship), to the breaking of bread (Holy Communion) and to *prayer*." The *Lutheran Worship* hymnal of 1982 directs us to pray for "the whole Church, the nations, those in need, the parish, and special concerns." The pattern of prayer we follow at St. Mark's normally includes petitions for all these things. Our prayers are often "litanies," meaning the pastor reads the petition and the congregation adds their assent to the prayer with a response, for example "hear our prayer" or "Lord have mercy." The congregation adds its assent to the whole prayer of collect at the end with the Hebrew word "amen," which means "may it be so!" The pastor usually signals the end of a prayer and "requests" the congregation's "amen" by saying either "through Jesus Christ, our Lord," (short ending) or "through Jesus Christ,

our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever” (full collect ending). Amen!

#### The Communion Service: The Preface and the Proper Preface

The words which begin the communion liturgy (Lift up your hearts/We lift them up unto the Lord/Let us give thanks to the Lord our God/It is meet and right so to do), are called variously the Preface, the Great Thanksgiving, and the *Sursum Corda* (Latin for “lift up your hearts”). They are one of the most ancient parts of the Christian liturgy. They can be traced back almost 1,800 years and were likely in use even before they were recorded in print. Versions of the Preface were discovered in Mossul, Iraq, and in Rome, and both date back to the 200s AD. The Proper Preface which follows the Preface, and begins with the words “It is truly good, right and salutary...” also date back thousands of years. The Proper Preface reflects the church year, and recounts the redemptive acts of God in Jesus Christ specific to the season. In Advent, for example, we recall that John the Baptist declared Jesus “the very lamb of God, and calling sinners to repentance that they might escape from the wrath to be revealed.” In Easter, we “chiefly are bound to praise [God] for the glorious resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ.” Possibly the most powerful Proper Preface is the one prayed during Holy Week, “that he who by a tree once overcame (*Satan*) likewise by a tree (*the cross*) might be overcome.”

#### The Communion Service: The Sanctus

The Sanctus, (Latin for *holy*), has been sung during the communion liturgy for centuries. The first part of the Sanctus comes from Isaiah, and was the song Isaiah heard the Seraphim (Hebrew for *Burning Ones*) singing to God. This part of the Sanctus was an old Jewish prayer that was part of the synagogue liturgies, and was probably even prayed by Jesus himself. The second part of the Sanctus comes from the Palm Sunday story, where the crowds cheer Jesus with the words, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest” (*Hosanna* is Hebrew for “Save now!”). The Sanctus serves to remind us that we are about to participate in the union between heaven and earth. In Holy Communion the God enthroned in heaven to whom the angels sing gives us himself through his Son in the unity of the Spirit who makes us one in faith. We, too, then sing the song of the angels and welcome the one who comes “In the name of the Lord.” For those who have lost loved ones in the faith, it is comforting to know that as we commune with Christ here on earth, they are also communing with Christ in heaven, and singing along with us, “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabbaoth: heaven and earth are full of thy glory!”

#### The Communion Service: The Lord’s Prayer

Following the Preface, the Proper Preface, and the *Sanctus*, we pray (or the pastor prays) the prayer of the family of God in Christ, the “Our Father.” When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he didn’t say, “pray something like this,” but rather, “when you pray, say...” and so we are not ashamed to speak the words our Lord himself taught us. In the middle of the prayer come the words, “Give us this day our daily bread.” The Greek word translated as “daily” has a few possible meanings. Luther interpreted the petition as referring to the needs of body and soul which the Lord provides, whether we pray for them or not. Another interpretation is that “daily” means “supernatural.” It

would seem possible, then, that Jesus also had in mind the Lord's Supper when he gave this petition. The Lord's Prayer would then read: "Give us today our supernatural bread and forgive us our sins," for the Lord's Supper is indeed given "for the forgiveness of sins." In any case, it is entirely appropriate that the church should pray this prayer before receiving the gift of communion from the hand of the Lord. Traditionally, the doxology (For thine is the kingdom, etc.) at the end of the prayer was not part of the Lord's prayer (note that it is not found in Scripture). But the prayer that originally separated the Lord's prayer from the doxology in the liturgy was removed in Lutheran and Protestant churches, and the doxology became "glued" to the prayer itself. For Luther, however, as with modern Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, the prayer ends as it does in the Bible with the petition "but deliver us from evil."

#### *The Communion Service: The Words of Institution*

The Words of Institution are the words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper and said or sung by the pastor over the bread and wine. In the churches of the Middle Ages these words of our Lord – "Take and eat," "Drink of it," – were murmured in a low voice by the priest. The power to transform bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ was found not in the *words*, but in the priest himself. Even reading Christ's words out loud was forbidden! Now, of course, it is inconceivable that any church would not read or pray the words of institution. However, Lutherans alone are the only Christian church that continues to use the words as Christ gave them and as he meant them. Catholics have changed the words to read "This will be my body;" many Baptists and Evangelicals read "This represents my body." Methodists and Presbyterians say "is," but don't mean it, by their own admission. Many Lutheran pastors, as Luther recommended, still sing the words for two reasons. The first is to remind us all that we are not just 'repeating' the Last Supper – we are celebrating Christ's true fleshly presence with us here on earth. The second is to give honor to these words that are able to give what they promise, "forgiveness of sins." For as Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, "where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation."

#### *The Communion Service: The Peace of the Lord*

The *Pax Domini* (Latin for *peace of the Lord*) is shared in our liturgy right after the elements are consecrated by the singing or speaking of the Words of Institution. These are the words Jesus spoke to his disciples at his resurrection according to John 20:19: "On the evening of that first day of the week...Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Where Christ is present in his word and in his body and blood, there is forgiveness, and therefore peace with God the Father. Many churches also share the peace with one another. The intention of this sharing, which dates to the earliest house churches, was to ensure that there was nothing keeping people from being in communion with one another. Jesus' instruction to "leave your gift there in front of the altar... [and] go and be reconciled to your brother" (Matthew 5:24) was observed by that practice. If there was a problem, it was resolved before the service continued, so that all Christians approaching the altar might "agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." (1 Corinthians 1:10).

### The Communion Service: The *Agnus Dei*

When Jesus first appeared at the Jordan River where John was baptizing, he pointed at Jesus and said to his disciples, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” To emphasize that what is being received in Holy Communion is indeed the body and blood of Christ, the hymn to the Lamb of God called the *Agnus Dei* (Latin for *Lamb of God*) was added to the liturgy in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The cry “have mercy upon us” reflects the Law and Gospel nature of the liturgy: we ask for mercy upon us, knowing that the one we ask in faith is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

There is also an intimate connection here with the Passover. At the first Passover, the Hebrew slaves killed a lamb and painted its blood over the door posts of their houses, so that the Angel of Death would “pass them over.” The lamb was then roasted and eaten “in haste.” (Exodus 12:1-13). So we too are saved from the Angel of Death by the blood of the Lamb of God we receive from the chalice. God does not see our sin, but the sinlessness of the one who became sin for us, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

### The Communion Service: The *Nunc Dimittis*

The *Nunc Dimittis* (Latin for *now dismiss us*) is based on the “Song of Simeon” recorded in Luke 2:29-32. It was traditionally sung at the end of *matins* or *vespers* services. Its place in the Communion liturgy, however, is fairly new. In the earliest liturgies of Holy Communion, the service ended after the distribution, with the pastor simply speaking the words “Go, it is over.” The singing the *Nunc Dimittis* does not seem at all out of place after Holy Communion, though. We have indeed seen and even tasted the salvation of God, and have participated in a veiled way in the great feast celebrated in heaven. Just as the prophet Simeon held the Christ child in his arms, we have held the bread of life in our hands and mouths. Now, with our sins forgiven, we can indeed depart in peace, according to the promises of our merciful heavenly Father.

### The Communion Service: The “Good Words”

At the end of the Holy Communion service we speak the *Benedicamus* (Latin for *we speak good words*) and then hear the *Benedictus* (Latin for *the good words*). First, we bless, or praise, the Lord for what he has done for us in the sacrament of Holy Communion. The Lord has given us pardon and peace, and so we offer him our thanks! But then, as one final parting gift, the Lord offers us his “good word” of forgiveness and peace one more time. The words the pastor usually speaks are the words given to Aaron and his sons from the Lord in Numbers 6:24-27: “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: ‘The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.’ So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” We began worship by making the sign of the cross and recalling the name the Lord placed on us in baptism: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We end the service in the same way, with the Lord placing his name on us, and blessing us. Praise be to God for the blessings of forgiveness, peace and eternal life he gives to all his children!