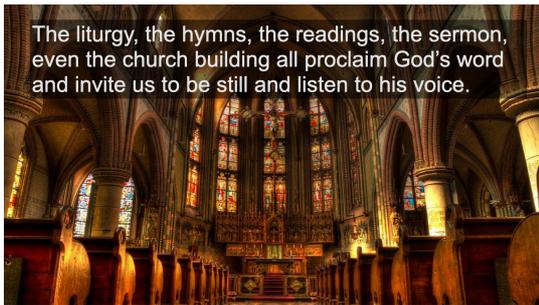


Encountering Christ in the Service of the Word

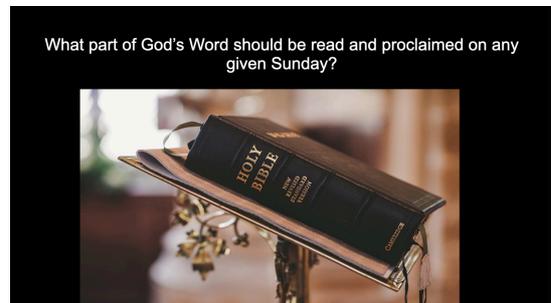
John 12:21



“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. Yes, grace and peace from Jesus, ‘the word made flesh’, whom we encounter in the readings and the sermon in worship. How wonderful it is that our hymns and liturgy also contain so much scripture. Even the church building’s design and artwork preaches God’s word and invites us to be still and to listen to him.

God, as we have heard through the prophet Jeremiah, desires prophets and preachers to declare his word faithfully, and not to substitute it with their own dreams. They are not to burden people with lies, or failure to preach a hard word needed to refine by fire or break falsehoods like a hammer breaks rocks. But they are to preach the full counsel of God who seeks to bring life, nourishing our souls with faith hope and love.

The word of God reminds us of his presence and what he desires for us all, but which part should be read on any given Sunday? We use a lectionary as the foundation and guide for our preaching in Lutheran Churches. With roots in the earliest traditions of the church, the lectionary is intended to be a gift, a path through scripture that each year walks the Church through festivals and the chief doctrines of the Faith.



We also have freedom to look at texts outside the lectionary, and to explore themes designed to help a community grow in knowledge, and perhaps challenge and equip for renewal and community engagement with the Gospel. Occasional side trips, like our current sermon series, ‘Why we worship like we do’, can also enhance the journey.

Christian congregations of the first century took their cues for the divine service from the worship practices of the synagogue, which used a lectionary to determine the readings. The lessons, having been read, would be preached upon by a rabbi. Perhaps the best example we have of this is from Luke 4:16-21, the account of Jesus preaching at the synagogue in Nazareth. The Isaiah scroll was handed to him; he unrolled it to the reading from the Prophets assigned for the day; he read it, and then preached on it.

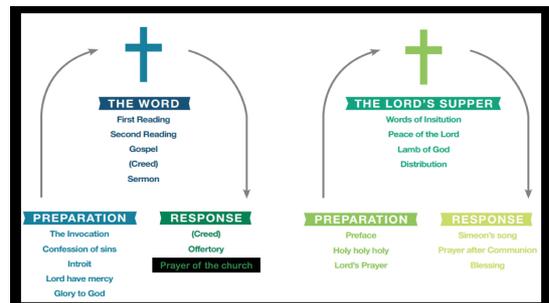


We find this same practice was carried over into the worship of the Christian church from references made to it, such as the one given in I Timothy 4:13: "Until I come, give attention to the selected reading of the day." Early Christian congregations began to supplement the readings from the Old Testament with readings from the writings of the Apostles. In passages such as I Thessalonians 5:27 and Colossians 4:16, Paul tells these churches that his letters are to be read in the service, and then circulated to other neighbouring congregations that they may use them as well.

As the Gospels were written and circulated, they too were read in public worship. The practice of reading Scripture was widespread, and various lectionaries have been used over time. Our modern lectionary is divided into years A, B & C. "A" focuses on the Gospel of Matthew, "B" on the Gospel of Mark, and "C" on the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of John is used in all three during the Sundays after Easter, and also serves to supplement St Mark in Year B. Can you tell me which cycle we are currently in? Yes, it's Year C, with our focus on Luke.

Today we continue the series exploring, 'Why we do what we do in Worship.' The worship service has two main parts. The first is meeting with God and being served by him through The Word (sitting at the feet of Jesus, if you like.)

The second part, and highlight of the worship service, is meeting with Jesus as he serves us through the sacrament of the altar, called 'The Lord's Supper', which is a summary of the Gospel of God's grace to us.



Anybody who comes to church and goes away saying 'I didn't get anything out of it' — undoubtedly came in the wrong spirit. Instead of expecting to be entertained, or pampered with affirmation of our own goodness, we humbly come to sit at Jesus feet, and listen. We do so with our ears and the eyes of our heart. He teaches the humble and lowly of heart. Listen to him as he serves us with words of life.



Today we focus on the first part of encountering Christ in worship, known as 'the service of the Word'. From the time of the apostles, an important part of Christian worship has been the reading of Scripture, including the Old Testament, the Epistles from the New Testament, and the Gospel. 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.

Everything that has occurred prior to the readings is called the preparatory liturgy, which prepares us to meet with God. So the invocation, introit, confession and absolution, passing the peace, prayer of the day (collect) and any hymns used to this point are part of the steps of our approach to God.

The scriptures we read, which are part of the three-year cycle of readings (lectionary) that I explained earlier, encompass the width of the themes and teachings of scripture. They also unify us in many ways with other churches around the world who are using the same readings.



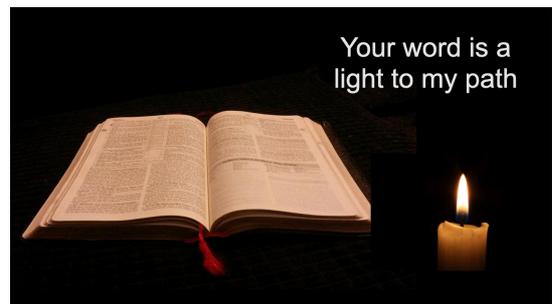
The first reading is from the Old Testament, except during the Easter season when it is from the Book of Acts. This reading usually relates to the Gospel of the day.

The choir and congregation may then sing a “gradual”. A gradual, meaning "step," is a seasonal scripture sung or spoken in response to the First Lesson and a bridge to the Second Lesson. Often we use a psalm at this point.

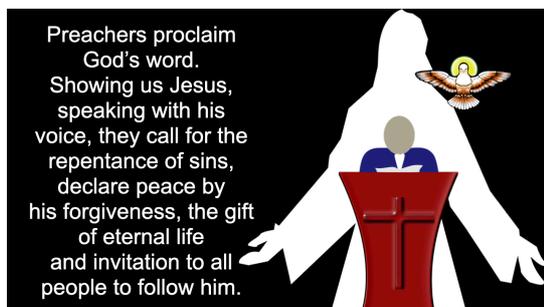
The second reading is from one of the epistles (or letters) in the New Testament. Next a verse from the holy scriptures is usually sung in preparation for the reading of the Gospel. This may be either a general verse, or specific verses for the seasons of the church year.

The Gospel Lesson is a selection from the accounts of the life of our Lord recorded by the four evangelists, Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Because Christ is with us in the Gospel reading, we stand to honour his presence. That is also why we also sing ‘Glory be to you, O Lord’ before the reading of the Gospel, and after it, ‘Praise be to you, O Christ.’

On certain festival days, ministers read the Gospel while standing among the people, with acolytes carrying candles proclaiming Jesus and his word as the "light of the world." Psalm 119:105 says, ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.’ (NRSV) God's Word is a lamp that guides us to Jesus, our rescuer. He overcame the darkness of sin, and destroyed the dark powers of death and the devil. Through him, God brought us out of darkness into his marvellous light, and through his word he guides us still.



A Hymn of the Day, based on the theme of the readings, sets the stage for the sermon. The Sermon then begins with a prayer or greeting from Scripture, such as Ephesians 1:2, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”.



Preachers proclaim God's word. Showing us Jesus, speaking with his voice, they call for the repentance of sins, declare peace by his forgiveness, the gift of eternal life and invitation to all people to follow him.

Preachers are not to proclaim their own wisdom or opinions. They are not called to teach philosophy or worldly wisdom, but to be a mouthpiece of God. They are to open up and explain God's Word, and apply that word to modern life and to problems known and experienced by their listeners. Preachers are to stress both what God demands of us (the Law) and what God does for us through Jesus Christ (the Gospel) that frees us. The right balance of law and gospel is vital. People shouldn't be left lost under the law, but

are to hear the sweet comfort of the Gospel that saves, frees, and equips us for life with God.

What a fearful task this can be. In preparation, preachers call on the holy Spirit to lead them, that they first place themselves under the word of God and sit at Jesus' feet in order to serve the people faithfully. This is an awesome task, an impossible task unless God speaks through human words. God's Spirit alone can grow faith in the hearts of hearers, and prepare them for blessed service in His kingdom.

John 12:21, where a group of Greeks approach Philip saying, “Sir, we want to see Jesus”, helps me to focus on the task of preaching. I've even seen this verse carved in the wood of Lutheran pulpits. Through the proclamation of the Word, the Holy Spirit teaches and leads us to listen to Jesus — as if directly sitting at his feet — in order to see him more clearly in our daily lives, to learn and grow.

From both Old and New Testaments, we find inspiration and strength from God's promises and the patient mercy he displays to us.

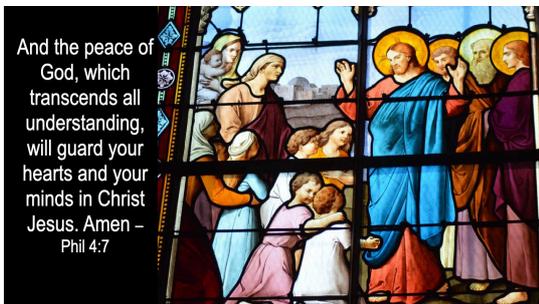
A preacher, and that includes authorised lay preachers, may also use modern day examples of Christians living out their faith. Stories of Christians seeking justice, and serving others despite hardships and oppositions, even martyrdom, inspire us, as do the quiet and faithful lives of men and women, young and old, that we know personally. It is in the width of Christian community that I celebrate women preachers who bring a wealth of experience and unique perspectives of discipleship that enrich the church's witness.

In all this we meet with and hear Jesus. He desires that we see him and ourselves more clearly. We learn to see others through the loving eyes of Jesus, our Lord and teacher, and with the assurance of God's seal of salvation on our lives. What amazing blessings!

From this high point in the service, we move on in response to the reading and proclamation of the Word by confessing the faith in the Creed, and by presenting our offerings, our prayers and praise. We then move to the other highpoint of worship, that of encountering Christ as he serves us with his own body and blood in the Lord's Supper.



Our focus today has been on the importance of the Word in the worship of the Church. Only by Jesus, the living word, can we worship God in spirit and truth: this is why the 'service of the word' occurs in every service we hold, so that we are encountering Christ in readings, the sung responses and hymns, the word preached and explained from the pulpit.



So I finish this sermon and others with another word of scripture, Philippians 4:7: 'And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen'

Video of the service including the above address: https://youtu.be/_ZYsnv8vhUU