

Sermon

December 11, 2022

What is Worship?
Pastor Dan Peterson

Worship, as I said at the beginning of today's service, is a time where we set aside all the demands placed upon us so that we can focus on what matters most in our lives, namely, God, the source of life and the sustainer of us all.

But what does it all mean?

Why do we sing? Why do we share the peace? Why do we listen to a sermon? And why do we receive the sacrament? Why, in short, are we here? What is the purpose of worship, and why does it matter?

The Plan

Now, before I attempt to answer these questions, I'd like all us to let out a collective sigh of relief.

Why?

Because I am not going to drag you through every detail of the worship service, no matter how interesting I find it personally. Instead, I would simply like to highlight a few details of the service to deepen our understanding so that none of us, myself included, take for granted the significance of what we do here and why.

If you have ever wondered, then, why we say the Creeds or what happens when we celebrate communion, then this morning's message is for you.

Confession and Forgiveness

Did you know our worship service has four distinct parts, distinct acts, you might say, of a play? If so, can you name them? We have the **Gathering** at the beginning. That's Act 1. Then we hear the **Word** in the reading of the lessons, the sermon, and the Hymn of the Day. That's Act 2. Then we have the **Meal** where we receive what I call the Food of Forgiveness. That's Act 3. And finally, we are **Sent** out into the world as **forgiven sinners** to be Christ to our neighbor, especially our neighbor in need. That's Act 4.

These four acts are preceded by confession and forgiveness. But here's the funny thing: confession and forgiveness are not part of the play. They are more like its prologue. We stand before God and confess our sin before the service formally begins to prepare ourselves for what is about to unfold, which is why we include here a moment of silence.

So, what do we confess? For my part, the rite of confession in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* captures it best:

Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

Notice the language: we are in **“bondage”** to sin. We are powerless. We cannot free ourselves. Sin here is more than simply “missing the mark.”

It’s not simply doing something wrong. It’s a condition.

Like a roly-poly, when sin touches us, it turns us in on ourselves. It makes us self-centered, something Charles Darwin actually confirms in his theory of evolution. Human beings are self-centered for the sake of survival. We are programmed with what the biologist Richard Dawkins calls a “selfish gene.”

Even when we become aware of this tendency, as Paul teaches in Romans 7, we still find ourselves in its grip.

That said, naming our powerlessness does something positive, as 12-step programs like AA have recognized for nearly a century. It frees us.

It can open us up, however fleetingly, to God and neighbor.

Now we are ready.

Now our worship service can formally begin!

Gathering

Anyone who knows their Bible will recognize our service’s opening words. They come from the Apostle Paul who often begins his letters by saying, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the HS be with you all.” You respond by saying, “And also with you.”

But why?

Are you a) simply being polite, or do these words b) have a specific function? The answer is b. The greeting and its response bring us into union before God as we begin our service, which is also why – today being an exception – I repeatedly move to the front of the chancel or to the aisle to say everything from the greeting to the final blessing.

The *kyrie*, which simply means “Lord,” likewise deepens our union as the one, mystical Body of Christ when we chant back and forth that God would have mercy on us.

And the Prayer of the Day? It does two things: it serves as a collect, which means it “sums up” a general theme of the day based on the forthcoming readings. It also draws Act 1 to a close and sets the stage for next part of our service – the Word.

The Word

The Word is the second act of our four-part play. We trust that God speaks to us when we hear the reading of God’s Word, that is, the Bible.

The Bible does us no good if it sits on a bookshelf and stays closed. But when we hear it as part of a service or gathering, the **Latent Word of God** in the Bible can become the **Living Word of God** when we hear it for ourselves.

Think of Psalm 23.

It’s one thing to read this Psalm as God’s promise to King David. It’s another to hear it as God’s promise to you. You are not alone, God says. I will accompany you through every chapter of your life, even those when the shadow of death looms large.

As the Psalm illustrates, both testaments (the Old and New) contain this Latent Word of God, this good news, but it only becomes a Living Word when we hear it and believe it for ourselves. That’s why we read from both testaments during the worship service. And that’s why I preach on writings from both testaments in my sermons. The message of God’s grace and mercy appears as much in Jeremiah or Isaiah as it does in Matthew or Luke.

But here we have a problem.

What happens if I fail to preach the gospel, the good news from Scripture that God claims you, that God embraces you, that God accepts you, that God frees you, that God accompanies you, that God walks with you, and that God love you? What happens if, in the silence that deliberately follows the end of a sermon, you remain unmoved by the Spirit, empty, perhaps even stuck?

Well, thanks be to God for Hymn of the Day.

Cantor Kyle and I chose the Hymn of the Day intentionally. Here’s why: the Hymn of the Day “further drives home the point of the sermon because **even if the pastor fails** at proclaiming the Word of God, the gospel can still be proclaimed through the hymn. . .” (“St. John’s Lutheran Church, Explanation of the Liturgy” at stjohnstmartinsburg.org, accessed on 12/10/22).

That’s why its words are so important. The lyrics matter. Pay attention to them. They have been selected not only because they reflect the common theme of the day. They have been selected because at any moment a line from a hymn can become the Word of God when it speaks to you, when it meets you right...where...you...are.

That’s the power of the Living Word! It can reach us through speech, yes, but it can also reach us through song.

After the Hymn of the Day, our focus on the Word continues with the Creed. Now the term “creed” is often mistranslated. It means “I give my heart to” something, here to the conviction that loving relationship lies at the heart and ground of all reality.

But there are differences between our two creeds, as you may know.

The Apostles’ Creed focuses on the humanity of Jesus. In it, we affirm that he lived, he suffered, and he died, all during the time when Pontius Pilate ruled over Judea. Why does it say that? Because opponents of the Church, a loose affiliation of people called the Gnostics, were denying Jesus’ humanity throughout the second century when the Apostles’ Creed was written.

By the fourth century, a new set of opponents arose.

Instead of denying the humanity of Jesus, they denied his divinity, hence the appearance of the Nicene Creed and its language about Christ as “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” The *Lutheran Book of Worship* directs us to say the Nicene Creed on festival Sundays and on Sundays throughout Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter.

Why? Who knows? Maybe we should chalk it up to what your previous pastor would call a “holy mystery.”

Our focus on the Word concludes with the Intercessory Prayers which we get from a denominational resource called Sundays and Seasons. I like to modify these prayers, to make them more poetic and to personalize them in ways that fit our congregation. In some cases, the Assisting Minister will do the same, which is great. Worship should be a group effort, after all, not just a one-person show.

After the prayers we turn to the third of our four-act play, the Meal.

The Meal

Now let me be clear. While Lutherans agree with Roman Catholics that Christ is present in the bread and the wine, we do not practice transubstantiation.

Transubstantiation means “change of essence or substance.” When a Catholic priest repeats the Words of Christ at the Lord’s Supper, the teaching goes, he lifts the elements up and at that point they become, according to their essence, the body and blood of Christ – even though their outward appearance remains the same.

Luther explains the presence of Christ a bit differently. How can the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, he asks, if God in Christ *already* “fills all things”? Ephesians 4:10 makes this clear: before he ascended, Christ first “descended into the lower parts of the earth,” which is a symbolic way of saying his presence now infuses all of creation. “Heaven and earth are his sack,” Luther writes, “as wheat fills the sack, so he fills all things.” That said, you won’t find Him in your beer mug or in a bowl of cabbage soup, Luther adds.

You will find him, rather, where he promises to find you, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

There you lay hold of Christ in a special way, in a deeply personal way. Luther writes:

When I preach [Christ's] death, it is in a public sermon in the congregation, in which I am addressing myself to no one individually; whoever grasps it, grasps it. But when I distribute the sacrament, I designate it for the individual who is receiving it; I give him Christ's body and blood that he may have forgiveness of sins, obtained through his death and preached in the congregation. This is something more than the congregational sermon; for although the same thing is present in the sermon as in the sacrament, here there is the advantage that it is directed to definite individuals (Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, p. 327).

This is why I say your name when I distribute the sacrament here at Queen Anne Lutheran. The sacrament, as I see it, is that one place during the week where you can experience pure acceptance, however fleetingly.

Here you do nothing. You say nothing. You simply put out our hands and receive the food of forgiveness. And then – perhaps, sometimes – something happens. There *is* a transformation. It's not that the bread and the wine are transformed at their core into the body and blood of Christ, however. The transformation occurs *in you*, in your consciousness, in the way you approach the sacrament, when you trust and expect to receive Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine.

No “magic” is required (this is how critics view the Catholic understanding of the sacrament and in some cases, albeit incorrectly, the Lutheran view as well). Neither is this act of receiving simply a memorial of Christ's sacrificial death, since Christ – as other early Protestants argued – can't be “up there” in heaven and “down here” at the same time!

No, Christ is everywhere, but he appears to us in a special way when we seek Him where he promises to be – namely, in the wine of Holy Communion as well as the water of Holy Baptism.

But wait.

We still profess to eat his body and drink his blood.

Are we cannibals? The answer, of course, is no.

Why? Because, as the explanation above “The Great Thanksgiving” in your bulletin indicates, we receive his risen body. Christ can't be present everywhere according to the human body he had before he died. But his glorified body, his spiritual body, his risen body, now fills all things, again as Ephesians 4:9-10 says. *That's* what we receive in the Eucharist.

The post-communion prayer follows in an effort collect or “sum up” the whole experience: now that we have been assured and strengthened through the sacrament, we should rejoice. At the end of Act Three, Christ has set us free.

Sending

The fourth and final act of our service is Sending. Here you are blessed as you go upon your journey.

And here you are invited to sing boldly as a response to what you have received, which explains why Cantor Kyle pumps up the volume for the sending hymn and the postlude: we are loved and embraced by the Holy One through Christ; let us go forth and share that love with others.

Let us listen when others won't, forgive as we have been forgiven, refrain from judgment, and love our enemies, for we can do "all things" through the one who strengthens us. And let us be reconciled to our neighbor, something we *practiced* before the pandemic in the sharing of the peace.

Amen.

An Oversight

Hold on a second.

What if the four-part play we just described was actually a *rehearsal* for the life we are called to lead in the world? That would answer the question I asked at the beginning: why does worship matter?

It matters because it can inform how we live in the world. To get better, therefore, we have to *keep practicing*. I expect accordingly to see each of you here next Sunday.

We always have room to grow.

Amen.