



Learning the Liturgy: ***Welcome to worship at*** **St. Stephen** Evangelical Lutheran Church

Understanding what you will experience here

Learning the Liturgy: An introduction to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

Worship in word and sacrament is at the center of the Church's life. It is here that God acts through the means of grace to bring forgiveness, life, salvation and all the power of the gospel. For Lutherans, the Word and the sacraments are the means God uses to share God's love with the world. It is no surprise that we share with many other Christians a simple but ancient pattern for the Sunday assembly. You can see these four parts of our one service in our worship folder: **GATHERING**—The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God. This time can include confession and forgiveness (or thanksgiving for baptism) and song, but always includes a greeting and opening prayer. **WORD**—God speaks to us in scripture reading, psalm singing, preaching and song and we respond in creed and prayers. **MEAL**—a collection for the needs of the world and the mission of the church is gathered, the table is set, thanksgiving is offered and God feeds us in Holy Communion with the presence of Jesus Christ. **SENDING**—God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world.

Baptism: Marked with the cross of Christ forever

One of the most noticeable outcomes of worship renewal in the ELCA (as well as other churches) is renewed emphasis on the centrality of Baptism. Many congregations when building or renewing worship space are reflecting this centrality in the size and placement of the baptismal font/pool. It is near the door because baptism is our entrance into the Church. For Martin Luther, baptism is a sign, promise and participation in what God does for all in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Luther encouraged the frequent use of making the sign of the cross on one's body as a reminder of our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* encourages this sign at several places, notably the beginning and the end of the liturgy, as a reminder of the sign marked in baptism. The sign of the cross may be made after receiving the elements of Holy Communion. In our worship folder, you will often find a little cross (+) when making this physical prayer is particularly appropriate. Worshipers are encouraged when entering and leaving the church to dip their fingers in the water and perhaps make the sign of the cross in thanksgiving and remembrance of Baptism. Confession and Forgiveness is nothing other than a return to baptism and is therefore conducted at the font. During the season of Easter and on other occasions, Thanksgiving for Baptism (*ELW* page 97) may begin the service. When this form is used the assembly may be sprinkled with water from the font during the gathering song as a reminder of the gift of baptism.

GATHERING

God initiates our worship, gathering us by the call of the Holy Spirit. GATHERING is the name for the first part of our service. It is the threshold that prepares us for the Word and Meal to follow. The Gathering is the most flexible part of the service and might look different depending on the season or the specific circumstances. For example, in penitential seasons it might include confession and forgiveness, song, greeting, Kyrie (Lord, have mercy) and prayer. In festive times it might be very full with Thanksgiving for Baptism with sprinkling of the assembly and a procession during gathering song(s), a greeting, a canticle of praise (Glory to God, This is the Feast) and prayer. Gathering always includes at least the apostolic greeting and prayer of the day. Each season or circumstance will determine how simple or elaborate the Gathering will be. In any case the goal of the Gathering part of our liturgy is to welcome all into the assembly, expecting to meet Christ in each person present. The Gathering forms this assembly into a worshipping community and prepares the assembly to hear God's word.

Confession and Forgiveness

The GATHERING often formally begins with Confession and Forgiveness or Thanksgiving for Baptism. The order for confession and forgiveness may be seen as a return to the gift of baptism (that is why it is omitted when there is an actual baptism). There is something baptismal about coming together on Sunday. Because of this baptismal connection, Confession and Forgiveness is led from the font. The assembly stands and faces the water as a reminder that this is how they entered the Christian community in the first place. The minister begins with a Trinitarian invocation, and the assembly is invited to make the sign of the cross (indicated by a +), the sign that is marked at baptism. The presiding minister invites the assembly into a time of confession preceded by silence of sufficient length to allow time for people to examine themselves and to indicate the weight of the actions in which we are engaged. The presiding minister then exercises the power to forgive sins, given by Jesus to the church, by declaring the forgiveness of God. Once again members of the assembly may make the sign of the cross (+) as the minister traces it over them. The cross is our only hope and the sign of our identity in Christ. Martin Luther teaches us to use this sign often, especially at the beginning and end of each day in prayer. On some festivals, we begin directly with a Gathering Song, reminding us that confession and forgiveness is not an essential prerequisite to every reception of Holy Communion.

Gathering Song(s), Greeting and Prayer of the Day

A Gathering Song usually follows Confession and Forgiveness or Thanksgiving for Baptism. During this time the ministers of the service take their places in front of the assembly. In many places this procession is led by a processional cross as a sign that we follow the cross of Christ through life. The cross also leads us back into the world at the end of the liturgy. The ministers may bow toward the altar as the primary sign of Christ's presence. The role of the presiding minister is to preside over the worshipping assembly and to coordinate the work of the many ministries of public worship. This role is best symbolized when the presider is at a chair visible to the entire assembly. From this place the presiding minister remains during the Gathering, the Word (except when this person is also the preacher) and the Sending portions of the service, reserving the altar for the Meal.

After the Gathering Song, the presiding minister greets the assembly with the words of the apostle ("The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ..."). This greeting serves as a welcome, much as a host welcomes guests to a home. The assembly returns the greeting. The presiding minister may bow toward the assembly as a sign of respect for the holy people of God. During Lent, we sing a simple cry for mercy, the Kyrie. "Kyrie" is Greek for "Lord." We still use the Greek title for this part of the service, because it is one of the oldest components of the liturgy. At other times a Canticle of Praise may be sung. In simpler times the prayer follows the greeting. The prayer of the day follows and reflects the theme of the day for each Sunday in the three-year lectionary.

Silence is kept before the prayer for the assembly to collect their own prayers. The assembly then sits to be attentive to the Word.

WORD

Following the Gathering part of the service of Holy Communion, the assembly then sits to be attentive to the Word. One of the ways the word of God is proclaimed is in scripture readings. As Lutherans, it is important to us to hear a rich fare of scripture each week. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, following the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary, commends an Old Testament reading, a psalm, a New Testament reading and a gospel reading for each Sunday and festival. The assembly stands as the gospel is read to show the prominence of this reading as a testimony of the living Word, Jesus Christ, present in our midst. The prominence of the gospel is sometimes further heightened, especially on festivals, by a gospel procession, where the gospel is read in the midst of the congregation often accompanied by candles and maybe the cross.

Music is a vehicle for the proclamation of the word of God. The psalm that follows the first reading is again being sung in many places. The psalms are Hebrew hymns, intended to be set to music. We welcome the risen Christ by standing and singing the Gospel Acclamation before the gospel reading. This church's statement on the practice of word and sacrament, *The Use of the Means of Grace* (authorized by the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly), advises, "The use of a Bible or lectionary of appropriate size and dignity by those who read scriptures aloud, the use of this book in liturgical processions, and its placement on the reading desk or pulpit may bring the centrality of the word to visible expression."

The Place

Evangelical Lutheran Worship suggests, "The unity of the proclamation of God's word is reinforced when all the readings and the preaching are led from a single place of the word." This is a new idea for many congregations where the old arrangement of a lectern on one side and a pulpit on the other still exists. This arrangement became popular in the medieval church when ceremonies directed that the gospel book should be carried to the (liturgical) "north" (left facing the altar). It further supported the idea that only a priest/pastor could stand and read there. Since the older arrangement of both lectern and pulpit still exist in St. Stephen's sanctuary, we have begun reading all the scriptures, including the gospel, from one place (lectern) and only moving to the pulpit for the sermon. The purpose of this is to set the bible (as read from the Lectionary Book) at the heart of our meeting, helping us to see the unity of the scriptures and emphasize the relationship of preaching to ALL the readings, not only the gospel (the Lectionary is carried to the pulpit to reinforce this connection). On festival days there is a gospel procession during which the Lectionary is carried into the midst of the assembly while the gospel acclamation is sung. The entire assembly turns to face the place where the gospel is then read as a sign of the presence of the risen Christ in the midst of this assembly.

The Gospel and a visible prayer

Evangelical Lutheran Worship suggests that the gospel be announced simply, "The holy gospel according to Matthew," for example. Other words are, of course, possible, but this is the announcement of an oral event—one that is to be proclaimed and heard, more than simply read. Citing chapter and verse in this context is not necessary. The gospel is proclaimed for these people to hear now in this place. Some Christians have the custom, during this announcement, of inscribing a small cross with their thumb on the forehead, lips, and heart as a form of prayer that asks, "May this gospel be understood in my mind, spoken with my lips, and trusted in my heart." This is simply a practice that might or might not be helpful for different individuals in the expression of faith. Preaching follows.

Proclamation in Preaching and Song

The sermon is an extremely important element in Lutheran worship, because here God's word of law and gospel are brought into our time and place to awaken and nourish faith. As the readings appointed for the day are opened up in the context of the church year, the preacher's call is to proclaim our need of God's grace and to offer that grace, equipping the community for mission and service in daily life.

The evangelical Lutheran expectation of preaching is to mercifully speak out loud the truth of our awful need, and at the same time, to give away God's free grace in Christ and to turn us in response to love of God and neighbor. Following the sermon in the service of Holy Communion, comes a uniquely Lutheran contribution to the western liturgy which we share in large part with other traditions. The Hymn of the Day is a central way in which the assembly takes its part in proclaiming God's word for the particular Sunday or festival. This is the principal hymn of the service and reflects the readings and theme of the day within the church's year. The assembly has heard the word proclaimed and preached and now joins its voice to that proclamation. The hymn of the day is a historic feature of the Lutheran liturgical tradition. The creed may follow.

Creed

A creed frequently follows the hymn of the day. Traditionally, the Nicene Creed is associated with Holy Communion and the Apostles' Creed with baptism. With restoration of frequent communion in Lutheran circles over the past 30 years, the practice of varying the use of creeds has been introduced into our worship. The Nicene Creed is usually used during the seasons of Easter, Advent and Christmas. The Apostles' Creed is suggested for the "green" seasons after Epiphany and Pentecost. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* suggests its use during Lent as well because of the baptismal associations of that season. It is not necessary to confess a creed each week since they were originally teaching documents for baptismal candidates. The Nicene Creed came to be used regularly in the Sunday eucharistic service only in the eleventh century. Other parts of our service also express our biblical faith as well, especially the Thanksgiving at Table ("Eucharistic Prayer"). The very ecumenical character of these creeds comes to expression by our use of the best current ecumenical translation, the 1988 version prepared by the English Language Liturgical Consultation.

Prayers of Intercession

One of the ways we exercise our faith is by praying for the needs of all the world. The Prayers of Intercession remind us each week of our baptismal vocation as a priestly people of God. The counsel of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is that these prayers be locally prepared and led by a lay assisting minister. The assembly voices its assent to these petitions with a brief response after each prayer. The role of the presiding minister is to be at the chair to conclude the prayers with a final commendation, again emphasizing that these prayers belong to the assembly. While these prayers should be locally prepared, our unity is seen in a common shape suggested to the whole church, petitions are offered:

for the church universal, its ministry, and the mission of the gospel;
for the well-being of creation;
for peace and justice in the world, the nations and those in authority, the community;
for the poor, oppressed, sick, bereaved, lonely;
for all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit;
for the congregation, and for special concerns.

Prayers of thanksgiving for the faithful departed may include those who recently have died and those commemorated on the church's calendar.

The Peace of Christ

In the pattern for worship used in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the prayers are finally concluded with the peace. This greeting and gesture is the conclusion of the Word portion of the Holy Communion liturgy and the transition to the Meal. Like the prayer of the day at the conclusion of the Gathering preparing us for the Word, the peace functions as a seam between these parts of the service. This is a special moment. As the risen Christ stood among the disciples on the first Easter evening saying, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19, 26), so the presiding minister greets us and we speak this same gift to each other. The presiding minister, standing at the chair, speaks first, extending his/her arms in greeting (embrace!) toward the assembly. As the assembly responds, the minister may bow toward them in acknowledgement. Then the assembly greets each other with these words and a gesture, becoming the risen Christ to his or her neighbor. This is not the time for merely saying “hi,” but a time to experience the risen Christ in the midst of the assembly. With this exchange of Christ’s gift, the assembly then turns to the Meal.

MEAL

With the exchange of Christ’s gift of peace, the assembly then turns to the Meal. By the mercy of God, the assembly will eat and drink the very promise they have been hearing in the scriptures. St. Augustine called Holy Communion, “visible words.” From the time of the New Testament the regular pattern for Christian worship has been Word and Meal. Christ invites us to the Meal each Lord’s Day. Following the Peace, the assembly is seated and two things happen simultaneously: a collection is taken for the mission of the church, and the table is set for the celebration of Holy Communion. Assembly song, choral or instrumental music, or other forms of music may accompany this action. The table is normally set by an assisting minister. When the collection is brought forward, many congregations also bring forward the bread and wine that will be used in this celebration. Bringing the bread and wine from the rear of the church symbolizes that these good things of the earth that God has made and given to be shared. After this an assisting minister may lead an offering prayer with the presiding minister standing back from the table until the conclusion. The offering prayer is one of the parts of the Meal that is optional. You will notice that while we frequently use one, there are some simpler times and seasons when an offering prayer not used at this point.

Great Thanksgiving Dialogue

After the Table has been set, and perhaps an assisting minister has led an offering prayer, the presiding minister comes to the center of the Table. Then the presider begins the ancient Great Thanksgiving. This thanksgiving starts with some of the most ancient texts of the liturgy, ones that are ecumenically well known in churches of various traditions—The Lord be with you...Lift up your hearts...Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. These words may be sung or spoken, depending on the season or occasion. The music too has been sung by generations of Christians. The important thing is that this is a *dialogue*, together the presider and assembly share in giving thanks at the table. These are words first of greeting, then of invitation to joyful thanksgiving for all of God’s acts culminating in the gift of the Son. The presiding minister extends his/her hands in greeting, and as earlier in the service, may bow to the assembly in acknowledgment of their response. In a sweeping upward gesture, the presiding minister invites the assembly to lift up their hearts. The third line invites the assembly to join in giving thanks which begins with the preface for the day or season, singing the *Holy, Holy*, and then praying the Thanksgiving at Table or eucharistic prayer which will include the account of the Last Supper.

Initial Thanksgiving

We have nothing but thanks to bring to the table, and so the presider moves to the altar to sing or say the “preface,” or “initial thanksgiving.” We begin to give thanks using one of the fourteen seasonal prefaces in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. There are also prefaces appointed for specific life passages, such as funerals, weddings, healing liturgies and the like. The day, season or occasion determines which preface is prayed since each one gives thanks in relation to the season of the church’s year or occasion for this service. The structure is common to all: The preface always starts with praise to God through Christ, followed by a specific reason for doing so on this occasion. The preface always concludes with the reminder that we do not pray this thanksgiving on our own, but are now joined by the hosts of heaven and the entire church on earth in every time and place in the joyous song that follows (Holy, Holy). Throughout the preface the presider stands behind the table with hands uplifted in the ancient gesture of prayer and praise. This gesture for prayer, which dates to the Old Testament is mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:8 when leaders “should pray, lifting up holy hands.”

Singing Holy, Holy

The “Holy, Holy” traditionally called by the Latin title, Sanctus, continues the praise and thanks of the Great Thanksgiving. We were reminded in the preface that our thanks and praise are now joined to the praise of all the angels and the church of every time and place. This is their song. The first part of the song is based on the cry of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:3, “Holy, holy, holy Lord...” We too stand before the Thrice Holy One. In acknowledgement of this presence, some presiding ministers and others bow during the first part of this song. The second part of the Sanctus, starting with “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” is found in Psalm 18:26 and is echoed in the Palm Sunday accounts of the gospels. The “one who comes” is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. At these words, some presiding ministers and others make the sign of the cross as an acclamation that the one who comes is indeed this crucified and now risen Savior. Because of his presence now with us at this table, in this bread and wine, we join in the acclamation of the end of the hymn, “Hosanna in the highest,” that is, “Save now, O God most high, save us, save all things!”

Thanksgiving at Table

The presiding minister then begins one of the forms for the “thanksgiving at table,” traditionally called the Eucharistic Prayer or Prayer of Thanksgiving. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides eleven forms for this thanksgiving at table. Many others are available as well and anciently presiders improvised these prayers before they came to be written down. The shape of the thanksgiving at table or Eucharistic Prayer follows a common pattern: it begins by continuing the thanksgiving by proclaiming what God has done in creation and redemption, especially as this is summed up in Jesus and in his words at the Last Supper (Words of Institution) which are proclaimed at the heart of every Eucharistic Prayer. Then, as the Words of Institution command, Jesus death and resurrection are remembered in thanksgiving. The prayer then turns to petition and prayer. The assembly prays for the gift of the Holy Spirit on this bread and wine and on this gathering. Other prayers may be added and the thanksgiving at table concludes with a final doxology, during which the bread and wine may be lifted up. The assembly makes this prayer their own with acclamations during the prayer, but especially with the great amen which concludes every thanksgiving and is often sung. St. Augustine called this the “great amen” because, he said, it is the most important “amen” of the entire liturgy.

Lord’s Prayer

In light of this great mystery that is now before us on the Table, all we can do is to pray in the words Jesus taught us. In the end, by God’s great mercy, we are given the words with which to stand before God. The presiding minister may invite the assembly into the Lord’s Prayer and prays with hands uplifted and arms extended. It is always appropriate for the assembly to also pray this prayer with hands uplifted as well. Much

ancient Christian art depicts the entire assembly praying in this way and not just the priests. The Lord's Prayer, with its petitions for the coming of God's reign, for bread and forgiveness, has become the most traditional prayer before communion used by all the Christian community. The Lord's Prayer concludes the Great Thanksgiving.

Breaking of the Bread

The presiding minister may then speak an invitation to the table welcoming the assembly to the meal of Holy Communion. The assembly may be seated and the bread is broken. The entire Great Thanksgiving embodies Christ's action in giving the Lord's Supper: He took bread/cup (setting the table), gave thanks (dialogue, preface, Holy Holy, Prayer of Thanksgiving), broke the bread (breaking the bread after the invitation), gave it to them (the communion). Once the bread has been broken the ancient hymn, "Lamb of God" is often sung. These are the words John the Baptist spoke when he saw Jesus coming (John 1:29). Now we address the risen Christ who gives his body and blood at this table as the true Lamb. The presiding minister normally gives the bread and oversees the distribution. Others, both lay and ordained assist in giving communion. While a pastor presides at Holy Communion, any baptized and trained lay person may serve as ministers of communion.

Communion

Whether the practice of the assembly includes kneeling or standing for communion, some matters involved in communion are common to us all. The ELCA recommends some fashion of continuous communion, as we practice at St. Stephen. This practice of a continuous flow of communicants helps make clear that this is a community meal rather than a private one. We all share together in the bread and cup having been made one by our baptism into Christ. Echoing the ELCA teaching document on the practice of word and sacrament (*The Use of the Means of Grace*), the notes on the service say, "Ministers with the bread ordinarily place it in the person's cupped hands. Ministers with the cup present it in such a way that people may naturally guide it to their mouths." Following the practice of the New Testament and the first 1800 years of existence, the church's preference is the common cup. For modern Americans who have become concerned with germs, the challenge is meeting pastoral need in local congregations while preserving the unity that is at the heart of the sacrament. At St. Stephen, those who serve at the altar are encouraged to follow the biblical practice of drinking from the cup. For pastoral reasons, communicants can receive the wine the chalice or by intinction (dipping the bread into the cup). These methods attempt to preserve the cup as a sign of the assembly's unity. For those who cannot take wine at all, we have the assurance that the entire Christ is present under either element with all the treasure of the gospel. A small amount of gluten free bread and non-alcohol wine is available.

Real Presence and Reception of the Elements

Holy Communion is the true body and blood of Christ, given with the bread and wine. As such it is important that this holy food be handled with deep reverence. The minister of communion addresses each communicant with the words, "The body/blood of Christ, given/shed for you." Each person may respond; "Amen" to each of these sentences and to the gift itself. Since the earliest centuries, communicants have been encouraged to answer "Amen" to these words as a way of saying, "yes! So be it! This food and this community IS the body of Christ, and for this I am thankful." Since Holy Communion is a gift given and not something to be "taken," communicants should extend their outstretched cupped hands in order that the minister may place the body of Christ in their palm. St. Cyril of Jerusalem spoke of this as making a throne for Christ. It is important to hold the little cup steady for ministers with the pouring chalice in order that the blood of Christ is treated with care. Those who receive by intinction may simply keep their hands folded.

The ministers themselves may receive communion either before or after the assembly has. At Emmanuel we follow the traditional practice of ministers communing first. This models the biblical practice of the host beginning the meal by eating to show that the food is good. In some assemblies, following a contemporary model of servanthood and hospitality, the communion ministers now commune at the end. Singing during communion distribution is an opportunity for assembly song that provides focus—it is a centering action in the midst of much movement. When the communion is complete, the remaining food is brought back to the table. Some bread and wine may be set aside to commune those who are absent. Wine remaining in the cup may be consumed by the presiding minister or poured into the ground. Bread may be reverently stored for the next communion.

Prayer after Communion

After communion the table is cleared, or the vessels veiled, and the assembly stands. A canticle, such as “Now Lord, you let your servant go in peace” (the Nunc dimittis) may be sung. At St. Stephen, we frequently will simply use a prayer after communion, led by one in the role of assisting minister. This prayer is one of the transitional moments in the liturgy and as such is important. It leads us from the Meal to the Sending. There are a number of prayers after communion available; however, the common pattern in these prayers is to give thanks for this communion in the body and blood of Christ and to ask that we be sent in the strength of this gift to continue God’s mission and service in a needy world. We are coming to the Sending.

SENDING

The liturgy of Holy Communion concludes with the Sending. Like the Gathering section of the liturgy, the Sending is flexible—adaptable to the day or season and the gathered community. It is, however, normally the briefest of the four sections. The Sending turns us from the meal of Holy Communion back toward our life and ministry in the world. On certain days there might be a rite such as a blessing of items to be sent out, or an affirmation of our vocation as Christians. Most days we simply receive a blessing spoken by the presiding minister. As at the invocation, the assembly is encouraged to make the sign of the cross on themselves in reception of this blessing and as a reminder of the sign marked on them in Baptism. We sing a hymn during which there may be a procession of the altar ministers back to the baptismal font. From the font, an assisting minister sends the assembly into mission and we enthusiastically reply, “Thanks be to God!” When a processional cross is used, it leads the assembly back out into the world to encounter Christ in all the places life leads. We are sent. The liturgy is complete. Word and Sacrament are enough to sustain us for the journey ahead. We are sent only to be gathered again the next Lord’s Day in this continual cycle to encounter anew the Triune God in Gathering, Word, Meal and Sending all over again.

