**Read Me Before Worship**

***A primer for visitors to the Lutheran Church.***

***Sacred Space***

You are about to leave the *narthex* and your seat in the *nave* of the church. Historically, Christians have identified the Church of Jesus Christ with Noah’s Ark (Genesis chs. 6-8), a ship continually passing from this world to the next. The vaulted roof allows us to envision ourselves in the “hull” of that great ship – hence, “nave.”

The focal point of every Lutheran church is the *sanctuary*. “Sanctuary” is a Latin-derived word meaning “holy place”. It is the dwelling place of God whenever worship takes place (Habakkuk 2:20). Therefore, it is with much reserve and respect our *ministers* and *altar guild* enter and exit the sanctuary; while doing so it is customary to bow in the direction of the *altar*.

The raised platform on which the sanctuary rests is the *chancel*. The chancel can be thought of as the “stage” from which the Divine Service is enacted. Here the Scriptures are read, the sermon is delivered, prayers and gifts are offered. Here the minister and congregation interact as he speaks on God’s behalf.

The *choir loft*, as its name suggests, is home to the choir. It sits behind so as not to distract worshippers from God who is present (though invisible) directly ahead.

As you quit this world for a moment to encroach upon the border of heaven and earth, you will find that even your sense of direction changes. Traditionally, Christians worship Eastward, perhaps because of his words in the Gospel of Matthew that suggest he will come from the east (Matthew 24:27). Do not be confused if the sanctuary might be referred to as “liturgical” East. Facing to the left is North; to the right, South; and West in behind – even when they do not correspond to the points of the compass.

***Sacred Objects***

Let’s reorient ourselves. To the liturgical “south” is a *lectern*, or a reading-table, from which the Scripture lessons are read. To the liturgical “north” a *pulpit* has been set aside for delivery of the *sermon*, which is a specially tailored message from God’s Word to the congregation. Another word for “sermon” is *homily*. (Our minister has studied “homiletics”: the practice of preaching.)

Now, lets’ face East. Front and centre is the Baptismal *font*. “Do you not know,” St. Paul reminds us, “that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (1 Corinthians 6:3-4) In other words, the life of a Christian begins at Holy Baptism. This *Sacrament* conveys the promise direct from God that we are His people.

Like an alternating current, all Christian worship flows to and from the *altar*. The altar in the centre of the sanctuary is the place on which our “sacrifices” to God (token offerings, prayers, and the *elements* to be used in Communion) are placed.

The altar chiefly functions as a reminder of the sacrifice Jesus Christ offered “once for all” (Hebrews 10:10) on the cross. For this reason a cross stands on the altar. A *crucifix* cross portrays the *corpus* (Latin for “body”) of Jesus Christ fastened or “fixed” to it. Of course, the best that any cross can do is merely represent our Lord.

But in the Sacrament of Holy *Communion*, the Son of God offers His *true* body and blood. The ceremonial bread (*host*) does not resemble human flesh, nor does the colour of the wine even need to be red. His body and blood are present in, with, and under the bread and wine in a manner which cannot be explained. We humbly take these words of Scripture at face value: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation (communion) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation (communion) in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16)

Communion *elements* are held in special *vessels*. The host is served either from a *pyx* or a cuplike *ciborium*, while the wine is served in an antibacterial sliver-rimmed *chalice* (individual cups are also available). The *assistant* in charge of the chalice wipes the rim with a white cloth (*purificator*) after each *communicant* drinks his or her share.

The minister is set apart by special ceremonial *vestments*. Surprisingly, though, his foundational garment exhibits the fact that he stands on even ground with every other Christian. He wears either a robe-like *alb* or a *surplice* overtop a black *cassock* to represent the white garment received in Holy Baptism. The emblem of his *office* as a minister of Jesus Christ is the scarf-like *stole*. While the minister *consecrates* the Communion elements, he may don a special garment called a *chasuble*. “Chasuble” is a Latin-derived word meaning “little house,” a good descriptor of this all-covering piece of clerical garb.

The *Eucharistic candles* set on the altar represent the two natures of Jesus Christ: fully God and fully man. Every candle and light reminds us that He is the “light of the world” (John 8:12). Finally, you will observe the instruments used in making “a joyful noise to the Lord” (Psalm 100). They are a vital part of Christian worship no matter the occasion.

***Sacred Time***

The Church’s sense of time also shifts as we worship. The Divine Service follows a set order or “liturgy” as our Lord draws nearer to us through His Word and Sacraments. Orders of worship vary from place to place, but there are three key phases:

*Service of Preparation* – We enter into the presence of the Triune God and suddenly come aware of our unworthiness due to sin. He invites us to examine our consciences, confess our sins, and hear His forgiveness in the form of an *absolution*. (See 1 John 1:8-9)

Every Christian is familiar with the prayer “Lord, have mercy.” In ancient Greek, that is *Kyrie Eleison*. It was the cry of a beggar when a wealthy patron or even the Emperor passed along the street. (See also Matthew 20:30). In our worship the *Kyrie* is not a repeated plea for forgiveness; it is rather a series of *petitions* for richer blessings from God.

*Service of the Word* – Through Jesus Christ, our Father has secured for us the right to hear his Holy Spirit speak through his holy Word. There are three Scripture lessons from the Old and New Testaments. An international sacred calendar called the *Lectionary* assigns the readings for each Sunday and *festival* occasion during the week. One (or more) of these Scripture lessons will form the basis for the sermon.

“Faith comes through hearing… the word of God” (Romans 10:17). In response to God’s Word, the congregation joins in confessing their common faith in the words of an ancient *Creed*. Typically the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed are recited; the lengthy Athanasian Creed is reserved for the Festival of the Holy Trinity (late May or early June).

United in faith and emboldened by God’s Word, we proceed to pray various petitions on behalf of the world and especially the Church. These prayers together with the token offerings are the “spiritual sacrifices” (1 Peter 2:5) of the “priesthood of all believers.”

*Service of the Sacrament* – In the Lutheran tradition, “the Sacrament” is shorthand for Holy Communion. Here the minister in charge of consecrating the Sacrament (the *celebrant*, for short) takes “centre-stage” as it were. He recites the “Words of our Lord” (Latin *Verba Domini*) which render the sacred bread and wine as His body and blood. In response to the presence of Jesus Christ the congregation sings a special hymn identifying Him as the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

In ancient times the Church celebrated the Sacrament literally “behind closed doors” – which means to show that they practiced *Closed Communion*. So do we. Only members of this congregation and those who publicly profess the same Lutheran doctrine shall be offered Communion. This is not an act of cliquish snobbery – it is out of love to protect the body and blood of the Lord from desecration (see 1 Corinthians 11:29).

After Communion the congregation is dismissed with a blessing (*benediction*) from the Lord. The most common blessing heard is the *Aaronic blessing*: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

Parallel to the “secular” calendar there exists a “sacred” calendar which Christians have observed for centuries. It charts an annual cycle of seasons and festivals. The colours of the *paraments* adorning the altar, pulpit, and lectern change with the occasion. Our calendar turns on three main events:

*The Time of Christmas* – spans the season of Advent (either *violet* or *blue*), Christmas and its season (*white*), and the season of Epiphany (*green*)

*The Time of Easter* – spans the season of Lent (*violet*), Easter and its season (*white*)

*The Time of the Church* – spans the season after Pentecost (*green*)