

Advent 1C - 2021 Commentary on the Service of the Word (DS IV) & The Advent Wreath

INTROIT/PSALM - Everything to this point in the Divine Service, especially the Confession and Absolution, has been preparation, being prepared by God to enter into His most holy presence, where He serves us through His Word.

The next Word of God we hear is from the Psalms. This part of the service is also called the “Introit,” which comes from a Latin word which means “enter.” Before speaking these words I step up to the altar, signifying “entering” into the Holy of Holies/God’s presence. The altar is where Christ Himself will sit enthroned in the Lord’s Supper. And when I enter God’s presence I bring you, the congregation, with me. Your eyes see only me moving, but actually the entire congregation moves. Pastor and people together are gathered into God’s presence. What is best to speak in God’s presence but God’s Word itself, this time from Zechariah 9:9b and Psalm 89.

KYRIE & GLORIA IN EXCELSIS - The word Kyrie is part of the phrase “Kyrie eleison,” which is from the Greek and means “Lord, have mercy.” Some parts of the liturgy seem at first glance to be misplaced. The Kyrie is one of these. Since we have just heard the Good News of our forgiveness in the Absolution and have gathered around God’s presence in the Psalm, it might seem strange to be asking for God’s mercy. It helps to understand, therefore, that this prayer is not just for ourselves but for all people. Those who have received mercy, pray for those who continue to need God’s mercy (as we all do).

After the Kyrie is Gloria In Excelsis, Latin for “Glory in the Highest.” This is the song the angels sang in the presence of the shepherds (Luke 2:14) when the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us in Jesus Christ (John 1:14). We join in singing the angles’ song, praising God the Father for His great glory revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ, as He now comes to us in His Word and Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

THE SALUTATION & COLLECT - The Salutation, “The Lord be with you. And also with you,” is not like saying “Hi, how are you? Fine, how are you?” Instead it’s acknowledging one another and our union with Christ. These words occurs three times in the service, and each time they alert us that something of unique importance is about to take place. This first use of the Salutation comes just before the Collect of the Day.

The word “Collect” comes from a Latin word which means “to gather up.” In the Collect some of our common needs (which the Scripture readings for today will remind us of), are gathered up and summarized in one prayer/petition and laid before our gracious God.

THE LESSONS - The particular Scripture lessons which we hear each Sunday have been organized by the Church over the centuries and follow the rhythm of the church year. The Old Testament reading points forward to the Messiah’s coming. By contrast, the Epistle reading deals with our life rooted in Christ and points back to Him. In the Gospel reading we don’t simply hear about Jesus; we hear some of the words which Jesus Himself spoke. The congregation indicates this distinction by standing for the reading of the Gospel. The “Alleluia Verse,” just before the Gospel reading expresses our anticipation of the Lord who comes to us in His Word (John 6:63).

THE CREED - Having heard the Word of God, we now hear from the Church. The word “creed” comes from the Latin “credo” which means “I believe.” The universal Church confesses three creeds (the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed), which summarize what we believe. These creeds mirror God’s Word, confessing back to God the revelation and faith He has given us. Scripture is God speaking to us. The Creed is the Christian’s reply. This is what the whole Church, past present and future, believes and confesses about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed, which we'll be confessing this morning, dates back to the Council of Nicaea in 325. In opposition to the Arian heresy (which denied the deity of Jesus Christ), it emphasizes the full, eternal deity of Jesus Christ. This is the Creed which is normally said in connection with the Lord's Supper since it confesses the eternal divinity of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who will give Himself to us in the Sacrament of the Altar.

THE SERMON - Preaching is not meant to make people feel good about themselves, but to transform people, to turn them away from faith in themselves to faith in Jesus, true God and true man, who cleanses us from all sin through His death in payment for our sins and His resurrection victory. In the sermon it's not enough to merely refer to the Gospel; the Gospel itself must be proclaimed. We continue to need to hear that our sins were punished on the cross with Jesus, and laid in the tomb, buried forever. Christ Jesus, however, has risen from the dead to live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and to give us His righteousness and forgiveness. Christ's holiness becomes our holiness and salvation. This is the Gospel that people need to hear: the "*the LORD is our righteousness*" (Jeremiah 33:16).

For an abbreviated sermon this morning I would like the children to come forward. Today is the First Sunday in Advent. The word "advent" is from the Latin word for "coming," and the Christian church celebrates the coming of God's Son in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, death and the devil. Jesus came first as a baby boy in Bethlehem. He comes to us today through His Word and Sacraments. He is coming again on the Last Day of this world.

These are some of the things which our Advent Wreath is meant to remind us. The wreath is in the shape of a circle to remind us that Jesus is God (with the Father and the Holy Spirit), who has no beginning or end. We light the candles to remind us that Jesus is also "*the light of the world*" (John 8:12), especially at the end of this life when all goes dark.

The purple candles on the wreath remind us of two things. First, purple is a color of royalty, and reminds us that Jesus is our King who has come to save/ rescue us from all evil. The sad thing is that the only way Jesus could save us was to let Himself be punished for our sins. His death on a cross was that punishment, and just before the Roman soldiers crucified Jesus they put a purple robe on Him. So purple reminds us of King Jesus' death to set us free from our sins.

But in the middle of our sadness about Jesus' death there is also joy when we remember that Jesus came back to life again on Easter Sunday to remind us that He is God and, therefore, able to defeat our sins, death, and the devil and give us eternal life with Him in heaven. We are reminded of this joy in the middle of our sadness when we light the pink candle. We light this pink candle on the Third Sunday of Advent.

As we light each candle the light becomes brighter, which reminds us that Jesus is coming soon. Then comes Christmas day, on which we celebrate Jesus birth. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day we light the white candle in the middle of the Advent Wreath. The white reminds us that Jesus, who is without sin, has washed away our sins through our Baptism and faith in Him (Galatians 3:27), making us His saints.

Jesus physical birth, death and resurrection assures us that He will come again on the Last Day to raise up all the dead, and give all who believe in Him eternal life with Him in paradise.

All glory be to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH AND OFFERING - Through the preaching of the Law and Gospel God generates a response in us. One of the first responses of faith is prayer. Realizing that all people need God not only to give us saving faith in Jesus Christ but to keep us in that faith, we pray for the needs of all people.

Following the Prayer of the Church comes the Offering. Along with offering our whole selves to God, our tithe in the offering is also a faith response, returning to God a portion of His gifts for the work of the Church.