

Worship 101: The Scripture Readings

In this month's article on worship we will look at an important part of the Service of the Word: the Scripture readings. Here God speaks to us through His written word. That is, He serves us through His word of Law and Gospel.

As was true of the worship that took place in the Jewish synagogue in Jesus' day so also in the New Testament church portions of the Bible are read during a worship service (Luke 4:16-20). In 1 Timothy 4:13 St. Paul calls upon the young pastor Timothy to make sure that the Scriptures are read publicly, that is, as the church gathered for worship on Sunday.

Over the centuries, as the church developed its worship practices, certain portions from the Bible were read during different seasons of the church year. Pentecost, one of the oldest celebrations in the church had readings taken from the book of Acts which tells what happened on the Day of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the believers there in Jerusalem. Old Testament prophecies of the birth of Christ were read in the season of Advent. The stories of Jesus' nativity were read during the 12 days of Christmas. In the readings for Epiphany we learn who this child is, born in Bethlehem. In Lent we focus on Jesus making His way from the mount of Transfiguration to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world. The events of Jesus' last few days before His crucifixion are read during Holy Week. The Scripture passages about our Lord's resurrection are used in the Easter season.

After the Old Testament and Epistle (letter) readings, the congregation stands for the reading of the Gospel. Standing suggests respect and honor as we are now listening to the very words of Jesus. The Holy Gospel for the day comes from one of the four books called Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These books present the life of Christ from four different perspectives each emphasizing certain aspects of our Lord and His three year ministry.

In the ancient church the sung "alleluia" was a signal that the Gospel lesson was about to be read. So also today, before the Gospel reading we sing an alleluia. One of our responses comes from John 6:68 where the apostle Peter asks Jesus: "[Alleluia] Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life". During the time of Lent traditionally the church doesn't sing any alleluias. We call it "burying the alleluias" until Easter. In Lent our Gospel response comes from Joel 2:13: "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." "Returning to God" refers to repentance which is one of the themes of Lent.

One of the Scripture readings for the day is usually the text for the sermon which will be our topic for our next article.

In Christ,
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