

Smoky Mountain Reflections #189

As we enter the month of March, we do so with the mantle of the Lenten season draped over all of our thoughts and activities. In this time of worship and reflection I often feel a personal need for a deeper understanding of what we believe teach and confess; to dig deeper into the meaning of all the things we say and do to teach the faith, learning to apply all the great gifts God gives us in and through his word and sacraments. It can be helpful to start with a broad overview, such as orienting yourself on a map. Start with the big picture, then slowly work your way down to the place where you are, and you may gain a fuller understanding both of where you fit in the grand scheme of things and how this functions in your immediate surroundings. That being said, let's take a little deeper look at why we do what we do in worship.

First, our church year is arranged according to the insights of thousands of years of Christian worship practices, holding on to and treasuring the best and most edifying ways of teaching the faith. This framework teaches two things very clearly: Jesus' *life* and his *teachings*. The first half (or *feast* half) of the year teaches the life of Christ; anticipating his birth (Advent), celebrating that birth (Christmas), revealing who he is and what he came to do (Epiphany), anticipating his fulfillment of God's promises with 40 days of reflection on his journey to the cross (Lent), and celebrating his resurrection (Easter). At the end of the Easter season we kick off the second half of the church year with the celebration of Pentecost. In this half of the church year, we methodically go through the teachings of Christ, seeking the fullest coverage of all that he taught. This pattern of textual rotation is used to direct and focus the liturgy and hymns of our worship. And on top of all that we have special days with feasts and festivals that celebrate heroes of the faith (historic saints) who we hold up as examples of a Christ-centered life as well as other key events in Christ life. These feast and festivals fall on specific calendar dates such as the traditional date of a saint's martyrdom for confessing the faith.

We get a similar focus on Christ life and teachings in every worship service hitting all the high points of that are mentioned above in the feast half of the year while also singing, speaking, confessing and hearing His teaching.

When we teach about the faith as Lutherans, we use Luther's small catechism. When we begin or transfer membership in the church we publicly confess our faith in accord with this catechism. In every part of our Divine Service we are focusing on the six chief parts of the faith, as outlined in the catechism.

The Ten Commandments: Every time any part of the liturgy, preaching, singing or praying in the service convicts you of your sinful nature or any particular sin, this is the commandments at work in the service.

The Historic Creeds: After the proclamation of the Gospel whether through reading or preaching, we confess our faith together using the Apostles', Nicene, or Athanasian Creeds. Any part of the service that sings, says or proclaims the triune name of God is also a confession of his triune nature.

The Lord's Prayer: After we have prepared ourselves in the liturgy to receive the Lord's Supper and before hearing his words spoken over the elements, we pray together the prayer he taught us.

Baptism: This is the only thing that we do not do every time we worship, and because it is a once in a lifetime event, we celebrate it greatly when we do. Many people, however, remember their baptism at numerous places in the service by crossing themselves, remembering they were baptized into God's triune name. The rubrics (red words in the hymnal) suggest the times in the service this can be done.

Confession and Absolution: We do this at the beginning of every service, because we daily sin much and need to confess that truth to hear God's sweet words so absolution spoken to us. This gives us great comfort as we enter into the Divine Service, washed clean.

The Lord's Supper: Almost every time we worship here at Saint Paul we receive our Lord's precious body and blood, in, with, and under the elements of bread and wine, given and shed for us to eat and drink for our forgiveness.

Every time we participate in the Divine Service, we are participating in a short one-hour catechism class as well, and are having our bodies and souls fed and nurtured for this life and the next. God created us with five

senses and uses all five of them to assure us of his love and forgiveness for us, in and through the word and sacraments.

Have a blessed Lenten season,
In Christ,
Pastor Portier