

This is the WORD of the Lord!

Dear Friends in Christ,

A few weeks ago, I was privileged to lead worship and be the guest preacher at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Asheville, North Carolina, a congregation I served from 1978 to 1991. The lectors, or lay readers, followed the worship custom after reading the Scripture lessons, saying: “*This is the Word of the Lord.*” The congregation automatically responded, as their former pastor taught them: “*Thanks be to God.*”

We Lutherans do that a lot in worship, don’t we, talking back and forth with each other and with God through responsive readings, prayers, psalms and chants. When we gather, our services – whether praise, traditional or blended - reflect order and reverence, the flow of worship a comforting constant and easily remembered. Most of you probably automatically respond to these versicles in worship:

- The Lord be with you. *And also with you.*
- This is the Gospel of the Lord: *Praise to you, O Christ.*
- Lord in your mercy: *Hear our prayer.*
- The peace of the Lord be with you always. *And also with you.*
- Bless we the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

- The worship has ended. *The service now begins.*

To the visitor and guest, all of this worship lingo might sound like stilted, archaic formal language, reserved solely for use in a stiff, liturgical church. In fact, one of my neighbors, a good Baptist Christian, likes to banter with me at times about being a Lutheran Christian, even leaving flyers at my door and giving me coffee mugs that invite me to “The Creek!” He must be a delinquent, former Lutheran, feeling guilty about leaving his roots, just recently sending a mock Star Wars image of Martin Luther that read: *The Jedi in me says, “May the force be with you. The Lutheran in me says, “And also with you!”*

[By the way, my neighbor gave me permission to share our story.]

Lutheran worship, indeed – and without apology - reflects our rich liturgical history, retaining traditional words and sayings that are, in fact, based on **the Word of the Lord!** Every aspect of worship is designed so that God can have a “**word**” with us from the “**WORD**” – drawing us into a deeper, personal faith relationship with Christ - revealed in today’s Gospel as “*the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth!*” (John 1:14) There are no “**words**” in worship, though easily remembered, that should ever become rote and routine, or simply automatic, because the focus is not on us – it’s about Him! Every time we come into this sacred space we invite God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit to be present in this place, for it is through **Word and Sacrament** that “*we feel His mighty power and receive His amazing grace!*”

The “**Service of the Word**” is not just a title or tagline in the bulletin, as the Psalmist declares in today’s Old Testament lesson: “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*” (Psalm 119:105) All of our responses and saying, songs and praises, readings and sermons are a “**Word**” from God, inviting sinners to come to Him in faith, placing our trust in Christ and Christ alone! It is simply impossible, I believe [I pray] to hear the Word of the Lord, spoken, read, preached or sung – proclaiming the “*old, old story of Jesus and His love*” - and not be moved by the Holy Spirit to faith full response and praise! After all, look at those whom God loves and forgives – you and me, sinners extraordinaire! This is the promise we boldly proclaim from the Word of God week after week after week, affirming the simple faith of our childhood: “*Jesus loves this I know, for the Bible tells me so!*” [Can I get an ‘Amen’ or ‘Thank you Jesus’?] Oh, stop that, we Lutheran’s don’t do that in worship!

But we do, my friends - every time we respond “*Thanks be to God*” or sing or say or pray the Kyrie, a Greek word meaning “*O Lord.*” It is a cry to the Lord for help and strength, forgiveness and love, and in the Bible we hear the blind men, the Canaanite woman and countless other voices crying out: “*O Lord, have mercy on us!*” (Matthew 20:30-31) And the good news - He does, Jesus Christ, the “*Word made flesh and dwelling among us,*” the Babe of Bethlehem, the Son of God giving His life on Calvary’s Cross, rising on Easter morn to declare

victory over sin and death, promising everlasting life to all who believe! No wonder in worship we respond to God's holy and inspired **Word**: *"Thanks be to God!"* or *"Alleluia, Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life!"* (John 6:68)

Are you beginning to catch the central focus of our worship – the **Word of the Lord** imbedded in each service, the Holy Spirit calling, teaching, inviting, equipping, encouraging and empowering us in our walk with God! The **"Word"** is at the center and core of every liturgical phrase and response, the sharing of peace before Holy Communion echoing the Apostle's prayer to the Christians at Thessalonica: *"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all."* (2 Thessalonians 3:16)

Isn't that why we come to worship, yearning to experience that deep, inner spiritual peace which sustains us when the storms of life overwhelm, when our hearts are filled with sinful thoughts, words and deeds, when relationships are at odds, when unexplainable sorrow and disappointment, illness or ill will seems to be the order of the day? Is that not the peace we receive each time we come in faith to the Holy Table, hearing a **word** from the Lord Himself: *"Take eat, take drink, this is my body, this is my blood, broken and shed for you...for the forgiveness of your sins!"* How can we not respond when we hear such Words: *"Bless we the Lord"* and *"Thanks be to God?"* It is the very peace that sends us home in the

powerful and personal benediction that God gave to Moses and Aaron declaring, “*Thus you shall bless the people...you shall say to them:*

*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 6:22-26)

I would contend my friends that worship can never, ever be a boring, rote, routine, uninspiring experience if our focus is on the “**Word of the Lord.**” Worship is not about us being “entertained,” but rather a moment to pause and pray, honoring God, seeking His will, receiving His grace, inviting His presence into our hearts and lives. through Word and Sacrament. That’s what it means to be a Lutheran, praying as Martin Luther penned in a wonderful hymn: “*Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word!*” (LBW230)



The Lord be with you. *And also with you.*

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the command, invitation and privilege to worship you in this holy and sacred place. Send your Holy Spirit each time we gather in worship, quieting our minds and stilling our hearts, making us attentive to your **Word**. It’s all about you Lord! It’s all about you, coming down in “*the Word made flesh,*” Jesus Christ our Lord, our Savior and Good Shepherd. We love you Lord. Thank you for loving us!

Lord, in your mercy: *Hear our prayer. AMEN!*