

One of the first things people notice about the Church of the Advent is the way we worship, and that observation often prompts the inquiry, “Why do you do that?” We hope that this article helps you understand the meaning behind the things we say and do, whether you are a newcomer asking these questions for the first time, or a longstanding member in need of a refresher. May the information offered more fully prepare you to worship the Triune God in spirit and truth, with reverence and awe -- for he is a consuming fire (John 4:24; Heb. 12:28-29).

ANCIENT & FUTURE

The first thing to note about Advent’s worship is that it is a combination of ancient and future elements. Looking back to the earliest recorded worship of the people of God, we see in the Old Testament that believers gathered three times a year to commemorate their rescue from bondage and to celebrate God’s goodness in creation (Lev. 23). At these sacred times, the Israelites moved through a somewhat regular pattern of worship. (See Exo. 19-24; Lev. 1-9; Josh. 8:30-35; 2 Chr. 5-7 and 29-31.) First, they were called to assemble. Second, there was a form of confession and purification (a sin offering). Third, they often heard God’s mighty saving deeds recounted or listened to instruction from God’s law. Fourth, they demonstrated their devotion to God through giving (burnt and grain offerings). Fifth, they communed with God through a meal together (the fellowship offerings). Last, a blessing was pronounced over them by the worship leader.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the early church recognized that the worship of the ancient Israelites followed the pattern and movement of worship in heaven (Exo. 25:40; Heb. 8:5; 12:22-24; Rev. 4:1-5:14). Thus, early Christian worship included confession of sin, hearing the Word of God, offering gifts to the Lord, and communing with Christ at the Lord’s Table. At the same time, the first Christians insisted that Jesus’ death was a final offering for the sins of God’s people (Heb. 7:26-8:2). Consequently, there was no reason to continue the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. Rather, they chose to gather on Sundays—in remembrance of Easter Sunday—in order to commemorate the finished work of Jesus and his resurrection victory over sin and death.

Within a few centuries, the early Christians began to commemorate certain days on which God’s great saving acts in Jesus had occurred. Special worship services developed for these holy days (holidays), like Christmas and Easter, and these days are now celebrated by most all Christians around the world. As the Christian calendar developed, the holidays came to be grouped into two seasons each year: the Season of Light and the Season of Life. The Season of Light begins in the darkest time of the year with Advent, a period of solemn preparation before celebrating the birth of Jesus on Christmas. The Season of Light continues for twelve days after Christmas until Epiphany, the day of the wise men, when we commemorate the leaders of the nations coming to Jesus to worship him, and the light of the Gospel going forth to all the world. The Season of Life begins in the deadest time of the year with Lent, a period of solemn preparation before celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on Easter. The Season of Life continues for fifty days after Easter until Pentecost, when we commemorate the gift of the Holy Spirit to all Christian believers, and the new life of the Gospel going forth into all the world. Thus, both of these seasons begin with a time of solemn reflection, move into a commemoration of God’s rescue of the world through Jesus, and climax with a celebration of God’s salvation going out into the world.

And so our worship at the Church of the Advent is ancient: grounded in the worship of Scripture; patterned after the worship of the early church; and joined to the eternal worship at the throne of God. It is also future, as we anticipate the return of Christ and the consummation of all things. In spite of the brokenness of the world and the trials we may endure, we are filled with hope as we anticipate eternal life together in the Kingdom of God. Everything we do in worship looks back to the faithfulness of God in history, and the promise of our inheritance as his people in eternity.

RITUAL & CEREMONY

Liturgy, the word used to describe our order of service, literally means “the work of the people.” This partly explains why the whole congregation participates in most aspects of the service, both by word and action, ritual and ceremony. When important events occur in life, we commemorate them with ritual and ceremony. For example, we celebrate birthdays with cakes, candles, singing and presents. Almost all special events involve a meal together, whether they be festive (e.g. the rehearsal dinner of a wedding) or poignant (e.g. the covered dish supper following a funeral). Sometimes people recoil against liturgy because they fear meaningless repetition. But ritual need not result in ritualism, and ceremony need not degenerate into ceremonialism. The consequences of liturgy for many Christian believers are quite the opposite. Liturgy enriches worship by involving the whole person, head, heart and hands. Instead of passive observation, liturgical worship enables greater participation as we confess our sins and our faith; stand to sing; lift our hands in praise and need; kneel in prayer; embrace at the peace; and taste the bread and wine. Worship in the Bible is liturgical, involving both ritual and ceremony (Exo. 4:22-23; 19:3-6; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-10; Rev. 1:4-6; 5:10). The Bible describes God’s people as a kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:4-10); liturgy is therefore the priestly service of all God’s people with all of our selves, body and soul.

WORD & SACRAMENT

The principal worship service of the Church of the Advent is sometimes called the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, or the Holy Eucharist. “Eucharist” is a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.” This is an appropriate way of describing what happens as we give thanks to God for his saving work through Jesus by the Spirit. The liturgy for this service comprises two parts. During the first part, we gather in the presence of God and the Word of God is proclaimed. During the second part of the service, we join together as the people of God to feast with Him in the Lord’s Supper. We believe that the good news about Jesus is preached and enacted through both word and sacrament. Most people are familiar with sermons from the Bible, but for some folks, a “sacrament” is a new notion. In short, the sacraments of baptism and communion are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as the means by which we receive his grace. Through the bread and the wine and by the Spirit, we receive God’s grace.

With this in mind, let’s take a closer look at the two parts of The Holy Eucharist to answer further the question, “Why Do We Do That?”

THE WORD OF GOD

OPENING ACCLAMATION

The leader of the service, usually a priest or deacon, begins the liturgy with an acclamation of praise to which the congregation responds. In this brief verse and response are the heart of worship: blessing God for who he is and what he does.

CONFESSION OF SIN AND COLLECT FOR PURITY

At the outset of the service, we ask God to purify us to worship him rightly. We do this in two ways. First, we pray the Collect for Purity. A collect is a short prayer, usually one sentence that makes one request of God, in this case, for God to cleanse us that we may magnify his name. Second, we read a summary of God’s law and respond in corporate confession. We confess the truth: we have broken God’s law and only he can forgive us. The minister announces God’s pardon as the Lord’s voice to the people.

WORSHIP IN SONG

Having been assured of God’s mercy and the Spirit’s grace, we lift our voices to adore our Lord. In the Prayer Book, an ancient hymn of pure worship, called the Gloria (Latin for “glory”), is sung. However, at Advent, we normally replace the Gloria with several songs of praise and worship, but the point remains the same. Many members of Advent sing with great freedom, singing with gusto and lifting hands to the Lord. Not only are these actions biblical, they are also appropriate given the worthiness of our God.

THE COLLECT OF THE DAY

At the end of the worship set, the Celebrant invites the congregation to prayer, using a verse and response.

Celebrant: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

In this greeting, we confess that the great hope of every Christian is indeed true: God makes his home with us. Then the Celebrant offers the Collect of the Day, a brief prayer that emphasizes the theme for that season of the church year. The Collect of the Day is found in the Book of Common Prayer.

THE LESSONS

At this point in the liturgy, we are seated and placed under the authority of God's word, captured in the response to the first two lessons each Sunday: from the Old Testament and from the New Testament Epistles.

Reader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

God speaks to us through Scripture, and we are bound to obey gratefully. We also read a Psalm aloud together—as this was the hymnal of the people of God throughout much of our history. The final lesson each Sunday is from the Gospels. A deacon usually reads the Gospel lesson from the midst of the congregation to symbolize the incarnation of Jesus: the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. When the deacon announces the Gospel reading, some members of the church make a three-fold sign of the cross on their forehead, mouth and chest to remind them that the word of Christ must be on their minds, lips and hearts.

THE SERMON

Following the reading of Scripture, God's Word is proclaimed by a minister or some other person authorized to preach by our bishop. Limiting the preaching role to certain people safeguards the church from false teaching. The sermon is first of all a proclamation of the Gospel and secondly an exhortation or application of the Scriptures to the church. Therefore, the sermon prepares us for Communion: thankful for God's work and trusting his grace for obedience.

THE CREED

After hearing God's Word proclaimed, we stand and profess the faith of the church in the words of the Nicene Creed. The creed dates from the 4th century AD when bishops and theologians gathered in council at the cities of Nicaea and Constantinople to address various heresies. The Nicene Creed is affirmed by all Christians as a summary of the Trinitarian faith. In confessing it, we affirm the faith and profess in the heavenly realms that there is no God but ours. Often people ask why we use the word "catholic" in the creed. "Catholic" does not mean we are part of the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, "catholic" means we are part of the "universal" church, the body of Christ's baptized and faithful people throughout space and time.

THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

A prayer leader invites us to kneel (or be seated) for prayer, and the congregation joins the petitions verbally or silently. As a kingdom of priests, we intercede for the church, the world, and those in need. The words of the prayers are derived from The Book of Common Prayer; but we also leave room for free intercessions and thanksgivings as the Lord leads.

THE PEACE

The Celebrant then pronounces the Lord's peace to the people, and they respond to him in peace. The Peace is not merely a chance to say hello to friends we have not seen in a week. The liturgy reminds us that to come to the

Table, we must be in right fellowship with others. What we enact in the peace, assumes a reality in our lives: that nothing divides us from others in the church as we come to receive the body of Christ.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

THE OFFERTORY

The second part of the liturgy begins with the collection of our tithes and offerings to the Lord. This flows with the overall movement of the Holy Communion liturgy, in which we give thanks to God for his goodness to us. The offertory is the gift of our first fruits back the Giver of all things. The congregation stands and sings our praise to God to conclude the offertory.

THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

Now we come to the communion prayer, which contains several parts. First, the Celebrant (a priest or the bishop when he visits) begins with an antiphonal greeting inviting the congregation to lift their hearts in thanksgiving. Second, the Celebrant offers the Preface to the communion prayer, which either expresses the theme of the church year or praises the Trinity. The Preface flows into singing two Biblical hymns as one song. The first hymn, the Sanctus (Latin for “holy”), is the song of the angelic beings in Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4. The second hymn, the Benedictus (Latin for “blessed”), is the song of Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. When we sing these Scriptural songs, we join the choirs of heaven praising God before his throne, and we entreat the Lord Jesus to join us at the Altar by the Holy Spirit. Even more, we cry out for Jesus to return in power and glory for the great wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19). After the song, the congregation kneels or stands, and the Celebrant offers to the Father the Prayer of Consecration. This Prayer proclaims the gospel, recalls Jesus’ words of institution at the Passover and invokes the Holy Spirit to consecrate us to receive properly the bread and wine. Throughout the Great Thanksgiving, the Celebrant lifts his hands, an ancient, biblical posture for prayer, and he makes the sign of the cross over the elements, symbolizing their consecration as the body and blood of Jesus.

THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD & COMMUNION

The Celebrant breaks the consecrated bread and invites the people to receive. As Christ was broken on the cross for our sins, so by the bread our union with him is assured and strengthened. We are in Christ, and Christ is in us. As Christ’s blood was poured out on the cross, the wine assures us that our sins are forgiven, that his grace is sufficient, and that one day we will drink the fruits of the new creation. Some members of the church will make the sign of the cross before and after receiving communion to remind them that only through Jesus may we have intimacy with God and that their lives are committed to the way of the cross. Of course, communion is a time of celebration. As Jesus feeds us with grace by the Spirit, so the worship team leads in singing God’s praise again. Once everyone has communed with the Lord, the Celebrant and congregation offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the Lord’s Supper and ask God to empower us to live lives worthy of him in the world.

BENEDICTION & DISMISSAL

Then the minister pronounces the Triune God’s blessing over his beloved people using a benediction from the prayer book of the Anglican Church of Kenya. Many in the congregation make the sign of the cross as they receive the benediction. As the liturgy concludes, we are sent out into the world on Christ’s mission by the power of the Spirit.

If you have further questions about our liturgy, feel free to contact one of the pastors through the church office. You may also find Thomas Howard’s booklet, *The Liturgy Explained*, helpful. Finally, Robert Webber’s book, *Ancient Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Church Year*, is an excellent resource for exploring the seasons of the church calendar.