



Liturgical Thought

EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY¹

Why does the Divine Service always include an Epistle and Gospel Text, and in that order?

Central to the **Service of the Word**² in the **Divine Liturgy** is the reading of **Holy Scripture** and **preaching that is governed by these Scriptures**. Here the Church has re-fashioned, if you will, the synagogue service. In the synagogue, the **Torah (the first five books of the Bible)**, considered **the most important part of the Old Testament**, was read first. The reading of the **Torah** was followed by readings from the **Prophets** and the **historical books**. In the **New Testament Church**, the **Divine Liturgy** has followed a similar pattern with readings³ from the **Old Testament**, an **Apostolic letter (epistle)**, or at times from the **historical Book of Acts** or from the **Book of Revelation**, and a **Gospel**. Note the reversal as in the **Divine Liturgy**, the most important reading—the **Gospel**—is **read last**. The readings from the **Old Testament**, the **Epistles**, or other books, lead to the **Gospel**, in which they are **brought to fulfillment**.

Three readings are appointed for every **Sunday** and **major feast** and **festival**: the **Old Testament Reading** (or a lesson from Acts during the Easter season) followed by a **Gradual** of the season or an appointed Psalm; the **Epistle**, followed by the **Verse** or **Alleluia**; and the **Holy Gospel**. Currently, **four lectionaries** are used in the LCMS: an adaptation of the **traditional lectionary** of the Western Church, known as the **Comes (One-Year Series)**, an adaptation of the **Ordo Lectionem Missae (Three-Year Series)**, in the Lutheran Service Book, a **revised Three-Year Series**, and a **revised One-Year series**.

At the announcement of the **Gospel**, the pastor may make a small **triple sign of the Cross** on his **forehead, lips, and chest** while praying **“The Lord be in my heart and on my lips that I may worthily and with dignity proclaim**

¹ Much of the content of this series on the Liturgy of the Church is found in *Why? A Layman's Guide to the Liturgy*, by Rev. Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., Repristination Press, (Malone, TX.), and first published in *Gottesdienst, The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*, in a series by the same name between the years 1985-2005. Used by permission.

² Again, notice the divisions in our Divine Service, **“Preparation,” “Service of the Word,”** and **“Sacrament of Holy Communion,”** or **“The Service of the Sacrament of the Altar.”** It is the last that makes the service the **“Divine Service.”**

³ The readings are also called **“lection,”** thus the **lectionary** is the **list of readings** for the Church calendar year even as the table from which the Old Testament and Epistle readings are read is call a lectern. The readings are also referred to as **“pericope.”**

His Holy Gospel.” I say this prayer when I kneel before the altar asking for a blessing prior to the **Gospel procession** and reading, but make the **sign of the Cross** at the announcement of the Gospel reading appointed for the day.

It is a rather recent innovation of the 20th century that the **Old Testament pericope** have been added to our Sunday readings in the **Divine Liturgy**. The first two readings, **Old Testament and Epistle**, function as the voice of **John the Baptist** preparing us to hear the voice of the **Good Shepherd** in repentance and faith. The reading of the **Holy Gospel** is rightly seen as the **high-point of the Service of the Word** and is surrounded with acclamations of glory and praise.

*** Soli Deo Gloria ***