

Worship at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church



**A Useful Guide for Following
Along**

Welcome to Our Redeemer Lutheran Church!

If you're new at a church, nothing can be more frustrating than feeling left behind when everybody else is on the same page. It can be equally frustrating if you've been worshipping for years, and you find yourself saying something over and over in worship every Sunday with no idea why you're saying it.

We understand this, and that is why we offer you this guide to help you both better follow along and better understand worship at Our Redeemer.

Whether you're a new member or a lifelong Lutheran, the following information should be a refreshing look at our worship practices.

I divided the following information into two parts:

Part I addresses the "how." It is very practical and is meant to provide simple direction and assistance for following along.

Part II addresses the "why." It is much more in depth and offers insights into how worship reflects our understanding of who God is and who we are in light of His revelation of Himself on the cross.

I hope you find the following guide both informational and enlightening, and may the rich blessings God provides you at worship continue to sustain you until our Lord's return.

Your Brother in Christ,

Pastor Bobby

“Part I of the Divine Service: How Do I Follow Along?”

There are three main things you need to follow along: 1. THE BULLETIN 2. THE ORDER OF SERVICE (Page “5” and “15” in the Hymnal); and 3. THE HYMNAL

THE BULLETIN

Whenever you come to Our Redeemer for worship, you will receive a bulletin. Inside the bulletin you will find all sorts of useful information. We list upcoming events, Bible Study times, people on our prayer list, and birthdays and anniversaries. Besides this useful information, there is also information important for worship.

During the service, the pastor will read a reading from the Old Testament, from a New Testament letter (called “epistle,” Latin for “letter”), and from one of the four Gospels (Gospel means “good news”). These readings are found printed in your bulletin, so you can read along. A summary of these readings can also be found on the back of the bulletin.

The most important information for you as a worshiper, however, is found on the outside margin of the bulletin. The bulletin is designed so that after you put the bulletin in your hymnal, a three inch wide section will extend out from the hymnal.

At the top of this section you will first see the season of the church year (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, or Pentecost). Next, you will see the date, the order of service, followed by the hymns, readings, and sermon title.

As a worshiper, the order of service is very important. It will tell you where to go in the hymnal to follow along with worship.

THE ORDER OF SERVICE: PAGE “5” AND “15”

At Our Redeemer we really only use two basic orders of service: page “5” and page “15.” It really is as straight forward as it sounds. Page “5” starts on page 5, and page “15” starts on page 15.

Page “5.” Page “5” is the order of service we use when there is no communion. It is titled “The Order of Morning Service.” Because we only celebrate communion (also called the Lord’s Supper) on the 1st, 3rd, and 5th Sundays of every month, page “5” gets used a lot and is the shorter of the two services.

Page “15.” Page “15” is the order of service we use when there is communion. It is titled “The Order of Holy Communion.” This service is the same as Page “5” with the addition of communion.

Page “5” and Page “15” are very similar. They both follow the same structure, and once you find which order of service we are using (Page “5” or Page “15”), the next step is following along in the hymnal.

THE HYMNAL

The congregation participates in worship in these four ways: 1) RESPONDING BY SPEAKING, 2) RESPONDING BY SINGING, 3) SITTING, and 4) STANDING. Sometimes we respond with singing. Other times we respond with speaking. Sometimes we do this when we are standing. Other times we do it when we are sitting.

The hymnal gives us all the responses we need, and following the hymnal actually makes worship pretty easy.

We will now go through the different parts of the service in the hymnal and point out the areas where you as a worshiper participate in worship.

INVOCATION

After the opening hymn, the congregation **stands**. After everyone has stood up, the pastor will say, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”

The congregation responds by **singing**: “Amen.” After this, we move on to “The Confession of Sins.”

THE CONFESSION OF SINS

The congregation remains **standing** throughout “The Confession of Sins.”

The pastor will speak, “Our help is the name of the Lord.” The congregation **responds** by **singing**, “Who made heaven and earth.” Next, the pastor speaks, “I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord.” The congregation **responds** by **singing**, “And Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.”

You then turn the page. You will see bolded words and un-bolded words. The congregation **speaks** the bolded words. The pastor speaks the un-bolded words. At the end of “The Confession of Sins,” the pastor will pronounce forgiveness, and the congregation **responds** by **singing**, “Amen.”

Once the pastor pronounces forgiveness and you respond with “Amen,” you **sit** down, and remain seated until the reading of the Gospel Lesson. Don’t worry, when that time comes, the pastor will say, “Please stand for the reading of the Holy Gospel.”

THE INTROIT THROUGH THE SCRIPTURE READINGS

After the Confession of Sins, the pastor speaks the Introit, and at the end, the congregation joins in by **singing** the Gloria Patri (Glory to the Father), The Kyrie (Lord Have Mercy), and The Gloria in Excelsis. These words and tunes are printed in the hymnal and follow one right after another.

After the singing, there will be The Salutation and prayer. Once again, this follows right after the singing in the hymnal. When these are finished, the pastor will read the Scripture lessons.

SCRIPTURE LESSONS

As noted earlier, there are three scripture lessons: the Old Testament, a letter from St. Paul or another New Testament writer, and the Gospel. The pastor will sing a psalm between the second reading (the epistle reading) and the Gospel. When you hear the pastor singing, you know the Gospel lesson is coming up soon.

When the pastor announces the Gospel reading, the congregation **stands** and **responds** by **singing**, “Glory be to Thee, O Lord!” When the pastor finishes the Gospel reading, the congregation **responds** by **singing**, “Praise be to Thee, O Christ!”

THE CREED

Right after the Gospel reading, the pastor will say, “We now confess our faith together in the words of the Apostle’s Creed (or the Nicene Creed).” These Creeds (a fancy word for a statement of faith) are in bold letters and the pastor and congregation **speak** them together.

SERMON HYMN AND SERMON

After the Creed, everyone **sits** down while we **sing** a hymn before the sermon. After the hymn, the pastor will approach the pulpit and give the sermon.

THE OFFERTORY, THE OFFERING, AND THE GENERAL PRAYERS

After the sermon, the congregation joins together by **singing** the offertory, (the words and tune of which is found in the bulleting right after the Creed). After the Offertory, the congregation sits, and the ushers collect the offering. When they have collected the offering, they bring it forward, and the pastor places it on the altar. Once this is done, the pastor will have the congregation **stand** for the prayers of the church.

At the end of each prayer, the pastor will say, "Lord in Your mercy." The congregation **responds** by **saying**, "Hear our Prayer."

LORD'S PRAYER, HOLY COMMUNION, BENEDICTION

If there's no communion, after the General Prayers, the pastor and congregation join together by **speaking** (praying) the Lord's Prayer, which is printed in bold letters in the hymnal. After the Lord's Prayer, there is one more hymn, one more prayer, and the Benediction (or blessing). The Benediction is always the last thing printed in the Order of Service. The congregation **responds** to the Benediction by **singing** three "Amens." After the Benediction, everyone **sings** a closing hymn.

If there is communion, after the General Prayers, we move into The Preface found on the bottom of page 24. Here, the pastor speaks and the congregation **responds** with **singing**. After The Preface, the pastor prays the Proper Preface (page 25) and then the congregation **sings** The Sanctus (page 26).

After the Sanctus, everyone **speaks** (or prays) the Lord's Prayer. Then, the pastor speaks the Words of Institution (page 27) and addresses the congregation with the Pax Domini (Peace of the Lord) (page 27). After this the congregation joins in **singing** the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) (page 28).

After the distribution, when everyone has returned to their seats, the congregation **stands** and **sings** The Nunc Dimittis (Now Let Us Depart) on page 29. Once this is finished, we close with The Thanksgiving (page 30), a prayer (page 31), and the Benediction (page 31). The last thing we always do is **sing** a closing hymn.

CONCLUSION TO PART I

Worship at Our Redeemer might be something different than what you are used to. Some find traditional Lutheran worship too formal. Others find it not formal enough. In either case, it is good for us to remember that different churches and denominations worship differently.

We are a traditional Lutheran congregation, so our congregation approaches worship in a very traditional Lutheran way. But, if you are new, give it a chance. The depth and profoundness of Lutheran worship is not easily experienced or understood in one, two, or even three services. Instead, it takes a while. And if you're a lifelong Lutheran, let the reality of God coming to us in worship through His Word and Sacraments, bringing us forgiveness, salvation, life, hope, and peace—let this reality sink in and stimulate the profound joy and comfort God intended worship to bring.

In a culture where everything seems to revolve around entertainment, convenience, and instant gratification, traditional Lutheran worship offers a real encounter with God. In worship, God comes to us, reminding us to slow down and pay attention to what He has to say about who we are and what He has done for us in Christ.

“Part II of the Divine Service: Why Do Lutherans Worship the Way They Do?”

(taken from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod website)

***Worship is like no place else in this world.
But there is one place that it does resemble, and that is heaven.***

The story is told of how Christianity was introduced to Russia. More than 1,000 years ago Grand Duke Vladimir of Kiev was interested in selecting an appropriate religion for his new nation. His emissaries investigated the main religions of the day, including Roman Catholicism and Islam. But it was only after visiting the chief site of the Orthodox Church in Constantinople that they found what they were looking for. In their report to their duke, the emissaries noted that in Orthodox worship there was such solemn splendor that they had a hard time knowing whether they were in heaven or on earth.

Worship is like that: one foot in heaven with the other here on earth. What brings heaven into our earthly worship is not dependent on the elaborateness of the service or the sincerity of our devotion. Rather, it is because of the One who is present in our worship that we experience heaven on earth.

If worship is "heaven on earth," then it stands to reason that what we do and say in worship should in some sense give us a foretaste of that great feast to come. In the following tour of the Divine Service we will see how the ancient texts of the liturgy give us that glimpse of heaven and, more importantly, how they deliver to us, here and now, the eternal benefits of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

INVOCATION

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." How many times have we heard those words? And yet, they testify with renewed freshness to our identity as children of God who've been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:1–8). Wouldn't it be something if God's faithful would remember that every time they heard the words of the Invocation, perhaps tracing the sign of the cross as a visible reminder?

St. Paul beautifully captures the eternal significance of our baptism into Christ when he writes to the Galatians that "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). We are clothed with his righteousness. Unlike the man in the parable of the wedding feast who had no wedding garment, when we stand before our Judge on the Last Day, we will be clothed and covered, robed in the purity of Christ.

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Already now, in this heaven on earth we call worship, we stand with boldness before the triune God who has claimed us and named us.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

We can indeed approach God with confidence. And yet, because we stand on this side of our Lord's final return, we still have with us the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. We have not yet faced the final judgment. And so, with sin still working in us, the condemnation of God's Law must still confront us, lest we have any delusions that we might have something to boast of before our mighty Judge.

Above all else, Confession and Absolution keep us honest—honest with ourselves and honest before God. The act of confession is not some work that we lay before the Father's throne; rather, it is the simple acknowledgment that God's Word is true and right and that when we measure ourselves against its demands, we come up short. God's Word says "you shall not give false testimony," but in truth we have lied and gossiped and slandered." And so, the Christian confesses: "Lord, Your Word is true; I have sinned."

There are three basic ways to handle sin and guilt. One is to ignore or minimize them. We've all been tempted in that direction more than a few times. Isn't that, after all, what our sinful human nature is all about? Another way is to institutionalize them, especially the guilt part. After all, if you can keep people feeling just guilty enough, you will keep them coming back for more.

The third way is to give sin and guilt their proper due, and then to silence them. That is the way of God's absolution. With his forgiveness, our sin is removed from us as far as the east is from the west. Christians know that, but they also need to hear it often. We need to be reminded that those familiar words, "I forgive you all your sins," are not just some impersonal announcement. They say what they mean and accomplish what they promise. Jesus himself said to his disciples that the sins they forgive are forgiven (John 20:23).

The last and greatest absolution that will ever be spoken to us will be at the last judgment. In the final pages of the Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis provides a marvelous description of this event. As each individual comes before Aslan—the lion who is Lewis' figure for Christ—one of two things happens: either the person gazes directly into Aslan's face and recognizes his forgiving countenance, or, upon seeing the lion's stern demeanor, passes into his long shadow, forever to be separated from Christ.

In the Confession and Absolution we are being readied for our appearance before Christ on the Last Day. And hidden behind those comforting words that our sins are forgiven is the invitation, "Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt. 25:34). When our Lord speaks those words to us at the Last Day, Confession and Absolution as we know it will cease, for we will then bask in the eternal absolution of the Lamb.

KYRIE

In this world of sin and death, Christians have plenty of opportunities to join in the brief, yet all-encompassing prayer of the Kyrie: "Lord, have mercy." All around us we see the results of hatred, envy, lust, and greed. Surely, the world is in need of God's mercy. It's no wonder that the church, in her worship, pleads before God on behalf of the whole world. It's a prayer that no one else is going pray.

Yet, when we cry out, "Lord, have mercy," there is confidence in our voices because we know that God is indeed merciful. He desires to bring relief to the suffering that is all around us. Our prayer may not always bring an immediate response—at least, not the response that we are seeking—but even then, we commend ourselves and the whole world to a merciful God.

Like the confession of sins, however, our cry for mercy will be silenced in heaven. There we will see the results of God's mercy, as before the throne and in front of the Lamb will stand all the redeemed—not one of them worthy of the honor.

HYMN OF PRAISE

On the night of Jesus' birth, the angels let loose their earth-shattering song of praise: "Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." On that specific occasion, their praise gave utterance to the good news that the Son of God had come in the flesh. Heaven had come down to earth! And ever since, the Church has continued to rejoice in this miracle of our salvation.

The opening words of the Gloria in Excelsis are followed by a hymn of praise to the triune God. One can imagine the faithful singing these words in heaven: "We praise you, we bless you, we worship you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory." Our focus is on the incarnate Son of God, the only-begotten Son, the Lamb of God, and only Son of the Father. And if that isn't enough to name this One who is the object of our worship and praise, twice we sing, "you take away the sin of the world." There it is, the heart and substance of the Christian faith. In heaven we will be gathered around the throne and the Lamb, confessing that he alone is holy, he alone is the Lord.

In more recent times, the Lutheran Church in North America has made a significant contribution to the church's liturgy through the alternate Hymn of Praise, "This is the Feast." Drawing directly from the description of heaven in the Revelation to St. John, our voices are joined to that heavenly throng as we sing with them, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessings!" (Rev. 5:12)

WORD OF GOD AND SERMON

Frequently we conclude the reading of Holy Scripture with the phrase, "This is the Word of the Lord!" More than just a "word" from God, this is his revelation in which he makes known to us his will, most specifically, his merciful will that desires our salvation. Ultimately, this word points us to the Word, the incarnate Son of God. He is God's final and full revelation to us, the mirror of the Father's heart. That is the point that the writer to the Hebrews makes in the opening verses of his epistle: "In many and various ways God spoke to his people of old by the prophets, but now in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2a). Only through him—God's only Son—are we able to know the Father's favor and grace.

In the sermon, the Word of God is brought to bear on the lives of the hearers. This is the equivalent of sitting at the feet of Jesus. But it's more than mere instruction. Through the sermon, God speaks to us with his two-edged sword of condemnation and promise, Law and Gospel. The subject of the sermon is both God and us. Through the sermon we come to a better understanding of ourselves, especially our need for God's forgiveness. But we also come face to face with God's mercy and love. Week after week, God's faithful hear the voice of their Good Shepherd, preparing them, in a sense, for that final day when Jesus calls them to their eternal reward.

CREED

In the course of his earthly ministry, Jesus put this hard question to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" He wasn't asking for the opinions of the crowds. He wanted a confession of faith. In reality, this confession is no different than the confession of sins. In both, we acknowledge that what God has said is true. When we confess our sins, we acknowledge the truth that God speaks about us—that we are sinners. When we confess the faith of the church in the creed, our confession speaks about God—who he is and what he has done.

In every age, the same question is put to the church: who do you say that I am? As we open our mouths and begin, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty . . . ," we confess a profound truth that has passed over the lips of Christians in every generation. This confession of the triune God is the property of no single individual, but of the whole church, including the whole company of heaven. There are more than a few saints and martyrs who put their lives on the line as they defended the truths that we confess in the creeds. Think of Athanasius, that faithful fourth-century pastor and confessor, who was exiled numerous times for his defense of the truth against the false teachers of his day. Or Luther, who stood firm against the combined might of the Roman Church and the Holy Roman Empire. In our own day, there are faithful Christians who risk their lives—and sometimes die—to confess these truths.

In the Revelation to St. John, we find confession going on in heaven. Just listen to the snippets of the grand confession that swirls around God's throne:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,
 who was and is and is to come! (4:8b)
 Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
 to receive glory and honor and power,
 for you created all things,
 and by your will they existed and were created (4:11).
 Worthy are you to take the scroll
 and to open its seals,
 for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
 from every tribe and language and people and nation,
 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
 and they shall reign on the earth (5:9–10).

In the same way, as we stand on holy ground where Jesus comes in his Word and Sacraments, we join that noble company of saints and martyrs, confessing these holy truths concerning the triune God.

OFFERTORY

"What shall I render to the Lord?" Truth is, we have nothing to render him. We brought nothing into this world, and we will take nothing with us when we depart. As Jesus so poignantly tells us, our treasures are already stored up for us in heaven (Matt. 6:19–21).

There is, however, an offering that we do make, both now in our worship and one day in heaven itself. It is the sacrifice of thanksgiving as we call on the name of the Lord (Ps. 116:17). In the Apology to the Augsburg Confession (Article 24), this eucharistic sacrifice is carefully distinguished from the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ. The sacrifice for sins belongs to him alone. Every time we try to grab that honor for ourselves, we come up short—very short. But when we recognize our rightful place—that we are on the receiving end of God's merciful goodness—then the sacrifice of thanksgiving cannot help but pour forth from our lips as we give our thanks to the One who gave everything for us.

The giving of our firstfruits, whether it is money or possessions, time or talents, is also a part of this sacrifice of thanksgiving. Our mouths cannot remain separated from the rest of our bodies. If the thanksgiving is flowing from our lips, then it will also find expression in the giving of our very selves for the sake of Christ and the neighbor.

SANCTUS

If any part of the service has been recognized as providing a glimpse of heaven, it's the Sanctus: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of your glory." This is the eternal song of the angels who hover over the throne of God in the vision of heaven that was given to Isaiah (Is. 6:1–4). Such was the splendor of their song that the very foundations of the threshold of the temple trembled at the sound.

At first glance, these words appear to be out of place at this point in the service. Nevertheless, the reality is that there is nothing in this entire world that compares with the miracle of Jesus' bodily presence to feed his people. In this meal God is breaking into our world to give us life. No wonder our repeated cry is "Hosanna in the highest," for what is more needed in this dying world than the Lord's salvation?

The second half of the Sanctus contains a statement as bold as the first. Here we have our own little Palm Sunday. Just as the crowds cried out to Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, so do we declare, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Mt. 21:9; Ps. 118:26). Heaven continues to break into our world as Jesus, our

humble king, comes riding into our midst in the Lord's name. This confession in the Sanctus of Jesus' real presence is so significant that Luther proposed moving the Sanctus after the Words of Institution in order to highlight the reality of the words we sing.

WORDS OF OUR LORD

Among many Christians, the words of Jesus that we often refer to as the Words of Institution are nothing more than an historical report: this is what Jesus did and what he said. Period. We have been blessed to know, however, that these words mean much more. They do what they say. According to the command of Christ, we celebrate the Lord's Supper not as a mere meal of remembrance but as a Sacrament by which Jesus himself comes to us. We don't transport ourselves back in time; rather, he comes to us and brings heaven down to earth for our benefit.

Of course, in heaven we won't receive the Lord's Supper. There we will have Jesus—the Bread of heaven—in all his fullness. But for now, as we wait for his return, he establishes his own beachhead in our sin-infested world, coming as our defender and deliverer, offering his own body and blood as the medicine of immortality. Here we find strength for the journey as Christ dwells in us and we in him. And the more we partake of this sacred food, the greater our desire becomes to be with Christ forever. In the words of Thomas Aquinas' great eucharistic hymn:

O Christ, whom now beneath a veil we see:

 May what we thirst for soon our portion be,

To gaze on Thee unveiled, and see Thy face,

 The vision of Thy glory, and Thy grace. (*Hymnal Supplement 98 #849*)

AGNUS DEI

Turning again to the Revelation to St. John, at one point John sees a scroll in the right hand of the One who was sitting on the throne. A "strong angel" puts forth the challenge, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" Then, between the throne and the elders, the Lamb comes into view. Undoubtedly the most significant feature in John's description of this Lamb is that it is a lamb who appears to have been slain.

When we sing the Agnus Dei, "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us," we are preaching and praying all at once. It was, after all, with these very words that John the Baptizer pointed his disciples to Jesus (John 1:29, 36). As we prepare to feast on the Lamb of our salvation, we do indeed proclaim him who gave his life for us. Here is the Lamb of God! Yet we also pray to him who is

now present in his body and blood. We pray for mercy, mercy from the One who showed the true depths of mercy and compassion as he was silently led to slaughter, dying like a lamb shorn of all its honor.

Returning one more time to the apostle John's vision of heaven, we later hear his description of the saints in white robes. "Who are they?" John is asked. The answer: "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:13–14). This is the blood of our redemption, the propitiatory sacrifice that was foreshadowed at the first Passover when the blood of the year-old lambs was sprinkled on the doorpost as a sign that blood had already been shed in that house. In his Easter hymn, Martin Luther applies that incident to us, thus revealing our standing before the Father:

See, his blood now marks our door,

Faith points to it;

Death passes o'er,

And Satan cannot harm us. (*Lutheran Worship* #123)

So it is at every celebration of the Lord's Supper. The blood of the Lamb is poured out for our drinking and his flesh for our eating. Clearly, God's mercy is shown, and his peace rests on us.

DISTRIBUTION

Try for a moment to picture the heavenly throng standing before the throne of God on the Last Day. The numbers will be staggering. And yet, united as we all are to Christ, the Bridegroom, we will be one—his elect Bride. As the faithful make their way to the altar to feast on the Bread of Life in the distribution, they are given a glimpse of that holy Bride. Oh yes, we see all of her warts and blemishes: the petty bickering over trivial matters, the deep disagreements on more weighty issues, and the painful ways in which we sometimes treat one another. Yet, by our common confession of the truth, we are one in Christ. As Christ gives himself to us in this holy meal, he strengthens that unity and bids us love one another with a deep and abiding love. How can it be any other way, as we are sent from the table with the blessing to depart in peace?

NUNC DIMITTIS

Another Lutheran contribution to the church's liturgy is the use of the Nunc Dimittis as the post-communion canticle: "Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace." At first glance it appears that we're taking the words of Simeon completely out of context. After all, what does his experience have to do with ours? How can

Holy Communion ever compare to Simeon's unique honor of holding the infant Jesus in his arms during the child's first visit to the temple at the tender age of 40 days (Lk 2:25–38)?

Of course, we would love to have been in the temple and shared in the experience with Simeon. For that matter, we would give anything to have been the first—along with the shepherds—to see the infant Jesus, or to have been with the Magi as they offered their gifts to him. But, as Luther so insightfully taught, we don't find Christ in those places. Through the events of his incarnation, birth, crucifixion, and resurrection our Lord has accomplished our salvation. But the benefits of his saving work—forgiveness, life, and salvation—are distributed to us through his means of grace, his Word and Sacraments. We can't go back to stand with Simeon in the temple. The good news is that we don't have to.

So when, following our reception of the Lord's Supper, we sing Simeon's ancient song of faith—"Lord, now let your servant depart in peace"—nothing could be more appropriate. Indeed, our eyes have seen his salvation. Better yet, we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8). So, what could be better than holding the infant Jesus in our arms? How about eating and drinking his body and blood given for the forgiveness of our sins? This truly is heaven on earth, because here we have Jesus and all his benefits.

BENEDICTION

"The Lord bless you and keep you." Recall again the words of Jesus in the parable of the sheep and the goats: "Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom." The blessing that God speaks to us in the Benediction prepares us for that final summons. Throughout the Divine Service, God is forming us in his likeness as he establishes in us a deeper and more lasting faith toward him and a persistent and steadfast love for one another.

"The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you." In their reports of Jesus' Transfiguration, the evangelists tell us that Jesus shone more brightly than the sun, prompting Peter to say, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." In heaven we will have the same response because it will be good—very good—to be in the presence of the Light of the world. For the moment, we see only dimly, but then we will see face to face. Still, it is good to be here even now, in this heaven on earth that we call worship, for already here God showers us with his grace.

"The Lord lift up his countenance on you and give you peace." We Christians are truly blessed in that God does not hide his face from us. In all other religions there is ultimately doubt as to their gods' attitudes toward them. How can it be otherwise,

given that their gods are the creation of their own imaginations? But ours is the creator of heaven and earth. To be sure, he is a stern judge who holds the sinner accountable. But in the person of his only Son, we see our Father's true nature, his fatherly heart of love. That is the countenance that he lifts up toward us in his holy Word and Sacraments as he reveals his mercy and grace.

Where the Lord blesses and makes his face shine and lifts up his gracious countenance on us, *there* is peace. Not the peace of this world, but peace between God and his faithful people. We know that peace because even now, in Word and Sacraments, we have Jesus and all his benefits. And in heaven we will rest in his eternal peace.