

# EXPLORING OUR FAITH

## A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 7 –The Word of God

*This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.*

**We proclaim and respond to the Word of God.** Over the last weeks, we looked at the “gathering rite” that constitutes the first step in the Eucharist: our coming together in the presence of God. Now we move from that introduction into what constitutes the heart of the Word of God half of the service: the readings from Holy Scripture, the sermon, and our affirmation of Faith through the Nicene Creed. Think of it this way: we come together, stepping out of our everyday secular world into the special holy realm of God as disclosed to us through the Bible. Thus enlarged and transformed in our orientation, we are prepared to pray, confess our sins, and proceed together to the Table. “Conversion” is a word we don’t often use in the Episcopal Church, but each Sunday we undergo a mini-conversion, a mini-change or refreshing of our baptismal orientation and outlook, through the Eucharist. Hearing and responding to God through God’s Word is central to this conversion.

**The lectionary.** The Scripture readings we hear each week come from something called the lectionary. Lectionaries for both the Eucharist and the daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer are at the back of the Prayer Book. The lectionary Episcopal churches use is an updated, ecumenical one called the Revised Common Lectionary. It runs in a three-year cycle, A B and C; we are currently concluding Year C. Each year centers on one of the gospels: Matthew = A, Mark = B, Luke = C. Selections from John get folded into each year. The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible reading matches up with the gospel; the second reading – from the New Testament books following the four gospels – moves through sections of these books in blocks of several weeks at a time. Over the three-year cycle we hear a very full portion of both Testaments.

**Bible versions.** There are dozens of translations of the Bible, which was originally written in Hebrew (the Old Testament) and Greek (the New Testament). St. Andrew’s, like most Episcopal Churches, generally uses one called the New Revised Standard Version. This traces back to the King James Version, promulgated in 1611 as the standard for the Church of England by its king, James I. It strives for scholarly accuracy together with a rather formal, traditional tone. Its cadences, and those of the Prayer Book, preserve a beauty that has been a treasured hallmark of Anglicanism through the centuries.

**What do we mean by “the Word of God”?** The first two readings in the Eucharist are followed by the lector’s acclamation, “the Word of the Lord.” The gospel is acclaimed as, “the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” At ordinations, the ordinand affirms belief in “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments [as] the Word of God.” So what do we mean when we give the Bible this kind of authority? Anglicans are, for the most part, not literalists when it comes to their use of Scripture. We understand that the Bible is a “library” (the literal meaning of the word Bible) of writings reflecting many voices over a period of centuries and a great variety of literary types (among them novels, poetry,

exhortation, history). What all these writings have in common is that they are written by people of faith, or wrestling with faith, to communicate that faith to others. This is the operation of the Holy Spirit. It is through this “incarnation” of God’s presence in the writings of human beings that God’s Word is communicated. That incarnation or inspiration continues as Scripture is proclaimed, reflected on, and interpreted homiletically in the Eucharist. The Word of God, in other words, is always active; it calls out to us, requires response. It is a living, real presence in the service.