

EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service

Session 9 – The Bible is Our Story

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. We're continuing this week our look at the central section of the Word of God half of the Eucharist. Readings from Scripture have been part of Christian worship from the very beginning, carrying on the practice of the Jewish synagogues from which the first followers of Jesus came. At first these readings would all have been from the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), but very soon Christian writings were included: what became our New Testament. The three-reading pattern we know today – Old Testament, New Testament, Gospel – was adopted by Anglican churches following Roman Catholic reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

The primacy of the gospel reading. The readings of Scripture, including the psalm which is a response to the first reading, can if we are not careful blur together. We get a lot of words thrown at us in short order! The use of silence, of thoughtful ceremonial accompaniment, congregational singing of the psalm, can help to break up the otherwise wordy sequence, enabling us to better attend to what is being read. Always the gospel reading should stand out. It is given primacy because it recounts the story of Jesus. That is why in a Eucharist the gospel must be read by an ordained person, why it is preceded by an alleluia or other gospel song, and why it is accompanied by ceremonies such as elevating the gospel book, making the sign of the cross and kissing the gospel book. Often, as is our custom at St. Andrew's, the gospel is read from a central place, though it may also be read from the lectern or pulpit. Before reading, the priest or deacon may trace three small crosses – on head, lips and chest – to signify commitment to the Gospel in thought, speech and heart. Members of the congregation may join in this gesture. Everyone stands for the gospel reading to show their respect for the Word.

Lectors. It is desirable that the first two readings be read by members of the congregation, who are known in Episcopal-speak as lectors (Latin for reader). The Prayer Book stresses that in liturgy the congregation is never to be a passive audience, but always an active participant. While the readings are printed in the bulletin, it is desirable to listen to them with the heart rather than just reading with the eyes. Reading them over before the service is a great way to prepare to hear them. Printing the readings in the bulletin also makes it easy to take them home for reflection during the week.