

The Service for the Lord's Day is a service of Word and Sacrament. We gather in the presence of the risen Christ, who appeared to the disciples on the first day of the week to open the Scriptures and break bread. Following Christ's example, the Church proclaims the gospel through Word and Sacrament each Lord's Day.

An order of worship, or liturgy, provides a meaningful pattern for this encounter with God. More than a random sequence of actions, it shapes our faith over time, forming us as Christ's disciples and preparing us to live faithfully in the world.

The order of worship we will explore in this series is rooted in Scripture, the traditions of the universal Church, and our Reformed heritage. Centered on Gathering, Word, Sacrament, and Sending, it keeps Word and Sacrament at the heart of the Church's life and worship. This pattern is not the only faithful way to order worship. Other forms may be equally appropriate, provided they are faithful to Scripture, open to the Spirit, and directed to God's glory.

The next couple of weeks we will be focusing on the elements of Gathering. I think of the opening of our worship service as being akin to stretching before one exercises in earnest. When we limber up, we let the body know that it needs to wake up, be alert, and ready to be stretched. The same is true for our spiritual lives. We don't just show up and have a liturgist read the scripture and have the preacher jump right in with the interpretation for our daily living. No, instead we gather with intention and preparation.

As those in the sanctuary arrive, they greet and check in with one another, and then find their way to the place in the room where they are most comfortable.

Those on Zoom, see one another, sometimes wave, write notes in the chat, and are free to unmute and greet one another with words.

As we near the time of the service, our music ministry offers us a prelude reminding us that it is time to turn our attention from fellowship toward worship. Once our attention is focused, our liturgist offers a word of welcome, and orients everyone to our service of worship – we try to make folks feel comfortable and know what they need to be able to move through the service with ease. Since we use hymnals from both of our denominations, we like to point out which we will be using and put an image of it on the screen as a reminder.

After the welcome and orientation, we allow stillness, sound, fire and water to usher us into our call to worship. This is a service of Word and Sacrament, and while we celebrate Holy Communion with one another once a month, we remind ourselves every week by pouring the water in the fonts that we share with Jesus the promise made in his baptism – that we are God’s beloved children blessed and bound by the covenant of God’s steadfast love. When we recall our own baptism, we renew our understanding of the sacrament as a symbol of dying and rising with Christ; that the brokenness of our humanity is washed away and new life is always present. All of that is conferred when we see and hear the water being poured.

Next come the actual words of the Call to Worship. This follows a tradition that goes as far back as, well, as far back as anyone who first gleaned an understanding that there was something more to life. That recognized that there was (is!) a divine entity that has the creative genius to fashion the world in which we live. To summarize Psalm 104 which contains themes of creation, God's providence, and praise:

Bless the Lord, O my soul! O *Adonai* my God, you are clothed with majesty and splendor.

You stretched out the heavens and set the earth on firm foundations.

Here, join me in this litany. I'll say the lines in plain text – you say the ones in bold:

You send springs into the valleys and provide water for every living creature.

You cause grass to grow for livestock and plants for people to cultivate.

The trees, birds, mountains, and seas all find their place in your care.

You appointed the sun and moon to mark the seasons and the rhythm of day and night.

How manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

All look to you, and you give them food in due season.

When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.

ALL Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Maker of All!

And there it is. The world we live in, the creatures with whom we share the planet, and the heavens that envelop us, evoke in us such awe, that all we can do – all we MUST do – is begin our time in worship by singing praise to God.

So, drawing on these themes, we often lean into the words of the psalmists to call ourselves to worship.

Our Reformed tradition understands God in a trinitarian way. So God is much more than Creator. Beginning with the covenants God made with the people of Israel, God also is our redeemer. Offering us guidelines for how to live ... giving us the command that we are to love – God, ourselves, and our neighbor ... that we are to be stewards of the planet entrusted to our care ... that we are to show unreasonable hospitality to those whom society inflicts injustice and pushes to the margins. In a moment I will talk about how, through this ethic of radical love, God helps us foster a healthy respect for our lives and the lives of others despite our flaws.

Of course, we recognize the powerful way God accomplished that feat in Jesus the Christ. And so we sing our praise to God for new life. And, of course, there is the expression of God through the Holy Spirit which activates God's power in our present living. It is the Spirit that helps us understand God's Word; it is the Spirit who accompanies us in our times of trial; it is the Spirit who partners with us in using our gifts to be a blessing in the world. It is to the Sustaining power of the Spirit of the Risen Christ to which we also call ourselves to worship.

So, we not only draw from the words of scripture, but we also call upon the creative artists who have given expression to the mighty Is-ness of God that makes us who we are and drives us to offer God our praise.

This past January I was introduced to such a voice. Her name is Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, and I have subscribed to her offering of a poem a day. Her gift is drawing from common experiences in life and curating them in such a way as to enable the reader to see more. The poem I'll read for you is set in the waiting area of an airport concourse – I trust many of you can relate. It is called “Among Strangers.”

I sat for hours in concourse A,
the plane delayed, delayed again,
surrounded by a young mother
with three hungry children and two
elderly couples who played endless
rounds of go fish and men in dark suits
on their cell phones and girls filming
dances for TikTok, when I looked up
and saw out the window a double rainbow,
ridiculously pretty against the slate sky,
and not wanting to be alone in my joy,
I touched the arm of the boy beside me
and he leaped up and ran to the window,
and all of us stopped to point or smile
or make jokes about pots of gold.
We will never see each other again,
but for a moment, we stood together
at the edge of delight, and the rainbows,
they just kept getting brighter, and I thought

it couldn't possibly get any more lovely.

And the boy smiled at me. And then it did.

The Call to Worship is a tap on the shoulder to look outside of ourselves for just a few minutes and notice the awesomeness of God; no matter what life is throwing at us in a particular moment. I love that it was a double-rainbow in the case of Rosemerry, and the strangers around her in concourse A. It was a gleeful, multi-colored shout from the heavens to say, "Hey! Your situation's no fun. But it's going to be okay." And the child's smile was a reminder that there is joy to be had in each other when we appreciate the beauty in this life.

We, too, are travelers who have chosen to enrich our lives together. Each Sunday we are called to worship to lift up our heads and look at God, and look at one another, and recognize that we are bound together by a covenantal bow. And through this service of worship our spirits are picked up, our lives are encouraged to see the promises of God as they appear before us.

The rainbow is a fitting transition to the element of worship we will discuss next week - the call to reconciliation through repentance and the grace offered us in the resurrection life of Christ Jesus. In the Jewish rabbinic tradition the rainbow served as a sign of God's covenant to no longer judge human beings with destruction but through just mercy. One particularly evocative rabbinic image is the rainbow as an unstrung bow, pointed away from the earth. It suggests that God's covenant is not merely a promise to remember but a public declaration that the divine weapon has

been laid aside. Many Christian theologians have seen in this image a fitting anticipation of the gospel's proclamation that mercy triumphs over judgment—not by denying justice, but by transforming the relationship between God and creation through steadfast covenantal love. The confession comes as a natural progression following our offering of praise to God, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and through Christ and the Holy Spirit the Redeemer and Sustainer of us all.

Now let us turn our attention on one who has helped to cultivate our worship of God through song and music. As we celebrate the ministry of music offered by Keith, and offer him farewell as he and Marc prepare to move to Phoenix, let us begin, appropriately, with song.