

Today we have reached the eighth of nine Sundays where we are focusing on why we worship the way we do. An order of worship provides a meaningful pattern for our encounter with God through the resurrected Christ and Holy Spirit. More than a sequence of actions, our Sunday liturgies shape our faith over time, forming us as Christ's disciples. The order of worship is rooted in Scripture, the traditions of the universal Church, and our Reformed heritage. It is centered on the movements of Gathering, Word, Sacrament, and Sending.

Today, we are focusing on the heart of it all: the proclamation of the Word and our response through the Sacraments.

Let me begin where John the gospel writer begins. His prologue opens with an unmistakable echo of Genesis, that ancient creation account where God spoke light into being amidst the void. John captures this cosmic significance when he writes: "In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light – a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken." The connection is intentional and profound. Just as God's creative word brought forth light and life in the beginning, so too does the Word continue to be the source of all life and illumination.

But John takes this theology one crucial step further. That life-giving Light, that life-affirming Word, became incarnate in a particular human being: Jesus of Nazareth. In him, John proclaims, "we saw the Word's glory ... filled with grace, filled with truth." Here is the stunning claim at the heart of Christian faith: God's word is not merely abstract or distant. It has a face. It has walked among us and suffered with us. It has broken bread with us and witnessed our everyday living. The eternal Word became flesh.

This incarnational theology shapes everything about how we worship. We are, fundamentally, a Christocentric community—centered on Christ. Our entire approach to reading Scripture, interpreting the Word, and hearing God's voice follows the pattern Jesus himself established. After his resurrection, walking with two confused disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus opened the Scriptures to them, showing them "things about himself in all the scriptures." This is our task each Lord's Day: to talk about the glory of God revealed in Jesus the risen Christ, and to show how all that Jesus taught through word and deed is meant to imprint upon our hearts so that we may reflect that "life-giving Light" to the world.

The sermon, then, is the most focused time in our worship service for this interpretation of the Word. But preaching is not casual work. Our Presbyterian Book of Order describes it as requiring: (W-3.0301 *Theology of Proclamation*)

- diligence and discernment in the study of Scripture,
- listening for the voice of God through the discipline of daily prayer,
- theological reflection on the message of the gospel,
- sensitivity to the context of the congregation,
- attentiveness to what the Spirit is saying to the church,
- awareness of events in the world, and
- consistent and personal obedience to Jesus Christ."

Do you need a Master of Divinity to preach? No. We are all members of the priesthood of believers, and you've heard powerful sermons from peers in this congregation. Yet for consistency and depth, we employ trained ministers who dedicate themselves to this demanding work. The art of preaching is delicate, and each minister develops their own rhythm of preparation.

Let me invite you into my own process, not because it's exceptional, but because it might help you understand what happens behind the scenes each week. We follow the Revised Common Lectionary—an organized three-year cycle that ensures we encounter a breadth of biblical texts. This lectionary is ordered around the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with John's more esoteric gospel sprinkled throughout. Each week includes a psalm, a Hebrew Scripture reading, and a New Testament reading complementing the gospel. When we became Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church, we developed a spreadsheet tracking these readings along with thematic connections. Our worship team plans thematic backgrounds; the music director selects hymns and anthems; the pastor develops sermon titles and the overall liturgy. This collaborative approach ensures our worship flows with intentionality and coherence.

Every Tuesday morning, I join a group of pastors studying the lectionary texts two weeks ahead. That afternoon, I compose the order of worship. By Wednesday at noon, the liturgy is complete—complete with prayers, readings, and responsive elements that all reinforce the central proclamation. Throughout the week, I immerse myself in commentaries, word studies exploring the original Hebrew and Greek, and contextual awareness of what's happening in our world and our community. Our Thursday morning Bible study, ably led by Pat Baker, often provides breakthrough insights that find their way into Friday's sermon manuscript.

I like to keep in mind content, of course, but also with an ear to how it will be received by you all. The last thing I want to do is be a drone that causes you to keep looking at your watch. Not every sermon will speak to every person, but my prayer is always that something offered each week will nurture your faith journey.

Yet here's the remarkable thing: even Jesus' own preaching had its limits. After Jesus opened all the Scriptures to those two disciples on the Emmaus road, explaining everything about himself, Luke tells us they still did not recognize him. Knowledge alone was insufficient. It took something else—something physical, tangible, ritualistic. Jesus broke bread in their midst, *reminding them of what occurred in the upper room before Jesus' crucifixion*, and only then did Luke tell us: "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."

This pattern teaches us something crucial about human nature and spiritual formation. The interpretation of the Word, however eloquent or true, isn't always enough. We need rituals that bypass our analytical brains and speak directly to our hearts. We need physical, embodied actions that enable us to recognize the presence of the risen Christ in our midst. The church has preserved many such rituals over the centuries, but the Protestant church recognizes two as Sacraments: Communion and Baptism.

A sacrament, in our understanding, is a sacred ritual action instituted by Jesus where the Holy Spirit uses physical elements—water, bread, and grape juice (fermented or not)—to make God's grace and presence visible and effective.

Baptism is the once-for-a-lifetime sacrament through which "a person is joined with the universal church, the body of Christ. In baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always." ([UCC website](#)) Each Sunday, we pour water into our baptismal fonts as a tangible reminder of this covenant. Those fonts remain accessible throughout our service, inviting you to dip a finger and remember the promise made upon your life.

There are pivotal moments when remembering our baptism becomes especially powerful—seasons of awakening, renewal, or commitment. Our church welcomes opportunities to publicly reaffirm our baptismal covenant during such moments, acknowledging and affirming how the Spirit is stirring within us.

Holy Communion follows the pattern of remembrance Jesus established in the Upper Room and reaffirmed on the Emmaus road. We return regularly to the table because, even after hearing the Word proclaimed, we still struggle to fully recognize the risen Christ. In the simple, ordinary elements of grain and grape, Jesus offers his body and blood, making a new covenant with us — forgiveness of sins and the repeated opportunity to reshape ourselves into the beloved children God claims us to be.

I love how the First Nations Version translates Romans 12:1: each time we receive communion, we present ourselves—"whole beings, heart, mind, and strength—to the Great Spirit as a living sacrifice." When we do this "in a sacred and spiritual manner," the text continues, we "will make God's heart glad."

The deeper insight from Romans 12 is transformative. Paul urges us: do not allow "the ways of this world to mold and shape" you. Instead, let "Creator change you from the inside out, *in the way a caterpillar becomes a butterfly.*"

The Word and the Sacraments are catalysts for this metamorphosis—enabling us to grow beyond how the world sees and judges us, how our family and friends define us, and even how we understand ourselves in order to become something only God can fully see!

And here's what happens next: as believers each grow in this way and come together in community, we become capable of applying Christ's teaching *together* in ways we cannot yet imagine. Our diverse gifts, when offered in service, bless our world in extraordinary ways.

Next week, we will look at the latter half of Romans chapter 12, and how we are sent from the time of worship to use our varieties of gifts to bless the world – through our work as a congregation, and in our everyday lives.

As we prepare for our leavetaking today, let's do so by asking the God of Hope to go with us.