

The Bible has an interesting trajectory. It starts with the garden of Eden, when everything was perfect and God dwelt on earth with His creatures. Once Adam and Eve rebelled against Him, that was lost. But He promises to restore this paradise when Jesus comes back and recreates this world. Therefore, the Bible has an arc, essentially from Eden back to Eden. But, we are in the middle, between these times. In this long interlude, God can seem absent, like He is nowhere to be found.

When problems happen, we wonder where God is. When our prayers seem to have no answer, we wonder where He went. What happened to God? In Isaiah 6, we hear the angels sing; “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” He is still working in this world, and every so often He pulls back the curtain so that someone can get a peak of this reality. Moses saw God on Mount Sinai. Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in His divine glory on the mount of transfiguration. But, most of the time, we don’t see God’s glory.

That isn’t to say that He is not here, He just masks His presence. In the first part of our service, we come to God in prayer, and He answers in His word. Now, as we move into the second major part of the service, God is going to come in a new way, in the Sacrament of the Altar.

But how are we to get ready for this? All too often, we treat the Sacrament of the Altar as if it is not that big of a deal. It is just something we do when it is offered in Church. As a result, all too often, we don’t think about preparing. We come to church and expect to receive the Sacrament.

It is a good practice, obviously, to take time for self-examination. In 1 Cor 11:28-29 Paul warns us: “Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.”

But how do we do this; how do we prepare for the Sacrament? First, we need to remember what is truly happening in the Sacrament. This is not just a memorial meal, where we remember something that happened. It is that, but it is more than that. Jesus promises us to be here, to be present bodily in the Sacrament. He tells us His body comes to us in the bread. He assures us His blood comes to us in the wine. He is actually, physically, coming! In this, He is breaking through to be present with us, in the Sacrament.

As such, we need to make sure that we are truly ready for His coming.

If you knew that Jesus was coming, what would you do? If He made an appointment to come to you, how would you prepare? I think it is safe to say that the first thing we would do is to clean-house, just as we clean our houses when we expect guests. But, with Jesus, we want to, essentially, clean house in our entire lives. It is not just outward cleaning. We should get rid of all sin and evil in our lives.

So, what is there hiding in your life that you need to have cleansed? Would you want Jesus to come as you are looking at things you shouldn't? Would you want Jesus to come and hear you spreading gossip? Would you want Jesus to come and witness you lose your temper? Would you want Jesus to come and see your greed?

Whatever sin you have in your life, clean it out! Confess that sin to Christ and receive His forgiveness. This is why we always start a Divine Service where we will receive the Sacrament, with Confession and Absolution.

But God calls for not just a confession, but repentance. We need to truly repent, to turn away from our sin. Simply put: stop living like that! Turn from your sins and change your ways.

He knows us, what we try to hide, and what is in our hearts. He is not like ordinary houseguests. For a normal guest, we can clean house for their coming, and then after they leave, we can let the clutter start building back up and they will never know. But Jesus knows what sins stack up in our lives.

This is where, visiting with Jesus, with God in the flesh, is different than a normal guest. Christ comes to make us pure and holy, not just to visit. He is the One who comes to cleanse us, not us cleanse ourselves for Him. He comes to bring blessings. This is why we start the Service of the Sacrament as we do.

We start this part of the service with another salutation, a blessing where the pastor blesses the congregation “The LORD be with you,” and the congregation returns the blessing. This is the second time we say this in the Divine Service. If this seems like we are starting over, we are; this is the start of the second service in Divine Service. We are resetting as we begin the Service of the Sacrament.

Once more, this is also a mini-ordination, where the congregation reaffirms the call of the pastor. In the Service of the Word, this is for the pastor to lead the prayers on behalf of the congregation and preach God’s Word. In the Service of the Sacrament, it is reaffirming that I am called here to administer the Sacrament.

From here, we are called to lift up our hearts, this is to turn our thoughts to God. We are here to turn our minds away from ourselves and to our LORD. This means to turn our hearts and minds from sin and temptation to God.

Next, we give thanks to God. This leads into something called “The Proper Preface.” This is called “proper,” because it is something that is specific to, or proper for, this time of the Church year. This part of the liturgy changes from season to season. Here we are specifically thanking God for whatever we are remembering this time of year. We are presently in the “common” season of the

church year, so it is less specific, but once we get to Advent, then we will find it changing with the seasons.

The proper preface ends by calling us to think more broadly of the Church. It always ends “with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your name, evermore praising you and saying ...” This common phrase is used to signal to the congregation that we are ready to join in the Sanctus. But even here, there is an important message to us. This reminds us that we are joining the praises of the angels and the saints in heaven.

Then in the song called the “Sanctus,” we join the song of the angels from Isaiah 6: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of thy glory.” This song, like so much of the liturgy, gets its name from the first word in Latin, and Santus means “holy.” In the Sanctus we also use a Hebrew word: “Sabaoth.” While it sounds like, Sabbath, it is very different. Sabaoth literally means hosts, or great armies. This is how the Old Testament speaks of the hosts, or armies, of angels. So, we are praising God as the Lord of the countless hosts of heaven.

Then, the Sanctus takes a sudden turn to – Palm Sunday? Notice that here we sing “Hosanna. Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” This is directly quoting and joining the crowds who celebrated Jesus’ triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. Earlier, in the Gloria in excelsis, we remembered Christmas, now we have jumped forward 33 years to Palm Sunday.

This is a radical shift! - or is it? What is it, above all else, for which we should be praising God? We praise Him for the blessings of this life, but there is more. The greatest thing that we praise Him for is that God the Son came into the

flesh to save us. That was the point of Palm Sunday. Jesus was coming into Jerusalem in order to suffer and die to cleanse us of our sins.

That is also the point of communion now! God the Son is coming into the flesh to bring His salvation, here, now, today!

Just think of how fitting the words of Palm Sunday are for us now. The first praise is “Hosanna,” which is an ancient form of praise. It comes from the Hebrew meaning “save us now.” Yet it is praise, because it is praising God for being the One who saves us. It is both praise and a plea for salvation – is that not fitting for Communion?

Then we repeat those words of the people of Jesus’ day “Blessed is He that comes in the Name of the Lord.” They were praising and blessing Jesus because He was coming in the Name of the Lord. He was coming to save them, even if they didn’t realize just how He would save them. While they did not understand, He was coming to give Himself on the altar of the Cross. There He would be the perfect sacrifice to win their and our salvation.

We repeat this, because Jesus is coming now, in the Sacrament, in the Name of the LORD. Here He comes to bring us salvation. He comes to the altar, to give us the very body and blood He sacrificed on the cross. We prepare for His coming, by asking His blessing, and turning our hearts from our sins.

Here, in this great interlude between the Garden of Eden and the New Creation, God still finds ways to come to be with us. He has not left us, but comes to us, with Jesus hiding Himself in the Sacrament to give us forgiveness, life, and salvation which gives us His presence now, and opens to us the way to His fuller presence for all eternity.