

Why Do We Do That?

This is the third in a series of articles on Lutheran customs and practices. Do you have an idea for a church practice you would like explained? Suggest it to Pastor Becker.

Paraments

In Lutheran churches, the altar, pulpit and lectern are usually hung with paraments, that is, the colored cloths with symbols on them. These change with various church seasons and occasions as a visual reminder of what we are celebrating in our worship. Paraments, like church seasons and holidays, are a custom which developed through the centuries of church history, and which Lutherans and some protestants felt no need to eliminate.

During Advent, blue paraments, the color of the sky, symbolize hope in the coming savior. Some churches still follow the older tradition of using purple for Advent, as during Lent.

White paraments during Christmas and Easter symbolize joyful celebration of the work of our Savior. White also used for other days focusing on the work of our Lord, such as Epiphany, Jesus Baptism, Maundy Thursday, etc., and for Thanksgiving worship.

Purple paraments during Lent symbolize repentance and the royalty of our savior king. Some churches have scarlet paraments used for Palm

Sunday and Maundy Thursday, symbolizing Jesus' blood, shed for us, and black paraments used on Good Friday. Our congregation follows the alternate custom of having the altar bare of paraments on Good Friday.

Green paraments during the Epiphany and Pentecost seasons symbolize the spiritual growth God gives to the church and to each believer.

Red paraments used on Pentecost and Reformation Sundays symbolize the work of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, red is also used for the ordination and installation of pastors. Red paraments may also be seen when a Saint's day falls on a Sunday during Epiphany or Pentecost seasons.

Unless there is a special day being observed, the color for weekdays is the same as the previous Sunday. Because the paraments reflect the worship focus of the church at large, they are not changed for baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.

Paraments accentuate the altar, which, in Lutheran churches, is a central visual focus in worship. It is the place for prayer, praise, offerings and the celebration of Holy Communion. An altar is a symbol of sacrifice, which Jesus fulfilled for us by his death on the cross. In non-Lutheran churches it may be seen as simply a table such as was used at the last supper. Non-Lutheran communion tables or their paraments may bear the words "Do this in remembrance of me", which reflects the belief that Holy Communion is simply

a symbolic reminder of Jesus' death rather than his true body and blood which he gives to us.

The altar and pulpit paraments match the stole worn by the pastor. A pastor's stole represents a yoke used to carry burdens. This symbol of the responsibility and authority of the pastoral office is first placed on a pastor when he is ordained.

Crucifix

A crucifix is a cross with a body (corpus) on it. In some churches, only empty crosses are seen. At the time of the reformation, some non-Lutheran churches adopted a form of the ten commandments which is understood to prohibit any form of "graven images". This leads some to reject crucifixes along with any statues.

While the empty cross is seen as a reminder of the resurrection (Jesus is no longer on the cross) a crucifix reminds us that we are saved by Jesus' incarnation, that is, that he took on a human body and physically died for us on the cross.

On some crosses, letters are seen, such as INRI, the abbreviation for the Latin phrase, "Jesus Nazareni, Rex Iudeorum", translated, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews", which is the sign that was placed above Jesus' head. The cross on our altar has the letters "Ihs", an abbreviation of the Greek spelling of Jesus.

Hear the Lutheran Hour: Sun.,
6:00 PM, KJLY, 107.1 FM