

The Invocation, The Aaronic Benediction, and The Sign of the Cross

On this day that we hear about the Baptism of our Lord there is an occasion to learn about two more pieces of the Divine Service; those being the Invocation that begins our service and the Aaronic Benediction that closes our service, along with the sign of the cross that accompanies both. The reason why the Baptism of our Lord serves as such an occasion to discuss these parts of our service is on account of the rubric found at the beginning of Divine Service Setting Three. There it is written: *The sign of the cross † may be made by all in remembrance of their Baptism.* In addition, there is found at the conclusion of the Aaronic Benediction the symbol of a cross indicating, here too, the sign of the cross may be made by all, and for much the same reason as is given for the Invocation.

In the first place, the Divine Service begins **In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit** in order to mark the name of the true and only God by whom we are gathered together so as to receive the gifts he desires to give us. In like manner, we **invoke**, or call upon, the name of our Triune God, and in this way prayerfully beseech him to be present in our midst for our help and our benefit.

This Invocation is marked by the sign of the cross; the cross being the symbol of our hope and salvation because it is that which the Lord Jesus died upon to pay the full price for our sins. The pastor may either choose to face the congregation and make the sign of the cross upon them as those who have had the sign of the cross made **both upon [their] forehead and upon [their] heart to mark [them] as [those] redeemed by Christ the crucified**¹ or he may choose to face the altar and make the sign of the cross upon himself. In addition, all the members of the congregation are invited to make the sign of the cross in remembrance of the time in which the benefits of Jesus's crucifixion were poured out upon them in the waters of Holy Baptism.

Of course, making the sign of the cross is not a divine command, but is voluntarily done by those who choose to do so. Additionally, it must be noted that, contrary to popular belief, the sign of the cross is not a practice exclusive to the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, in the Small Catechism, Luther instructs us that morning and evening prayer are first marked by the sign of the cross. He writes *In the morning/evening when you get up/go to bed, make the sign of the cross and say: **In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*** We see that the sign of the cross is not a practice exclusive to the Roman Catholic Church, because the cross by which Christ takes away the sins of the world is a sign for all people of the gracious salvation the Lord mercifully gives.

It may also be made at other times during the service. For example, some may choose to make the sign of the cross at the dismissal from the Lord's Supper, rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins won upon the cross and delivered through the Lord's Supper. Some may choose to make the sign of the cross during the Lord's Prayer at the *The Seventh Petition*, **But deliver us from evil**, recognizing that we have been delivered from evil through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It may also be made by the pastor before the sermon as a way to, again, invoke our Triune God to bless the preacher and the preaching of God's Holy Word. It is also appropriate to make the sign of the cross at the close of the service during the Aaronic Benediction, and that because as we were blessed in the name of the Triune God at the beginning of the service, so are we blessed to have the name of the Lord put upon us through the Benediction at the close of the service.

It is called the Aaronic Benediction because it was first given to **Aaron and his sons** who served as priests under the Old Covenant. In Numbers 6 the LORD says **Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.** We ought to note that this is a three-fold blessing, indicating the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this way we see that our Divine Service is bookended with the name of our most Holy God. Thus, the sign of the cross may be made at this time because the name of God is being put upon God's people; the very same name into which Christians are baptized.

In *The Large Catechism* Luther wonderfully teaches us how precious this name of God, into which we are baptized and by which we are blessed, is by writing **God's name [is a] treasure greater and nobler than heaven and earth.**² Thus, we Christians rejoice to have our worship begin and end **In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

¹ *Lutheran Service Book*, "Rite of Holy Baptism," p. 268.

² *The Large Catechism*, Part V, Holy Baptism, paragraph 16.