

# Why incense?

## FIVE REASONS FROM SCRIPTURE

Incense was a regular part of the worship of Lutherans in the early Reformation, which probably shouldn't be surprising. They were used to it, there was no need to reject it, and the Bible provides clear reasons for using it.

So what does the Bible say about incense?

### It has a long history.

The use of incense for the worship of the One True God extends from the Old Testament into the New. See, for instance, Ex. 30:7-8: "And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it [the altar]. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations." See also 2 Chron. 13:11; Phil. 4:18.

### It signals God's presence.

Throughout Scripture, incense marks the presence of the One True God. Ex. 40:34: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." See also Is. 6; Matt. 2:11 (the Magi offer frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus) and John 19:39 (Nicodemus brings myrrh and aloes for Christ's burial).

### It's a symbol of atonement.

God's presence is gracious, merciful, and atoning, which is communicated through incense. Eph. 5:2: "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." See also Ex. 30; Num. 16:46-47.

### It's a sign of reverence for Christ.

In the New Testament, incense is reverently used to confess that Christ is the Son of God, the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Matt. 2:11: "And going into the house, they [the magi] saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." See also John 19:39.

### It's strongly associated with prayer.

Incense frequently accompanies the prayers of God's saints. Luke 1:9-13: "According to the custom of the priesthood, he [Zechariah] was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.'" See also Ps. 141:2; Rev. 8:3-4; Rev. 5:8.



## The Bible speaks highly of it. Luther recommended it. Why not revive it here?

You may have noticed a recent addition in our altar area—an ornate brass pole standing roughly 5' tall, with chains hanging from it, holding a tear-shaped object.

Maybe you've noticed the little "Aladdin's lamp" there, too.

The proper terminology for what you're seeing is **censer stand** (pole), **censer** (tear-shaped object), and **boat** (lamp). The purpose of the whole set-up: to burn incense.

"But wait. We don't burn incense at St. John's."

True, we haven't burned incense recently, but we have occasionally in the past. Now in 2017, the year of Reformation 500, we have an ideal opportunity to reintroduce it.

Incense *can* take a little getting used to, especially if it's not been part of your church experience. But we're optimistic that it will enhance the services at St. John's in a variety of ways.

And that's the bottom line with any worship practice here. Does it serve the Gospel? Does it reinforce the teachings of Scripture?

In the case of incense, we think yes.

The "incense rollout" will be gradual, which will give everyone time to check it out and ask questions. To that end, we've assembled here a list of reasons for using incense as well as some FAQs, which you can find on the back side of this page.

If you have additional questions or comments, please come in and chat with the pastors or send us an email. We'll be happy to talk to you about it, and we want to hear your thoughts.

# FAQs

## Answers to all your burning questions

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**Will incense be used in every service at St. John's?** No. We're currently trying it out on Wednesday evenings at Evening Prayer, Vespers, and Compline, and at mid-week Matins services. Eventually, we'd like to integrate it in some Sunday services (e.g., major festivals). Use of incense on such occasions would be pre-announced.

**Will the incense affect my allergies?** We hope not, and we've taken steps to reduce the possibility. Most importantly, we're using only the very best hypoallergenic incense, 100% frankincense. It's also possible to use incense that gives off only a "light smoke." As for the scent, it's most concentrated by the source, in the altar area. If you're in the pews, the smell is fairly subtle; it becomes less and less noticeable the further back you sit. We encourage you to come to a Wednesday service and smell for yourself.

**Isn't incense Catholic?** Yes. So are liturgies, crucifixes, organs, stained glass windows, altars, ornamentation in the nave, sermons, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar.

**Okay, but isn't it still Catholic?** Sure. But it's also biblical. And Catholics aren't the only ones who use incense. You can find incense in Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches, too (including LCMS)—churches where the historic liturgy is a priority.

**What did Luther think of incense?** Luther thought incense was fine. In fact, he recommended its use in his German Mass of 1526, based on following guideline: Whatever could be kept without harm to the Gospel was kept (see list of "Catholic stuff" above). That doesn't mean that Luther expected everyone else to use incense. For him, it was a matter of evangelical freedom, with the decision left up to individual congregations.

**But if a congregation doesn't use incense, does that mean its worship is in some way less Lutheran?** Not at all. Congregations are free to use it or not use it (see above).

**We didn't have it in my congregation growing up. Why?** From the 1910s through the 1940s, Lutheran churches in America distanced themselves from Catholicism. At the time, our ancestors felt great pressure from American society for being "too German" and "appearing too Catholic." Both suggested to the American mind an allegiance to foreign

powers. So out went crucifixes, chanting, the sign of the holy cross, bowing, genuflecting, use of chorales from the Lutheran hymn tradition, chasubles, altar bells, and even sometimes candles. Also out: incense.

**Incense seems sort of mystical/magical/mood-oriented. Don't Lutherans discourage that sort of thing in worship?** Chanting is used by Buddhists for a mystical purpose; in Christianity it has entirely different purpose. Muslims follow a liturgy, but Christian liturgy is entirely different. So also with incense. For Christians, incense is used as a reverent confession of Christ, who offered Himself up a fragrant offering to God, and for the prayers Christians are privileged to return to God because of Christ's atonement.

**Our prayers will rise to God without incense, right? Why add actual smoke?** Ceremonies are used to teach the people. Just as the prayers of the pastor ascend without him holding out his empty hands, that gesture demonstrates that we're receivers of God's gifts. It works that way with incense, too. The smoke and scent remind us that our prayers do, in fact, rise before God because of Christ's atonement.

**We don't follow other Old Testament practices (e.g., animal sacrifice). Why incense?** Hebrews 9:13 teaches that Old Testament animal sacrifices have been abolished in Christ, the once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin. Many other elements of Old Testament worship didn't persist in the New Testament for the same reason, but incense is different. The New Testament clearly continues to highlight its use in the reverent worship and confession of Christ.

**Will St. John's will always be an "incense church"?** We plan to introduce the use of incense gradually, allowing both time to get used to it and to ask questions. Ultimately, its use or non-use is left to the congregation's evangelical freedom; using incense now will give people informed experience for future judgments.