

Call to Worship



Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Word in Worship
Volume 53.4

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Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

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Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

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Introduction

Kimberly Bracken Long

For Presbyterian and Reformed Christians, the Word has always been central. Scripture has been, and remains, at the heart of our worship. Preaching has been paramount—sometimes to our benefit, and sometimes to our detriment, depending on the time and place. More recently, the descendants of Calvin and Bucer have begun to embrace a broader definition of “Word” to include a range of forms of proclamation. In this issue of *Call to Worship*, we will explore some of those forms and consider important topics of the day concerning how we tell our stories and the language(s) we use.

Not surprisingly, several articles in this issue deal with aspects of preaching. Homiletics and worship professor Angela Dienhart Hancock helps us think through the “where” of preaching, offering insights on the theological significance of the pulpit as the place for the preaching event. Rolf Jacobson, professor of Old Testament, considers the role of the psalms in worship, leading us through the various ways psalms enable us to praise, pray, and even preach. A gifted and experienced preacher, Casey Thompson, offers wisdom on the difficult topic of preaching justice in an affluent church.

Several articles focus on Scripture and language in worship and preaching. Jonathan Hehn takes on the complex task of demystifying the Revised Common Lectionary for those of us who have always wondered why it is put together the way it is and just how it works. His guide will help preachers and other worship planners understand the riches of the lectionary and, as a result, use it more fruitfully.

Alexandra Mauney urges us to attend to the disabled members of the body of Christ when choosing our words. Focusing particularly on hymnody and liturgy, she helps to sharpen our sensibilities about how what we say and do in worship affects those with physical challenges, and how we might do better. David Gambrell’s interview with Samuel Son reveals a surprising new view of ancient prophets and their similarities to contemporary slam poets—a take that will surely open your eyes to new possibilities.

This issue also highlights proclamation that comes in forms other than words. Kathryn Sparks returns to these pages to enlighten us on the ways that movement in worship proclaims Scripture in ways that words alone cannot. We also hear from Scott Galloway, a professional filmmaker who has launched InLighten, a series of short films based on the Revised Common Lectionary. He introduces us to this new video resource that can be used in worship, preaching, teaching, small groups, and more—and opens our eyes to yet another way to proclaim the good news.

The Work of Our Hands feature, this time from Bush Hill Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, is full of ideas for visual proclamation of the Word. New hymns, book reviews, and columns round out this issue that is once again graced by the artwork of Amy E. Gray. I pray that this issue of *Call to Worship* will be a feast for your imagination as you do the life-changing, world-shaping work of proclaiming the Word.

Kimberly Bracken Long, Editor



Feature Articles

Reclaiming the Pulpit

Angela Dienhart Hancock

Viewing a video recording of your own sermon has long been a dreaded feature of introductory preaching courses, including the one I teach at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. It's good, at least once, to see and hear yourself. Video recording is a common practice. But there is one question I ask students before the camera rolls that is relatively new: will you stay in the pulpit for the sermon? For a certain percentage of my students, "good" preaching includes walking around, getting as close as possible to hearers, gesturing freely and casually, and making intense eye contact. This preference for wandering seems to cut across denominations, theological commitments, and worshiping traditions. Where does this impulse come from? It is a hard question to answer.

The Reasons for Stepping Out

On the one hand, we might point to the same broader societal trends that led to town hall-style debates in the political world. We want politicians we can have a beer with; we want preachers who are one of us. We want preachers who address us like late-night talk show hosts, stand-up comedians, TED talkers. To speak behind a pulpit means to assert one's authority, to erect a barrier, to "talk down" to people. The whole enterprise seems vaguely but repulsively undemocratic. But leaving the pulpit behind and moving to the floor says something else. It means talking *with*; it is relational, reachable, relatable. To leave a pulpit and stride down to be with the people says: I am not a distant authoritarian like those other preachers. I like you. I am like you. I want to be close to you. Coming on down demonstrates a cluster of virtues: humility, empathy, solidarity.

On the other hand, students formed in the tradition of perambulatory preaching are also convinced that coming on down is more *effective* than communicating from a pulpit. As the Rookie Preacher website puts it: "Do you want to engage people in a more powerful way in your preaching? You have to leave the pulpit."¹ More powerful, more effective, at what? Gaining and keeping a hearing. Engaging, persuading, convicting, claiming, changing. The promise made about preaching from the floor is that it increases the preacher's power, hence authority. And there is some evidence from the social sciences that supports this claim. Proximity does impact influence. In the North American cultural context, the closer someone is, the more socially uncomfortable it is to ignore them.

But if this is the case, then there is a strange contradiction at the heart of the matter: leaving the pulpit *says* I am leaving "authority" behind, but I leave the pulpit in order to *increase* my authority, not relinquish it. Whatever else preaching from the floor is, it is not a divestment of power. It just makes the power dynamics harder to see. In some contexts, at least, it may assert the preacher's freedom to encroach on the space of the listener, demanding a hearing rather than inviting one. Not only is my voice mysteriously much louder than any of yours (those parasitic ear mics are almost invisible!), but I'm also going to invade your space. You *will* listen to me!

Instituting Words?

All of this sounds very negative, I know. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be in solidarity with hearers, or to be an effective communicator

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rather than an ineffective one. But I wonder if we have thought deeply enough about the implications of abandoning the pulpit as a symbol. As Paul Ricoeur once wrote, “A symbol never dies, it is only transformed.”²

In the Reformed tradition we continue to offer “instituting words” for our sacramental symbols—at the font every time we baptize, at the table every time we break the bread. But in the case of the pulpit, how regularly do we offer an “instituting word,” guiding interpretation? In what follows, I will consider some key resources for interpreting the meaning of “pulpit” in a Reformed church context and offer some guidelines for reclaiming the pulpit as a provocative and productive symbol, one that leaves traces even when left behind.

Unpacking “Pulpit”

The Bible is the obvious place to begin investigating what the pulpit might mean. The earliest biblical reference to something like a pulpit is recorded in Nehemiah 8, where we find the prophet Ezra reading and interpreting the Law standing on top of a wooden platform. But it is the larger symbolic dynamic—a prophet addressing a crowd—that is perhaps more significant than the platform itself: prophets, teachers, and apostles are called out, separated, set apart from others in the event of proclamation. We might call this pattern “the one and the many.” Scripture is full of references that link holy speaking and holy hearing to the spatial dynamics of up and down, mountains and valleys, near and far.

In Proverbs 9, we even have a text where Wisdom sends women up to preach:

Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals,
she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servant-girls,
she calls from the highest places in the town,
“You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the
wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight” (Prov. 9:1–6).

In contrast to the dynamic of moving up to preach, there are also biblical texts that describe a movement down to preach: Moses comes back down the mountain to deliver the Law to the people; the synagogue tradition has the rabbi sitting down to preach—thus Jesus reads the scroll of Isaiah, then sits down to preach his sermon. But the sitting down, like the climbing up, marks the activity of preaching as unique.

The sermon on the “mount” in Matthew describes Jesus gathering the disciples around him, then sitting down to preach while they remain standing—the traditional gesture of respect for a teacher. Here we see both spatial dynamics in play: Jesus sits down in the appropriate preaching position, yet the whole activity takes place up on a mountain, linking it to the Sinai tradition.

In certain texts it becomes clear that pragmatic considerations are a factor in choosing separation rather than togetherness. What will make it possible for all to see and hear? Consider, for example, this incident from the Gospel of Mark:

Again [Jesus] began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables (Mark 4:1–2).

Why did Jesus choose separation from the people, addressing them from farther away? So all could see and hear. Jesus opted for different spatial arrangements in situations where it was the one and the few rather than the one and the many: reclining by a table, seated by a fire, walking down a road. It is when a group is too large that seeing and hearing is compromised that Jesus chooses separation. The choice to separate oneself in such cases is an expression of the desire to connect with all, rather than a rejection of it. Preaching from a pulpit today might be read in the same way. One is set apart from the many in order to be accessible to the many, and often this separation from the many involves a change of altitude.

Furniture with a History

One of the roots of the pulpit is a piece of liturgical furniture used in the early centuries of the church, the bishop's chair, a throne-like *cathedra* made of marble or wood, raised a little higher than the presbyters who sat in a semicircle on either side. The bishop's chair reflected a practice used in the civil basilicas, where judges were seated above the scribes. The bishop preached from the *cathedra*—an echo of the Jewish tradition of teaching while seated. Another related item was the *ambo*, also adapted from a synagogue object, a desk-like piece of furniture used by the rabbis. The word *ambo* means “ascended” or “crest of a hill,” because the lector had to climb up some steps to enter it.

At first the ambo was used exclusively for the reading of Scripture, and there is evidence that early Christians connected their reading places to their Jewish roots, referring to the ambo as “Ezra’s platform” and “a mountain.”

At first the ambo was used exclusively for the reading of Scripture, and there is evidence that early Christians connected their reading places to their Jewish roots, referring to the ambo as “Ezra’s platform” and “a mountain.” The pulpit as a distinct piece of liturgical furniture developed in the twelfth or thirteenth century, first in the context of the monastery, later used in the church. In the beginning it was modest in scope, but it gradually became more ornate and finally very elevated in keeping with the corresponding high-backed pews. The Reformation resulted in a reemphasis on the pulpit and eventually placed pulpit and table closer together so that the people could hear and see both better. Generally speaking, from the sixteenth to nineteenth century, the pulpit was used by the clergy for everything that was spoken in the service, not just the sermon.

The post-Reformation pragmatic concern that every word spoken could be heard by all was taken to the extreme in the late nineteenth century when the meeting house was, in many places, transformed into a preaching venue and concert hall. As the evangelical movement spread on both sides of the

Atlantic, its theology of conversion encouraged yet another transformation. The goal was now getting the congregation as close as possible to a charismatic evangelist, who could make full use of gesture and movement in pleading with potential converts. The “auditoria” architecture that arose in response to the needs of such evangelical preaching was eventually overcome by Gothic revival architecture, which moved away from the sanctuary as a place for ministerial performance and back toward the sanctuary as a place of mystery. The Gothic style featured a pulpit, not the revivalist’s platform. Subsequent developments in North American church architecture include a return to auditorium-like sanctuaries—with a preacher wearing a body mic on a platform or stage. Most (but not all) churches rooted in the Reformed tradition resisted this impulse, for deep theological reasons. Pulpits remain a prominent feature in Reformed churches. But while it is difficult to get rid of a pulpit, it is not hard to leave one.

A Symbol among Symbols

The pulpit is, of course, a part of a constellation of symbols we meet in the context of worship, including the table, the font, the book, the cup, the bread, the light, and the cross. The proportions of these symbols, their unifying features, and their placement in relation to one another and the congregation speaks volumes. Is the pulpit massive and the font slight? Is the pulpit skeletal and peripheral and the table ornate and central? And what do we make of a separate, usually minimalist piece of furniture, the lectern, which holds the Bible and in some churches is the place where Scripture is read? What is communicated in the relegation of the Bible to a utilitarian structure while the artistry is saved for the “real thing”: the sermon?

Further questions are raised if we dispense with the pulpit altogether. If we do not have a pulpit, why should we have a font? Why a table? The Lord’s Supper was first celebrated at an actual table—there is a good argument there. But the font? Surely it is as limiting as a pulpit. If a pulpit is shorthand for “mountain,” then font is shorthand for “river.”

If the table holds plate and cup and the font holds water, what is the function of the pulpit? It holds the Bible. It elevates whoever occupies it so that all can see. It serves an acoustic function in the absence of electronic amplification or it may feature an amplification device. When the preacher is not

in the pulpit, in utilitarian terms, it is just a book holder. Does the preacher who leaves the pulpit and roams then carry the holy book? If not, then we wonder if abandoning the book visually testifies to the Reformed understanding of the relationship between the Word of God written and the Word of God preached. Maybe the preacher brings the book with her as she comes on down, but does holding the book make it look more like the holy book belongs to the preacher and not the church?

The Pulpit and the Theology of the Word

The elevation and celebration of the Word read, preached, and heard is, of course, one of the defining characteristics of the Reformed tradition. If worship space is visible theology, then what specific guidance does the church have to offer about how to interpret worship space? The Directory for Worship (PCUSA) states that

Space that is set apart for worship should encourage community, be accessible to all, and open us to reverence for God. . . . Space for Christian worship should include a place for the reading and proclamation of the Word, a font or pool for Baptism, and a table for the Lord's Supper.³

This “space” is admittedly vague. Is it to be identified as the place of preaching even when no preaching is taking place? Yet, it is clear that something must be recognized as “Word,” because the passage goes on to insist that the arrangement of spaces for proclamation, baptism, and communion should convey “their relationship to one another and their centrality in Christian worship.”

The Reformed understanding of preaching adds further considerations to the question of the pulpit. The Second Helvetic Confession proclaims “the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God,” but the confession is careful not to leave it at that. Lest we confuse message and messenger it continues, reminding the reader that “the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains true and good.”⁴ A theology of preaching consonant with the Reformed faith affirms that God is free to—and even promises to—speak in, with, and through human words. Yet this theology also cheerfully and fearfully acknowledges how ridiculous the idea is.

How might a pulpit express that preaching as a human activity is an impossible possibility?

One way to figure that out is to explore the difference between pulpits, lecterns, and podiums. In relation to the other two pieces, a pulpit is both more substantive and more complex. In many cases, pulpits have three sides, so the space for the occupant is literally and visually marked and bounded. Part of the function of a pulpit, then, is its capacity to “encase” the preacher to some extent. Like vestments, the pulpit enables—or forces—the preacher to partially disappear. For those who advocate leaving the pulpit, this hiding of the preacher can be seen as a barrier between preacher and congregation—maybe even a betrayal of the idea of the immanence of God and the priesthood of all believers. But what is lost when the barrier comes tumbling down?

The partial hiding of the preacher emphasizes that it is not the personality or the individuality of the preacher that is most significant in the preaching event.

The partial hiding of the preacher emphasizes that it is not the personality or the individuality of the preacher that is most significant in the preaching event. The pulpit, and maybe the robe, too, says that it's not just about me, the preacher, interacting with you, individuals in the congregation, but about the possibility of something Other erupting in our midst. The holy book—not the preacher's book, but the church's book—lies open and visible. The individual, the preacher, does not disappear entirely. The person in the pulpit bears a human face, eyes, hands, voice. But this revelation of the humanity of the preacher is tempered by its partial obscurity.

As One with Authority?

Of course, all of this also involves issues related to authority and ordination. Many contemporary trends in church architecture and preaching are motivated by the desire for a communal, conversational, democratic assembly. The idea of all gathered for conversation is more palatable to many than the pattern of the one who speaks and the many who listen. But does preaching from a pulpit necessarily celebrate hierarchy and assert authority in ways preaching from the floor does not?

In the Reformed tradition we affirm that individuals are chosen by God through the voice of the community and set apart to fill a particular role in the church's work and worship. In calling out the one from the many, the PC(USA) *Book of Order* states that "the basic form of ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God, from whose midst some are called to ordered ministries, to fulfill particular functions."⁵ Reformed ministers are such because of what they *do*, not because of something that they *are*.

The symbolism of the "throne"—clearly distinguished from every other chair in the room by its sumptuous upholstery—has to do with saying something about who the preacher is in contrast to the others present.

This highlights a difference in the function of the symbol of "pulpit," as the site of an activity, and the "thrones" that remain as preacher seats in some sanctuaries. The "thrones" are just a place for the preacher to sit—the preacher is not performing any ministerial function while sitting there. The symbolism of the "throne"—clearly distinguished from every other chair in the room by its sumptuous upholstery—has to do with saying something about who the preacher is in contrast to the others present. The pulpit, on the other hand, is about marking a holy *activity*, not a holy *person*. Can we say the same about the preacher who steps out and leaves the pulpit behind? It is worth pondering. The pulpit can pose another challenge as well: if the preacher is the only person who ever reads from or stands before the holy book in the pulpit, are the pulpit and the book the private property of the preacher? For the pulpit to function as a symbol of holy activity and not a holy person, the preacher cannot be the only one who enters it to engage in holy speaking.

Reclaiming the Pulpit

The pulpit does important symbolic work in the context of worship: it holds the church's book. In most cases, it partially obscures and partially reveals the person standing behind it. It marks a place where the dialectic of divine/human speaking is

made visible. The book and the pulpit gesture at divine presence; the human face, voice, and hands it supports acknowledge the human. The pulpit also symbolizes the pattern of the one and the many. The occupant is set apart, hemmed in, drawn into this marked space/time/activity. As such, the pulpit is a metaphorical opportunity. The presence of a human being in a place marked as holy ground is still an impertinence. If anything, an awareness of the fragility and provisional nature of all human speech makes it even more so. It has not lost its sting. It is still productive. The surplus of meaning is alive and well. Why leave it behind?

It is hard, especially in times of decline and anxiety, not to frame preaching in terms of "effectiveness." If someone promises us that if we leave the pulpit and get up close and personal with our hearers, they are less likely to ignore or dismiss us, naturally we are tempted to give it a try. If the town-hall format accomplishes certain rhetorical goals, then why not adopt it?

But worship in all its oddity is not just a matter of what is most effective—whatever it is we mean by that. Splashing a handful of water on someone is not the most effective way to wash them. Those pinches of bread and swallows of wine are not the most effective way to feed people. If our purpose is washing, feeding, or communicating, there are more effective ways.

But for those who are interested in letting the impertinence of the pulpit loose, here are some temporary, contemporary guidelines that can serve to highlight its symbolic richness:

1. In the presence of the "many" in the place of worship, where there is a pulpit, use it.
2. Make it out of wood, or stone, or some other material that remembers where it came from.
3. Put the holy book on it. Make the book big.
4. Make sure the pulpit is visually connected to the font and the table, that their scale is proportional and that they speak the same stylistic language.
5. Since the pulpit is the site of a holy activity, not a holy person, clergy do not own the pulpit or the book. Have non-ordained people of all sorts reading and leading from the pulpit regularly. Have a step stool ready so kids can lead too.
6. If there must be a "lectern" in the sanctuary, use it for announcements, not for reading Scripture. Do not put the book there.

7. Get rid of the “thrones” for the preachers. Preachers can sit with the congregation, then move to the pulpit, emphasizing that the one is sent up by the many for a particular purpose.
8. Offer frequent instituting words that interpret the symbolism of “pulpit,” and provide opportunities for others to offer instituting words as well.

Postscript

The pulpit is not intrinsically a holy object. Its identity is culture bound. If we were to start all over from scratch, one can imagine a few other ways to symbolize the one and the many, to cradle the holy book, to indicate the enchantment and foolishness of human beings speaking the Word of God. Preaching from a pit with the people gathered above. Preaching from a boat with people on the shore. Suspended from the ceiling, perhaps, though that sounds terrifying.

But the holy book would be visible as the church’s book. The preacher could be seen and heard by all. There would be indications of the dialectic of hiding and revealing in the person of those set aside to lead in worship. The constellation of symbols that says Word and Sacrament would bear witness to their use even when not in use. They would be distinct, yet connected, yet in balance. We might imagine all sorts of ways that we—a bunch of Reformed castaways on a desert island—could mark holy time and space and activity in our worship.

Yet we cannot start from scratch. The pulpit is there, even when we reject it. Even when wrenched up from the floor and hauled off to the landfill. It is a part of our communal memory. Inscribed in our history. Martin Luther King Jr. voicing that dream. Billy Graham calling them down just as they are. All the mothers and fathers who stepped into that bounded space and testified before we did.

Are we so afraid of this particular dragon that we cannot imagine it has any new worlds left to unleash? We can ignore it, leave it, and celebrate its absence. Or we can let its impertinence loose on a new generation, point to its eloquence, and see what happens.

Notes

1. <https://rookiepreacher.com/leave-pulpit-engagement/>.
2. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 64.
3. Directory for Worship, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2019), W-1.0203.
4. *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2016), 5.004.
5. *Book of Order*, G-2.0101.



Amy E. Gray

The Psalms in Worship and Preaching

Rolf Jacobson

Introduction—Two Stories

The psalms have always been central to Christian worship and preaching. Since the earliest days of the church, the psalms have provided the melodies with which the people have praised God, the pleas and expressions of trust with which the people have talked to God, the basic wisdom to which the people have walked daily with Christ, and, often, the holy text from which preachers have proclaimed the good news. Allow me to start with two stories, both a little funny, but in totally different ways.

About sixty years ago, a family friend graduated from college and took a teaching job at a Christian school in a Calvinist, or Reformed, tradition. The Reformed have often been, of course, people who take both piety and psalmody seriously. During her first year of teaching at the school, two of the teachers got in a fistfight. The cause of dispute? Whether or not Christians can sing anything in worship other than psalms. Make worship great again!

About six years ago, I bought a used speedboat. I live in Minnesota—the land of ten thousand lakes—and I had long wanted a boat. So, on a beautiful June day, I took my son Gunnar out for his first ride in our new, used boat. There was a gentle breeze and a bald eagle in the sky. Gunnar asked, “How fast will this boat go?” I thought it was a worthy question, so I decided to find out. The engine responded obediently to the fully open throttle. When the nose kicked out of the water and then planed out nicely, Gunnar—who was eight years old at the time—stood up, stretched wide his arms, reached into his memory for a sound that expressed the joy he was feeling at that moment out in God’s good and beautiful creation, and began to sing, “Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah,

hallelujah, ha-le-e-e-lu-jah!” I think Handel would have approved.

I laughed. But later I reflected on that experience. Where did Gunnar learn the “Hallelujah” chorus? We don’t play much classical music at our house; we’re more classic country and bluegrass. So, where did he learn that? In worship, of course. In the choir school at our church. In worship and choir, he had learned to sing the psalms. And having learned them in worship, they provided the melody and words that helped him give voice to the joy he felt out in God’s world.

And that is why the psalms always have (praise God) and always will (please, God) be central to Christian worship.

The Glad Psalms—“Praise” Tells Who God Is by Describing What God Has Done

The primary role that the psalms play in Christian worship is that they literally provide the words of praise that the people of God sing to their Savior and Lord. Before there was either Jesus or his church, the psalms were the worship book for second temple Judaism. According to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, after the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples sang “the hymn.” Most likely, this is a reference to the Egyptian Hallel—Psalms 113–118. This group of psalms was sung at all three of the annual Jewish festivals. At Passover, Psalms 113–114 were sung before the dinner and Psalms 115–118 were sung after. Tragically, the church and synagogue split from one another in the years after Jesus. But happily, the church brought the book of Psalms with them and continued to practice singing psalms in worship.

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But what exactly are we doing when we sing praise to God? There are many ways to answer that question, of course. If we take our clues from the ways that the psalms praise God, we are doing at least two things when we praise God. We are giving ourselves to God and we are giving God away to our neighbor.

When we praise God we are giving ourselves away to God. As the great Reformed Psalms scholar J. Clinton McCann has written, “In short, praise is the offering of the whole self to God.”¹ We can arrive at this conclusion by noticing that praise language in the psalms is often addressed directly *to God*. A few examples show this:

We give thanks to you, O God;
we give thanks; your name is near (75:1).

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
For you, O LORD, have made me glad by
your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy
(92:1–4).

I will extol you, my God and my King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever
(145:1–2).

The examples could be multiplied many times over, but as these few passages show, one of the characteristic ways in which the psalms praise God is to praise God directly. The psalms give us words that are directed “to God.” God is the “you” to whom the praise is addressed.

Thus, as we praise God as “you,” the psalms give us the words that help us maintain the relationship that God began with us in baptism. And they teach us that having a prayer relationship with God is not just about asking for things that we would like God to give us. It is also about giving ourselves back to God in relationship. It is about giving ourselves joyfully, thankfully, and fully to God.

The psalms don’t just tell us to do this; they give us the very words and hymns to do so. As the powerful Roman Catholic Psalms scholar Harry Nasuti taught us, the psalms do theology not just by talking about God, but by giving us the words to encounter God. He writes that the psalms “make available a relationship between God and the believing individuals and communities that have used them.”² Nasuti goes on to say that “an encounter with God takes place through the use of the Psalms.”³ And, most clearly, he simply states: “God uses the Psalms to shape believers into the type of person that God wants them to be.”⁴

Martin Luther, in his 1519 commentary on Psalms 1–5, wrote something very similar:

There is, in my opinion, one difference of content between this book of the Bible and the others. In the other books we are taught by both precept and example what we ought to do. This book not only teaches but also gives the means and method by which we may keep the precept and follow the example. For it is not by our striving that we fulfill the Law of God or imitate Christ. But we are to pray and wish that we may fulfill it and imitate Him; when we do, we are to praise and give thanks. And what is the Psalter but prayer and praise to God, that is, a book of hymns?⁵

Praise is the language of love. When we praise God, we give ourselves to God in love. We use praise language as the language of love in our human relationships, too. One lover may say to the beloved, “I love you. You are beautiful, you are kind. You are strong, you are faithful, and you are courageous. I love you.” When lovers use this language, they are figuratively giving their hearts away to their beloveds. They are giving themselves in relationship. Similarly, a parent says to a child, “I am so proud of you. You are intelligent, you are compassionate. I love you.” Here, too, parents share themselves with children in love.

We need to praise God with this sort of “you” language in order to maintain and strengthen our relationship with God. When we do so, it straightens us out spiritually. As sinful people, we tend to get bent in on ourselves. Luther described the condition of sin as being “curved in on ourselves.” And even after salvation, we still tend, under the gravitational

forces of sin, to fall back to earth and curve back into ourselves. This curved-in-ness can be about many different things—it can be about our insecurity, or our greed, our anxiety, or our self-righteousness. It happens when we think, “I’m not good enough.” Or when we think, “It’s all up to me.” It happens when we think, “I’ve earned this and I deserve this. It is mine.” And when we think, “I’m better than other people.” Or when we think, “I’m a failure.”

Praising God as “you” helps reorient ourselves back to God, who graciously forgives sins, even sins of greed and self-righteousness. Who thinks we are worth dying for. Who helps us so that we don’t have to do it all ourselves. Praising God as “you” orients us back toward heaven, toward the author of our stories.

Notice that in these psalms, thankfulness is part of praising God as “you.” “We give thanks to you, O God; we give thanks; your name is near” (75:1). “It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High” (92:1). By thanking God in praise, the spiritual fruit of gratitude to God naturally blooms in our souls like yeast proofing in warm water. And being thankful is literally a spiritual gift that keeps on giving.

In recent years, first social scientists and now physical scientists have demonstrated the power of the gift of gratitude. Recently, scientists at UCLA have shown that attitudes and feelings of gratitude actually change your brain for the better—creating a whole range of positive benefits. This finding corresponds with research by Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania that shows that practicing gratitude makes people more resilient, happy, and healthy.⁶ In fact, from the dozens and dozens of happiness studies that have been conducted over the last forty years, the power of thankfulness has been repeatedly demonstrated. And the good news is that the psalms show us how to be thankful as Christians—by thanking God in praise as “you.”

The challenge, then, is to practice gratitude regularly. The first and most important way to practice gratitude is to worship—and in worship to praise God. But taking a cue from my son Gunnar, who learned words of praise in worship but then used them in daily life, we should learn to spend time thanking God in praise on a daily basis. For me, to pray is to open a window of the soul onto the kingdom of God. So at least once a day, I try to find time to pause, to pray, to open a window of my soul onto the kingdom of God—and then simply

start sharing with God all of the things for which I am grateful—a warm bed, a roof over my head, the grace of God, the love of Christ, the communion of the Holy Spirit, the love of family and friends, the freedom of our country, the taste of creation in a Honeycrisp apple. I find that doing so reframes my whole day. I am less anxious, less depressed, more resilient, a little less curved in on myself.

There is another type of praise language in the psalms. There is a type of praise that is not spoken to God, but about God. From this kind of praise we learn that praising God means giving God away to our neighbor.

When we praise God, we give God away to the neighbor. The prominent Old Testament scholar Patrick D. Miller wrote that the purpose of praise is “to bear witness to all who hear that God is God.”⁷ That is, our praise functions as witness to other human beings. Or, as I prefer to phrase it, when we praise the Lord, we give God away to our neighbors. This theological statement can be supported by noting that praise language in the psalms also has a second form, in which the psalms sing praise *about God rather than to God*. Consider these three passages:

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the
peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD
rejoice (105:1–3).

Praise the LORD, all you nations!
Extol him, all you peoples!
For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures
forever.
Praise the LORD! (117:1–2).

Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
I will praise the LORD . . .
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin
(146:1–2a, 6–8).

Again, the examples could be multiplied many times over, but the point is clear enough already. In the psalms, praise language is often spoken *about God*. In this form of praise, the point is to point others to God, to give God away in free and honest witness. In this basic form of praise, two moves dominate the psalms of praise: the “call to praise” and the “reasons for praise.”

The call to praise is an essential part of praise and the element with which the psalms of praise often begin. An opening imperative enjoins the entire community to join the song: “O give thanks to the LORD” (105:1) or “Praise the LORD” (117:1) or “Bless the LORD” (103:1). Note the further verbs in the opening verses of various psalms: “Extol,” “make known,” “tell,” and so on. The point is to let others know that the Lord—and the Lord alone—is God.

There usually follows what Psalms scholars describe as “reasons for praise,” because these following phrases are usually introduced with the words “because” or “for” as in Psalm 117:2. Why praise God? Because “his steadfast love endures forever.” One can also think about these verses not as reasons for praise but as the praise itself. When you praise a child, you tell the child what it is they have done that is wonderful. When you praise a child to their parents, you tell the parents what it is about the child that is wonderful. So it is here. The psalms give us the words to use to tell others what it is that God has done that is wonderful. Consider the good news about God in the passages above. Psalm 105 calls us to “tell of his wonderful works.” Psalm 146 then offers examples of those wonderful works:

- His steadfast love toward us is great.
- He made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.
- He keeps faith forever.
- He executes justice for the oppressed.
- He gives food to the hungry.
- He sets the prisoners free.
- He opens the eyes of the blind.

- He lifts up those who are bowed down.
- He loves the righteous.
- He watches over the strangers.
- He upholds the orphan and the widow.

And so on and on. These are not just reasons for praise; they are the very praise of God: the good news of God’s enduring steadfast love, constant forgiveness, bountiful providence through creation, timely salvific deliverance, and just intervention into history. Praise the Lord!

Sad Psalms and Mad Psalms— “Prayers” Insist That God Be God

The glad psalms are not the only—or even the dominant—voice in the Psalter. Equally numerous and perhaps even more vocal are the sad psalms and the mad psalms. These are the psalms of prayer. Some scholars call them “psalms of lament,” but I prefer to call them “prayers for help”—because the most important thing about them is not the sadness that they express but rather the fact that they ask—even insist!—that God intervene with saving help. These are not therapeutic griping sessions. These are *intersessions*—prayers that turn to the Creator and Savior of the universe, prayers that believe that the Lord has the power to act and to save, and prayers that insist that the Lord do so right now!

Walter Brueggemann writes that the prayers for help “insist upon Yahweh’s faithfulness and protest against Yahweh’s refusal to be visibly and effectively faithful.”⁸ That is, the psalms look around at life and give us words to speak to God that say, “Hey God! Life is not what it should be in a trustworthy creation, ruled over by a good and gracious God. So, since you claim to be a good and gracious God, how about you show up in the midst of all of this sin and suffering!? If you and you alone are God, show up!” A friend of mine who is a pastor tells people who come to her with their sorrows, “Start to read the book of Psalms and keep reading until you find something that works for you.”

The most simple prayer in the psalter is the start of Psalm 69, and it is still the psalm that works the best for me: “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck” (v. 1). We’ve all been there, neck-deep in the floods of life. Sometimes it has literally been water filling up my basement (here is some free advice: don’t buy a house at the bottom of a steep hill; if you do, get your basement drain tiled). Other times it has been the much more

powerful, figurative waters of life coming up to my neck: bone cancer when I was fifteen, a son sick at his birth, a daughter struggling in adolescence, a father-in-law dying, my faith community in crisis. Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.” Or, as we learn to sing in the liturgy of the church, “Lord have mercy! Christ have mercy! Lord have mercy!”

Crying to God in accusation, in pain, in suffering is not an act of doubt but an act of faith. Why? It is an act of faith because it asserts the faithful trust that God can change reality. It is an act of faith because it is an act of relationship with God. And it is an act of faith because it trusts God enough to be angry with God. When we pray these psalms, we say to God, “I am mad. I am mad at you. And I am mad about this world that you made. So, help!”

The mad psalms make some people uncomfortable. Is anger with God okay? It is okay to be uncomfortable with anger. After all, Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Matt. 5:21–22a). So, this might make you a little uncomfortable when the psalmist says,

O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young lions,
O LORD!
Let them vanish like water that runs away;
like grass let them be trodden down and
wither (58:6–7).

It may make us uncomfortable to read or use such angry language, but we also need to remember that such language is fitting response to genuine evil and true injustice. If we don’t get angry in the face of real injustice, we have lost part of our humanity and part of true biblical religion. Again, Brueggemann is helpful.

Angry lament allows us to say “Life isn’t right. It is now noticed that life is not as it was promised to be. The utterance of this awareness is an exceedingly dangerous moment on the throne. It is as dangerous as Lech Walesa or Rosa Parks asserting with their bodies that the system has broken down.”⁹

“I’ve Been Bad Psalms”—Penitential Psalms Cry Out for God’s Mercy

A final type of psalm—which is really a subtype of the prayer for help—is worth mentioning, because it is such an essential part of traditional Christian worship. These are the penitential psalms—the psalms that teach us that we are sinners, that we can turn to God, who is merciful, for forgiveness, and that give us the words to do so.

A final funny story: Years ago, when I was a teacher at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, I was teaching a course on the psalms. A guest speaker from Luther Seminary came to speak to the students about singing the psalms. He referred to Psalm 51 and said, “It is one of the penitential psalms.” A student raised her hand and asked, “What does penitential mean?” Just then, her cell phone started to ring in her purse. She quickly shouted, “O my God, I am so sorry!”

There it is. The penitential psalms—Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143, and others too—give us the words to say to the Lord, “O my God, I am so sorry!”

The penitential psalms teach us the theology of forgiveness and also give us the words to ask for and receive forgiveness from God. Psalm 51 teaches us that everyone is a sinner; we are born into a broken creation and we all share in the condition of sin. “I was born guilty” (51:5). Psalm 19 teaches us that we often do not even know our own sins, are not always even aware of our sin: “But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults” (19:12). The psalms teach us that we dare to ask for forgiveness not based on our own sincerity of repentance, or upon how well we will stay on the straight and narrow in the future, or even on how badly we feel about our past sins. The psalms teach us that the loving and merciful character of God is the only reason we dare ask for forgiveness: “Have mercy on me, O God, *according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions*” (51:1, italics added). And they teach us that new life with God itself comes with forgiveness. With forgiveness, according to Psalm 51, God gives us “a contrite heart,” “a new and right spirit,” “truth in the inward being,” and “open lips” and “mouth to declare [God’s] praise.” In short, to use Paul’s language, through forgiveness God makes us into new creations.

Conclusion—Sending the Psalms to the Lake

The task of the worship leader and preacher, then, is not simply to use the psalms in worship. The critical task is to use the psalms in worship in ways that equip the people to sing the psalms, pray the psalms, scream the psalms, and confess the psalms when they're at the lake. This is not just about use, but about formation for daily life.

We must use the praise psalms but also teach people why we praise and show them how to praise in daily life. We must use the prayers for help in worship and sing the *Kyrie* ("Lord have mercy"), but also equip people to know that God is there in times of trouble and give them the words to turn to God in the worst moments of their lives and of their neighbors' lives. The psalms enable us to thank God, confess our sins, and express trust in God in life's darkest valleys. In order to do this, the psalms will have to be preached. Using them in daily life will have to be modeled by the preacher and worship leader. And above all, the psalms will have to be prayed and sung over and over again. For as Martin Luther wrote,

In [the Psalter] is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.¹⁰

Notes

1. J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 53.
2. Harry Nasuti, "God at Work in the Word," in *Soundings in the Theology of Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), p. 29.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
5. *Luther's Works* (American Edition), 13:286.
6. Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 30–44.
7. Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 68.
8. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 54.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Luther's Works* (American Edition), 13:254.

Liturgical Dance: Blessing and Proclamation

Kathryn Sparks

Peace to this house!” Such are the words that washed over me anew during a summer Saturday evening service at Jefferson United Methodist Church in the little town of Jefferson, Maryland. Rev. Katie Bishop was preaching on Luke 10:1–11 that evening. You will remember: Jesus sends seventy appointed *others* out ahead of him, two by two, to all the towns and places he intends to go. “See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3b). The seventy are instructed to enter the homes of whomever will host them, to eat and drink whatever is provided, to cure the sick who are there, and to say, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:8–10). Although I have heard this passage of Scripture before, it became new to me that summer evening. Rev. Bishop spent her sermon unpacking for us what happens in the text *before* the eating and drinking, the curing of the sick, and the proclamation of the kingdom of God. In fact, she said, it is what makes all that follows possible. The very first thing the seventy are instructed to do when entering a home is to say, “Peace to this house!” With this blessing, the atmosphere has the potential to shift—the peace grows exponentially as its recipients receive it and allows for the healing and good news to be shared. Jesus’ followers then and we now are invited, rather instructed, to *bless* first and foremost.¹

How often we forget this simple and profound lesson. How quick we are to judge or jump to conclusions when we come into another’s presence. What if we took a deep breath first, wherever we go, and offered blessings in the spaces and places of our lives? What if we took a deep breath in our worship of God and received a blessing of peace before anything else—like the clearing of cobwebs from our dusty hearts. In such a way, healing and

proclamation find room to root and grow.

It may be a stretch to traverse from this passage in Luke to the new-old art form of liturgical dance, but my muscles want to try it. As I consider Jesus’ instruction to bless, my being fills with the gift of the dance for the people of God. It occurs to me that while liturgical dance has varied functions for worship, an overarching goal of the dance is to make ready the hearts of those gathered so the good news can be felt or truly heard in a new way. Sometimes liturgical dance is directly representative of the good news in those occasional instances when a dance offering is the actual sermon. But more often than not, liturgical dance encircles or heightens the Word, highlighting for the congregation unique possibilities that may not have been thought or felt before. Liturgical dance not only invokes the Spirit but, as proclamation, it is “*inspirational*, heightening the proclamation in a dramatic way; *evangelical*, witnessing to the good news; *prophetic*, revealing new dimensions of the Word or connecting its message to current events; *homiletic*, connecting the scriptures to our daily life.”² In all these aspects of dance as a form of proclamation that overarching goal can be found; dance makes ready the hearts of those gathered so that the good news can be felt or truly heard in a new way. In short, it serves the same end as the blessing Jesus instructs his disciples to say. “Peace to this house!”

This article is about learning to see and experience a blessing of peace. It is also about dance as a form of proclamation. Join with me as I make this leap! What follows are descriptions of four dances that I have either choreographed and directed or facilitated. *Were You There?* is an example of proclamation dance that is *inspirational*. *The Story of Beth* is an example of proclamation

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dance that is *evangelical*. *Micah 6:6–8* is an example of proclamation dance that is *prophetic*. *Psalm 30* is an example of proclamation dance that is *homiletic*. In these examples, I hope to reveal the power and presence that dance in worship can engender for the gathered community. I hope to show the relevance of dance for worship in our day. And, ultimately, I hope we come to understand that liturgical dance is a wonderful, unique gift available to us to say, “Peace to this house!”

On March 14, 2014, a dance was literally given to me by God, quite seamlessly, which expressed a depth of despair that we do not often allow ourselves to access. It was a dark night of the soul for me—a time of great personal loss and anxiety. I was sitting at the kitchen table listening to the hymn “Were You There?” thinking I would attempt to choreograph it for the Holy Week chapel service at Wesley Theological Seminary. As I listened over and over to the music, I saw the choreography take shape in my imagination, and before I knew it, the entire dance was gifted to my mind-heart. I knew exactly what to do when I met the dancers the next week to rehearse.

When I create, it is not typical for me to see a fully formed dance in my mind’s eye and then be able to teach it directly from the vision.

Choreographers work with their material in a variety of ways. When I create, it is not typical for me to see a fully formed dance in my mind’s eye and then be able to teach it directly from the vision. Most of the time, choreography is a good deal of work—improvising and trying out movements, playing with different patterns and combinations before going in to work with a group. This experience of choreography had never happened to me before and has not happened in the same way since. I was the recipient of and then a vessel for a dance offering that God must have wanted to be exactly a certain way. The choreography was given intact; it danced within me as I sat in a state of awe, tears rolling down my face.

“Were You There?” is an African American spiritual arranged by Melva Wilson Costen in 1987. “Few hymns from any culture have captured the pathos of Jesus’ crucifixion as movingly as this

African American spiritual. Its emotional climax (and highest pitch) comes in the great ‘O’ at the center of each stanza, a moment that moves beyond anything words can convey.”³ Because this hymn is iconic, a classic, and much beloved, any dance paired with it must necessarily embody its essence—the essence of the pathos of Jesus’ crucifixion. This was an ambitious task and one I took very seriously. Before the dancers and I even started moving, we sat with the words of the hymn and talked about its origin. The music touched each of us—five dancers—in a unique way and in a very deep way. Each of us could relate to the profound sorrow. As one dancer would say when we did the dance again a couple of years later, “I’ve always thought myself as a latecomer [after the life and death of Jesus and, of course, resurrection!]. You’ve brought me right there to where and when Jesus was pierced and nailed on a cross. Thank you for this incredible experience.”⁴

Dance is often inspiring whether on a stage or outdoors or as an expression of worship.

What makes a dance inspirational? Dance is often inspiring whether on a stage or outdoors or as an expression of worship. We ourselves are the stuff of which it is made and this fact must lend a power and grace to the art form that is truly inspirational. The thesis of this paper defines one aspect of dance as proclamation to be inspirational, heightening the main point, the declaration, in a dramatic way.

Were You There? did just this. The five dancers entered the space by processing in single file, walking in unison to arrive in a horizontal line facing the congregation. During this entrance only the piano could be heard playing the melody of the hymn. Then, a solo voice sang, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The dancers moved in stepping rhythm from a line to a cluster and one dancer stood out from the other four. I called her the Jesus dancer because her movement was primary and accented by the other four. Next, the choir sang, “Were you there when they pierced him in the side?” Again, the Jesus dancer had the main movement and the four dancers clustered around her, accenting what she was doing. Next, the choir with congregation sang, “Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?” And the dancers embodied this line from the music. Finally, the solo voice again,

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The dancers processed out in a single file line with the Jesus dancer leading. Throughout the dance, in each repetition of the refrain, the dancers clapped and then contracted the muscles of their torso to the line “O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.” The effect on the congregation was intense, evocative. By the last time the dancers did this, in single file line as they processed out of the chapel, most of the congregation was in tears.

What leads us to enact, to dramatize, to add our physical selves to this most holy and desperate time in our liturgical year? Perhaps it is because the key to our connection with God, the key to our spirituality, is our physicality.

The strong emotional response by the community reflects just how connected we are to one another. We are literally related body to body via a web of mirror neurons. We feel each others’ pain and also each others’ joy at a visceral level. That is one reason why dance in worship is so vital for our churches. Dance that truly speaks will speak on a body level with the congregation. Even those witnessing and not dancing themselves will feel something in their body, in their kinesthetic sense, when watching the dance. People may find themselves awakened anew. It is in this spirit that dance is inspirational, heightening the proclamation in a dramatic way. The last days of Jesus’ life have been dramatized throughout history. What leads us to enact, to dramatize, to add our physical selves to this most holy and desperate time in our liturgical year? Perhaps it is because the key to our connection with God, the key to our spirituality, is our physicality. Our body is the location of our spirituality.⁵ It makes complete sense that we would dance out our anguish, dramatize and enact, go through the motions of what it might have been like two thousand years ago as Jesus walked toward Golgotha. This is how we pray. If dance can heighten peoples’ experiences and make ready peoples’ hearts so that we all have a change of heart, then praise be to God for giving this avenue, this blessing called dance: “Peace to this house!”

One of the most revelatory encounters of liturgical dance I have ever witnessed was my

experience in 2013 companioning a dancer friend at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church as she created her first testimony through dance. Beth is a young woman, a gifted dancer, with an intellectual disability. As she struggled to match her classmates in the confirmation class, it became apparent that she needed a modality other than words to create her statement of faith, whereby she could join the church. So, with Beth’s mother and a pastor of the church, I created a path for Beth to state her beliefs. The path was dance. We met for about three months during the Sunday school hour with Psalm 118:24 as the backdrop of our explorations. Beth choreographed and I witnessed and translated her story for the community. In the week leading up to youth Sunday, she danced what she had created before the governing body of the church when the youth presented themselves, ready to join. Youth Sunday drew near and though we hoped Beth would want to dance in worship, we were not sure she would feel comfortable enough to do it. That Sunday will remain in my heart forever. We sang the hymn “I Danced in the Morning,” and I could feel Beth’s bodyspirit warming up standing next to me. The time came; she danced her dance, *Beautiful Day*. And from that dance then flowed a profound gift of the Holy Spirit. It was time for the youth to come forward to receive the laying on of hands. In practice, Beth did not want to stand up when it came time in the service for this to take place. But on that Sunday, *after dancing*, she stood tall; she stood for the first time next to her classmates. Beth joined the church through dance.

I know this experience to be an incredible example of personal and communal transformation that took place through the vehicles of embodied theology and spirituality. It is also an example of liturgical dance that is evangelical, witnessing to the good news. Not only was it one of the most free expressions of body I have ever seen, that expression allowed a person to take her place in the community and for the community to have its fullness. Beth’s dance literally changed hearts that day. It allowed for a radical expansion of the meaning of belonging; it pointed all those gathered toward God and witnessed to the good news beyond what we knew before.

A dance which reveals new dimensions of the Word and connects the community to current events is prophetic in nature and reflects another aspect of proclamation. In April 2017 and again in November

2018 I created and directed a dance based on Micah 6:6–8 at Wesley Seminary and the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church respectively. The dance was meant to open up new ways of looking at this beloved passage of Scripture and in so doing invite participation with an alternative way of being in the world—speaking directly to the times in which we live.

The dance was created for a group of eight dancers with the majority of movement done by seven. The eighth dancer was the prophet carrying the voice of God for the people. The dance was accompanied by a mixture of recorded music (“Expression” by Helen Jane Long) and spoken word recited by the eighth dancer, the actual text from Micah. “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:6–8). Out of the seven dancers who did most of the movement, acting as the community of faith, one dancer represented a leader within the community who had more complex steps than the others. All seven dancers performed a 16-count phrase to the steady beat of Long’s piano music, and this phrase repeated throughout the dance, echoing a petition or plea, fire, bowing, swirling, and cradling. The Micah text was recited overtop the music and the dancer who stood out with more complexity was, at times, dancing in tandem with the Scripture.

We are the community of faith and
we are called to dance with God—
to do justice, to love kindness,
to walk humbly with God.

This dance is a form of proclamation that is prophetic in nature because it highlights the role of the community of faith in relationship to God in a unique way; all who witnessed the dance participated in the Micah passage because the seven dancers were, in actual fact, dancing on behalf of the congregation. We are the community of faith and we are called to dance with God—to do justice,

to love kindness, to walk humbly with God. At the end of the dance, the prophet, who for most of the time had primarily been a voice speaking the Scripture, came into the scene to touch each person in the community. Then she took her place with them as all dancers connected in some way—a hand on each shoulder. And then the entire group moved together, walking forward with resolve. In Wesley’s chapel we were able to surround the baptismal font as the music ended and say, “This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.” In New York Avenue’s sanctuary we walked down the center aisle among the people, close to each other on the right and left. At the church, the children’s sermon immediately followed the dance, and during that time we talked about the dance with the children. In a magnificent stroke of genius, the pastor invited all the children to stand and form a group with the dancers and all connect to one another, a hand on shoulder or arm, and then walk together that way. It was an incredible picture of the way God calls us to be in the world. In a world of deep divisions and polarization, we are called to walk *with* each other and seek unity—do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God. We are called to say “Peace to this house!” wherever we go, with whomever we meet.

The last aspect of dance as proclamation that we will explore is dance that is homiletic, connecting the Scriptures to our daily life. A recent example of dance that takes on this role is a study and then offering I created of Psalm 30. I had the privilege of collaborating with Rev. Katie Strednak Singer several months ago as we prepared for worship at Immanuel Presbyterian Church one hot July Sunday. I knew I wanted to dance to the text as it was spoken aloud, and I spent a few weeks reading through it, mulling over phrases that stood out to me. I recorded my own voice speaking the psalm and gradually began to dance to the recording. A rhythm started to take shape—perhaps to match the rhythm of the psalmist in some way. And I “performed” the dance for a friend who knows both Scripture and music to see if he had any feedback.

I came in with a bang on “I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up” (Ps. 30:1a), but the dance actually magnified the journey between contraction and release, depth and height, lament and rejoicing. The psalmist cries to God in his song and asks to be remembered by God. He travels between “the Pit” and experiencing restoration of self in the midst of community. “You have turned

my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent” (Ps. 30:11).

This psalm with dance offering speaks directly to our daily life, and the way it was done in worship makes that clear. Rev. Strednak Singer had a brilliant idea. She suggested that I dance the psalm twice and intersperse it with her sermon. She gave a brief introduction and then, as it was time for the primary Scripture to be read, she spoke the psalm as I danced it. From there she flowed back to her sermon, elucidating not only the practical nuggets within the psalm-dance but also her wisdom on its deeper truths. To whom do we turn and how are we to handle the “sackcloth moments” of our lives? Then, to conclude the sermon, the psalm was danced a second time. This gave people a chance to see the interpretation through movement again—perhaps to see what they missed the first time. It also served to highlight Rev. Strednak Singer’s main points. The psalm with dance acted as bookends for the sermon, the proclamation. It made ready the hearts of the congregation at the beginning of the proclamation and it punctuated the message Rev. Strednak Singer conveyed in a beautiful way. Together, one preacher through words and one preacher through body, we preached that day.⁶

It strikes me that as I have described these four dances and recounted the stories around which they were realized, I have taken myself—in addition to you—on a journey. What do we know now that we may not have known before? Perhaps we have been reminded that we are the stuff of which *inspiration* is made, affirmed that our body is the location of our spirituality. Perhaps you and I can remember a time of transformation that either happened to us personally or in our community, an event which truly knit us into fellowship—*evangelism* in the very best sense of that word. Perhaps we have seen the Scriptures opened in such a way that we understood God’s call upon our lives in a deeper way, propelling us beyond our comfort zone as only the *prophetic* can do. And perhaps, finally, we have been met with practicality and wisdom so that we can integrate God’s Word more fully with our daily lives, an example of the *homiletic* in action. Liturgical dance is an expansive frame through which we can focus on our life with our God. It has the potential to enlarge us and open us and requires us to be present, body to body. Though the words on these pages do not capture the living,

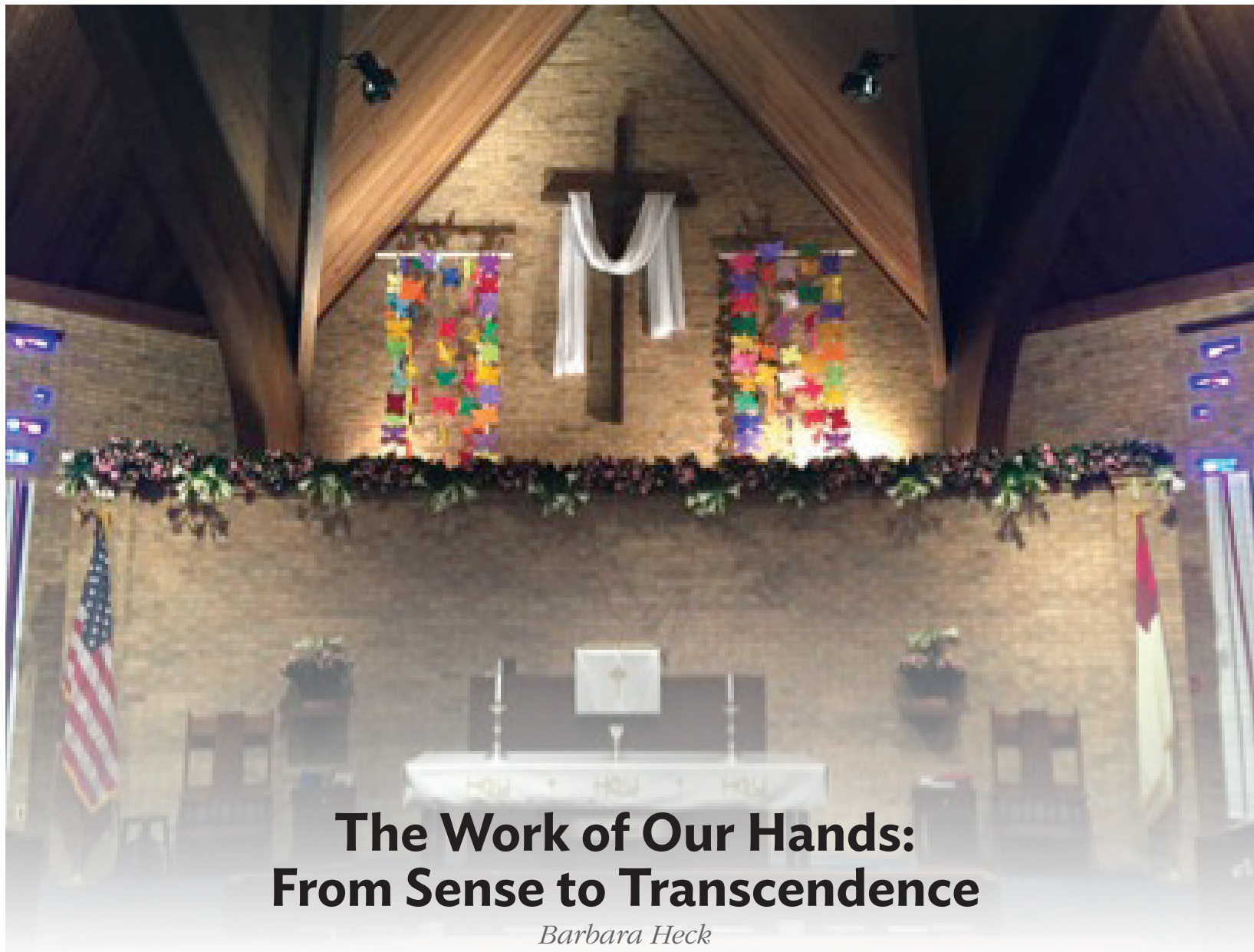
breathing essence of the dance, they give a taste and may whet the appetite to learn more. Dance can take a variety of roles in worship. It has a number of functions of which proclamation is one. What I am suggesting throughout this exploration and as a result of it is that we link together liturgical dance as a form of proclamation and Jesus’ instruction to bless first wherever we go. When dance becomes proclamation, what that means is that it is a unique and visceral way to prepare the hearts (and body) of the gathered community so that something new can occur—a shift in understanding. In short, liturgical dance calls us to believe deeply in the incarnation and that we are loved beyond our wildest dreams.

In our world today “Peace to this house!” is needed on the scale of emergency proportions. Who will we ultimately be if we cannot offer a blessing to one another first, wherever we go? Oh, dear God, let there be *dance*. Let there be the dance to woo us into relationship with you and with one another. Give us the grace to invite participation of our body and the Body so that our hearts will be stirred, even opened, that we too—as *The Dance* teaches—can say to all we meet, “Peace to this house!”

And let all the people say, Amen.

Notes

1. Katie Bishop, sermon preached July 13, 2019, at Jefferson United Methodist Church, Jefferson, MD.
2. Ronald Gagne, Thomas Kane, and Robert VerEecke, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, rev. ed. (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 1999), 103. Emphasis mine.
3. *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #228.
4. Yongchi Rhie, words of thanks written in a card following the creative process and offering of the dance.
5. Colleen M. Griffith, “Spirituality and the Body,” in Bruce T. Morrill, ed., *Bodies of Worship: Explorations in Theory and Practice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 81.
6. Katie Strednak Singer, sermon preached July 27, 2019, at Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA.

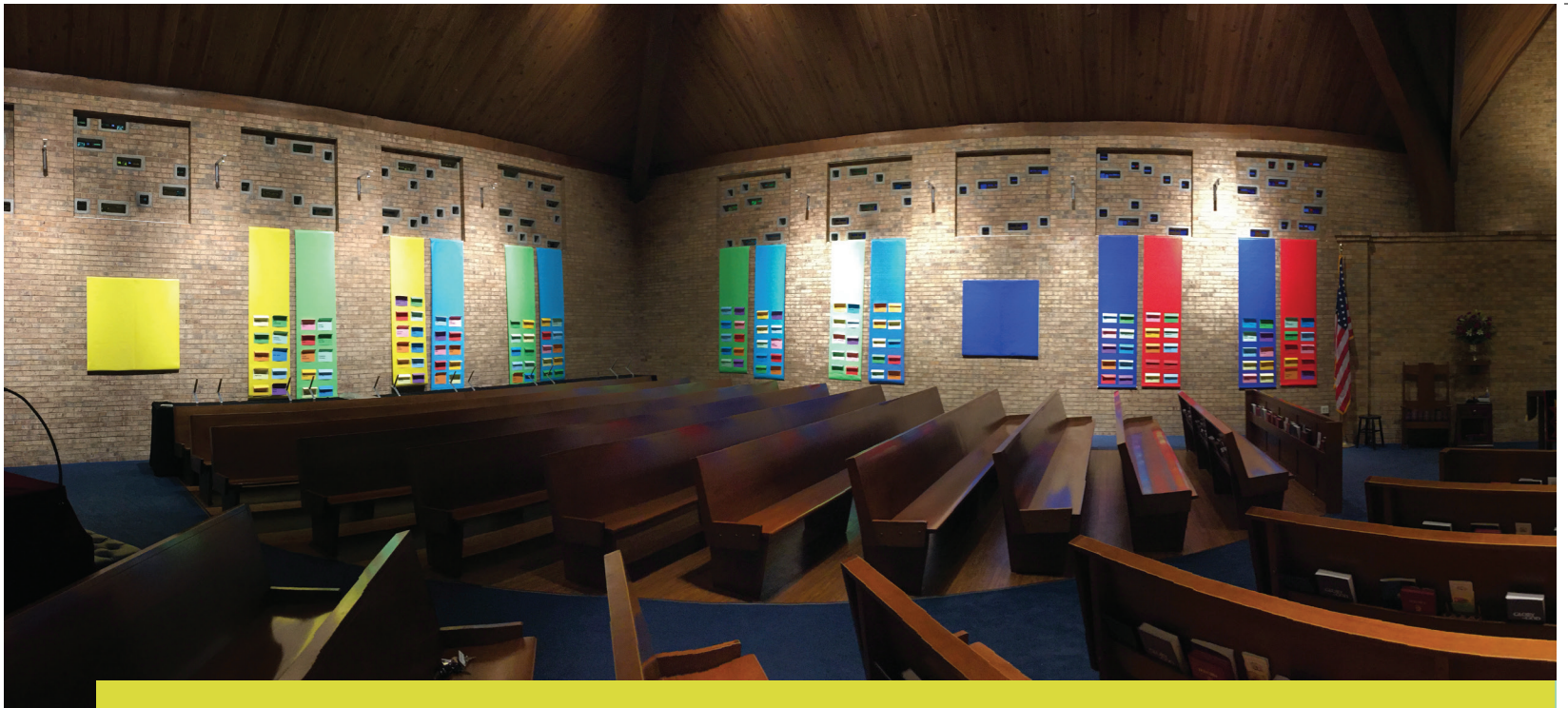


The Work of Our Hands: From Sense to Transcendence

Barbara Heck

Bush Hill Presbyterian Church is found along a busy, four-lane thoroughfare that cuts through Fairfax County, once known for serving as a rolling road to bring large barrels of tobacco to the port at Alexandria, Virginia. Milton L. Grigg, a Virginia architect who worked as a modernist within the Jeffersonian tradition, fully embraced twentieth-century Modernism when he designed this sanctuary. One senses a “holy emptiness” in this space with its high wooden ceiling that peaks in the middle of the sanctuary. The six-sided floor plan emphasizes the width of the sanctuary in its middle, and a central pulpit stands in the front of this rectilinear church. The simplicity of the interior space mimics a cavernous space created for safety inside a mountain cave. The tall brick walls, the vaulted wooden ceiling, and jeweled glass blocks create a feeling that is high and far away yet warm and inviting. It is a unique, modern-style church.

Barbara Heck is pastor and head of staff of Bush Hill Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

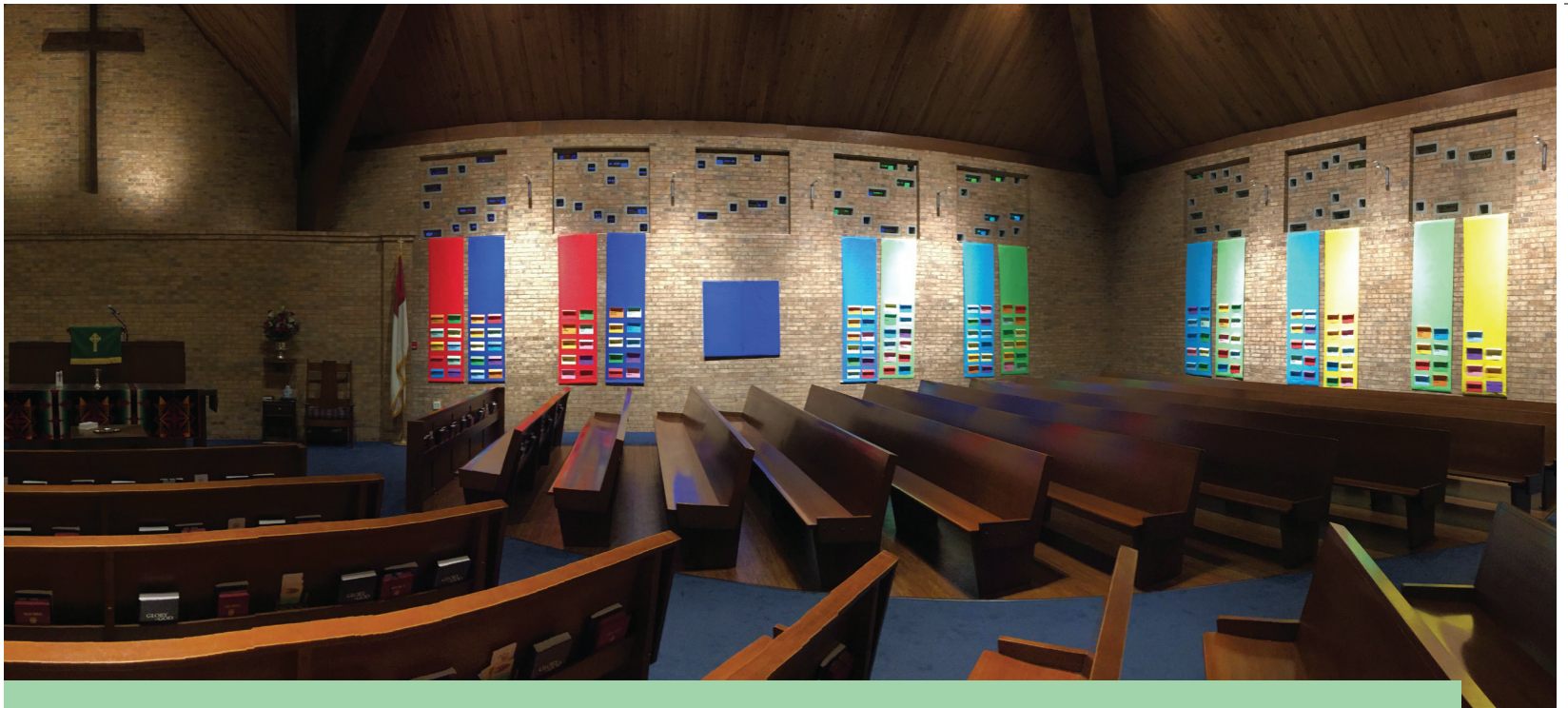


When I first stood in this sanctuary, I wondered, “Did the third pig of *The Three Little Pigs* fame—you know, the one who built his house out of brick—did he also build Bush Hill Presbyterian Church?” There is. So. Much. Brick. Even in the spaces where it seems like there should be windows, there is lots of brick embedded with jeweled glass blocks. Only when the lights are off does the intense brilliance of those blocks take your breath away. The changing

progression of the jeweled color moves from yellow to green and blue and eventually to reds and purple. I have come to love this space. The imminence of God’s protection is strong in this sanctuary. No huffing of the world’s chaos or puffing of human sin will blow this place down.

These brick walls and the simplicity of the space are a blank canvas that invite us to create visuals for worship. Involving people in that process helps





them to see the vital role they play in creating a worship service. It has also enabled us to adorn the space in a wide range of ways throughout the liturgical year.

For Lent, we've colored our own crosses, glued them on long black paper, and hung them like thieves on either side of the wooden cross that reigns over our worship services. For another Lenten season, we built a six-foot fig tree and talked about

the need for Jesus to fertilize our lives and help us grow into the fullest people who God created us to be. We invited the congregation to write down their fruit on paper figs scattered in the pews. During the offertory, people came forward to place their fruit on the tree. Afterwards, one of our writers crafted a story using the words that people offered.

For Easter, we've cut out and stapled butterflies together and fluttered strands of them around the





sanctuary. Where once black paper (Ash Wednesday), purple papers (Sundays in Lent), green ribbon (Palm Sunday), and red ribbon (Maundy Thursday) cascaded down from the jeweled windows, white paper and multicolored ribbons flowed down, together “a thousand dimensions, bursting with color and cadences in a wild, limitless, expanding dance of energy,” as Jeremy Begbie writes.¹ To create that atmosphere of resurrecting joy, Bush Hill members brought in spools of every color of ribbons. We’ve also traced our hands on paper, cut them out and curled them and transformed them into paper lilies.

During Ordinary Time, people have donated their newspapers in order to create an installation to remind us that “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” that we are to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and . . . run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

For stewardship season, to emphasize the *partnership* that ministry is, and in the spirit of giving *and* receiving, we hung papers with stapled

envelopes. Everybody had an envelope with their name on it. We always ask people to give their time, talents, and treasures, but this time we wanted people to receive recognition for what they give—to receive the gift of being seen. We invited members to write notes of thanks to others for who they are and what they do in order to create our Christian community. Finally, we asked people to write their pledges of time and talents on hearts that were posted on squares of color. This installation matched the design of our stewardship logo.

We rarely create alone. This congregation is blessed with a phenomenal artist and art teacher, Julia Schickel, who is a partner and leader in the creative process and the art making. Our active engagement in creating visuals for worship takes us beyond ourselves and helps us surrender to God. The creative process lets God work with us, knitting us together as the body of Christ.

We live in an image-drenched world, and bringing images into worship makes smooth a highway for our God to reach us. Bringing the visual arts into a sanctuary for worship heightens the affective perception of the people of God as they listen to the Word of God. The sensory input of visual arts gives God greater access to the worshiper as God is made known through color and image. God directs our thinking without words yet sparks our imaginations to leap from “sense” to “transcendence” and be known to us.

Note

1. Jeremy Begbie, *For the Beauty of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 180.



Proclaiming the Good News in Film: An Interview with Scott Galloway

Editor's Note: Scott Galloway is founder and executive producer of InLighten Films. I met Scott during a filming session and, as a result of that meeting, he and his team produced a documentary of the Just Worship conference held in Austin, Texas, in September of 2019. He lives with his family in Charlotte, North Carolina.

What is InLighten Films?

InLighten Films is a weekly, original film series that presents stories based on biblical Scripture from the Revised Common Lectionary. Films are designed for worship, Christian education, Bible studies, retreats, and so forth. In addition to film premieres, InLighten Films subscribers receive discussion questions and bonus film extras.

What was the inspiration for this endeavor?

For the past fifty years I have watched the pews thin out around me. I have found the challenge of attending church particularly difficult for my children and their friends. They tell me it's for "boomers." However, they do connect with story. I

am the same way. I believe we all are. It is part of our design, foundational in the Gospels, and a big reason why Jesus spoke in parables.

The most impactful stories of our time are told visually. Today, one of the most popular visual storytelling forms is the short film. The shift to shorter form is the biggest change I have seen in my film career, particularly with younger viewers. They like to watch, create, and share short-form content. InLighten Films is a way to reach audiences, particularly younger ones, in the way they prefer.

Are all of the films the same length? Are they similar in approach? Do they tell stories, present dilemmas, raise questions? What's their purpose?

InLighten Films are original short films that run three and a half to five minutes in length. Films are either scripted or documentary and are designed to engage and inspire, provide context and relatability, improve biblical literacy, and augment the worship and Christian education experience in churches and schools.



Photo Credit: Brent Christy



Photo Credit: Ben Carter

Every film tells a full story but is designed to be slightly open ended to help foster discussion. Films do not require explanations like clips lifted from feature-length films. They are not dated or overused viral YouTube videos. These are never-before-seen films premiering in sanctuaries and classrooms that are made by award-winning filmmakers, beautifully captured in the highest quality.

How are churches using these films? What other possibilities do you see for their use?

InLighten Films have been shown in worship services—traditional and contemporary, adult and children Sunday school classes, Bible studies, weekly devotions, religious and ethics college classes, church staff meetings, retreats of every kind, even at a senior citizen home. We recently learned of a church that has created an intergenerational class of high school students and their parents.



Photo Credit: James Willson



Photo Credit: Monica Galloway

Where does the content come from? Were preachers, teachers, or scholars involved?

We have a team that studies the lectionary and does their best to determine which texts worship or educational leaders will select. Once the text has been picked, we begin the process of assessing what the passage is communicating and how a film can serve to illustrate it. This is essentially what these films are, visual illustrations.

We then meet with a group of advisors. They are ministers, Christian educators, and biblical scholars. We start by presenting our themes. Given the broad nature of the themes, we are usually close to what our advisors see. Getting the “gist” of the text is fairly attainable. When we present story ideas within the themes—well, this takes a good deal more time.

What are your hopes for InLighten Films? That is, what do you hope these films will do?

A friend once told me of his family struggles with church. One Sunday his eldest son stood outside the sanctuary door and refused to enter. “It’s stupid. I don’t like it.” Finally, my friend told his son, “You think I like it? I don’t like going either, but we have to do it.” The worst part of his story was that that was how it ended. There was no blaming the comment on exasperation. There was no *mea culpa*. This was simply how he viewed his Sunday morning obligation.

My hope is that InLighten Films offers a small window into the good news, that the films bring a vitality to worship, a fresh approach to Christian education and Bible study, and more than anything, that the films help connect God’s word and the teachings of Jesus Christ to others.

You’re from a long line of Presbyterian ministers. How does your personal story play into the story of InLighten Films?

My father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all Presbyterian ministers. My mother was a Christian educator and social worker. I grew up in the church. I always loved the stories within my father’s sermons. He was very intentional in including them. Over his fifty-year ministry he collected stories from his colleagues and from his studies. He put the stories on five-by-seven cards and catalogued them:



Photo Credit: Ben Carter



forgiveness, sin, trust, and so forth. He created more than ten thousand story cards. When I told him my plans for InLighten Films, he gave me his cards. It is a remarkable legacy gift that I cherish beyond words.

How do churches get access to your films? Where can we learn more?

InLighten Films delivers password-protected links directly to churches or schools. Links can be downloaded or streamed, along with a PDF of the lectionary text, discussion questions, and bonus film extras. Churches and schools can screen films as many times as they wish, in whatever way they choose, for as long as needed. InLighten Films provides a Scripture and key word database for continual reference.

You can learn more by visiting: <https://inlightenstream.com/>.



Above: Photo Credit: Ben Carter

Bottom right: Photo Credit: Brian French

A Primer on the Revised Common Lectionary

Jonathan Hehn, OSL

This article unapologetically advocates for the use of the Revised Common Lectionary as a practice that is historically grounded, pastorally appropriate, and sensitive to the increasingly ecumenical nature of American congregations. It is written primarily for preachers and other worship planners, especially church musicians. Unlike in some traditions, the use of the lectionary is not compulsory for Presbyterians. In fact, the current Directory for Worship sets a rather low bar for ministers to maintain regarding the public proclamation of Scripture.¹ It is technically only required that passages for worship be chosen from both Testaments. However, it is also required that those choices be guided by the rhythms of the church year. And as we will see, the so-called “rhythms” or seasons of the year and the use of a lectionary are practically inseparable. This is why the Directory for Worship itself commends the use of a lectionary, and why so many congregations today have found the Revised Common Lectionary in particular to be the best way to structure their collective engagement with the Bible.² But even beyond legalistic requirements and pastoral arguments for the use of a lectionary, there is also important history to consider which should inform our present-day practice. Thus, it’s to history that we first turn.

Arrangements of Bible Readings in Early Christian Traditions

As with many things “early church,” we do not know exactly when or how a lectionary emerged. We do know that there are complete extant lectionaries dating from the sixth century, and that even earlier, certain important days and seasons were commonly paired with particular Scripture readings,

an approach known as *lectio selecta*.³ Because of this, it seems that lectionary and liturgical year developed together. Indeed, it makes sense for one to recall the resurrection account on the anniversary of Jesus’ rising, the day we call Easter. In the same way, one would be inclined to read Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost, or Jesus’ birth narrative at Christmas. Aside from occasional use of *lectio selecta*, the earliest pattern for the year was one of *lectio continua*; that is, the books of the Bible were simply read through in order, Sunday by Sunday. As the centuries went on, and more feasts and saints’ days populated the calendar, the *lectio continua* arrangement became almost totally obfuscated by *lectio selecta*.

Sixteenth-century Reformers sought to correct this obfuscation, including Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglicans. The Swiss Reformers however, including Calvin, were the most extreme in their efforts, returning to a near pure observance of *lectio continua* by abandoning the lectionary, the liturgical year, and any and all saints’ days. While those extreme efforts did result in a greater proportion of Scripture being read during worship, the severity of their reforms resulted in an imbalance between *lectio continua* and *lectio selecta* that was merely the opposite of the one to which they were reacting. Nevertheless, Reformed churches carried this paradigm into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Westminster Directory as the American Paradigm

When the first *Directory of Publick Worship*, commonly known as the Westminster Directory, was published in 1645, it was an entirely new model of

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liturgical governance. The Westminster Directory, despite being largely rubrical, did offer a concrete order of worship along with specific instructions for structuring the liturgical reading of Scripture that combined the *lectio continuo* paradigm used by Calvin with the requirement of readings from both Testaments each Lord's Day. While it officially supplanted the well-established use of liturgical books⁴ across Britain, many still used material from those books along with the Directory.⁵ Regarding the reading of Scripture, the 1645 Directory says that if "it is convenient, that ordinarily one chapter of each Testament be read at every meeting; and sometimes more, where the chapters be short, or the coherence of matter requireth it." It also added that "it is requisite that all the canonical books be read over in order, that the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the scriptures; and ordinarily, where the reading in either Testament endeth on one Lord's day, it is to begin the next." While this system isn't detailed enough to be called a lectionary, it is a clear and unambiguous norm. American Presbyterians inherited this norm, and presumably followed it, into the early nineteenth century.

Evangelicalism

The Second Great Awakening and emerging Evangelical movement heavily influenced American church practice. The move toward worship that was effectual, centering liturgically around the preacher's message, meant that ministers felt empowered to choose readings on which to base their sermons. Sometimes these readings were only a single or small handful of verses. At best, the personal latitude that preachers took in planning worship in this era gave them the ability to use Scriptures for legitimate didactic and/or evangelical purposes. At worst, however, that latitude resulted in the people of God encountering precious little Scripture in worship.⁶

Concurrent with these changes in the structure and style of preaching was a major shift in what Presbyterians sang during worship. The old tradition of singing only metrical psalmody in Reformed churches slowly eroded over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, first being supplemented and then sometimes totally supplanted by hymnody. This meant that in addition to losing the regular *bearing* of significant portions of the Bible in worship, Presbyterians and others were also losing the regular *singing* of the Bible over the course of the nineteenth century.

What's the Point?

What is the point of all this history? What could centuries-old historical paradigms have to say about our current practice? I think it has good things to say about (1) understanding liturgical tradition and its ability to offer us practical guidance for today, and (2) the importance of pastoral context. The Westminster Directory is an excellent example of both of these.

In an age when general literacy was still fairly low, congregations would have relied on this weekly public reading of Scriptures for their biblical education.

On one hand, the Westminster Directory acknowledged its direct and indirect reliance on liturgical tradition. Its preface offers that "were [the creators of the *Book of Common Prayer*] now alive, they would join with us in this work . . . that we may in some measure answer the gracious providence of God, which at this time calleth upon us for further reformation."⁷ The Westminster Directory's requirement of *lectio continua*—but from both Testaments—relies on both Calvinist and *Book of Common Prayer* traditions. On the other hand, the Westminster Directory also understood the immense importance of pastoral context for shaping how Scripture was used in public worship. Its framers clearly desired that congregations engage the Bible more fully, wishing that "the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the scriptures."⁸ In so doing, they took up the mantle worn by the sixteenth-century Reformers and their commitment to individual biblical literacy. However, unlike some of the earliest Reformation communities, in which going to church multiple times per week was normative, the assumption here is that once-weekly (Sunday) worship attendance is the norm. Thus, according to the Westminster Directory, each Sunday the readings began where they had left off the previous week. In an age when general literacy was still fairly low, congregations would have relied on this weekly public reading of Scriptures for their biblical education. Another important contextual element in this era was the general lack of a liturgical calendar. As noted above, early Reformed churches abolished all feast days and seasons, and the Westminster Directory affirmed that choice.⁹ It would make no

sense, given such context, to observe a lectionary based on the liturgical year, while it would have made perfect sense to simply read systematically through the books of the Bible Sunday by Sunday.

Could it be, that in our current context, where biblical literacy and attendance at Sunday school or midweek Bible studies by congregations is increasingly low, but where observance of the liturgical year is the norm, that use of the Revised Common Lectionary is the most obvious pastoral choice? I think the answer is yes.

Structure of the Revised Common Lectionary

The liturgical year and the lectionary are inseparable. What would the season of Christmas be, for instance, without the reading of the birth narratives from Luke or Matthew? What would Easter be without the recounting of the resurrection? The question around the lectionary is not one of kind, but of degree. It would be hard for most Presbyterians today to imagine a year without Advent, Lent, All Saints Day, or even the Baptism of the Lord. In the great tradition of the church *semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, we have seen the pastoral and contextual advantages of embracing the church year in our modern times, which has resulted in many if not most Presbyterians recapturing the use of the lectionary in worship, at least for the major seasonal cycles. What may not be well understood, though, is the underlying structure of the Revised Common Lectionary, and how it can serve as a tool for opening up the riches of the Scriptures more fully to our congregations.¹⁰

At its core, the Revised Common Lectionary observes a single annual cycle, each year beginning with Advent and concluding with the feast known as Christ the King or Reign of Christ.

At its core, the Revised Common Lectionary observes a single annual cycle, each year beginning with Advent and concluding with the feast known as Christ the King or Reign of Christ.¹¹ However, as readers of this article are no doubt already aware, in order to allow the Synoptic Gospels to each speak in their fullness, this yearly cycle is threefold; Year A

draws Gospel texts mostly from Matthew, Year B from Mark, and Year C from Luke, while John appears on feast days and is interspersed largely within Year B to accommodate Mark's brevity. Moreover, there is far too much of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament letters to be practically read over the course of one single liturgical year. Therefore these, too, are spread over the course of three years.

The basic structural division of the Revised Common Lectionary within each year is between the major seasonal cycles and the numbered Sundays, which Presbyterians, along with Roman Catholics, call Sundays in Ordinary Time.¹² One might think of the major seasonal cycles—the Christmas cycle, which includes the Sundays of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, and the Easter cycle, which spans from Ash Wednesday to Pentecost—as narrative and thematic, telling the story of Jesus and salvation history, while lections during Ordinary Time are systematic and sequential, reading through the books of the Bible in a sort of logical order.

The Christmas Cycle

The Christmas cycle serves both as an eschatological ending to the liturgical year and as an incarnational beginning. Both aspects have to do with the in-breaking of God's kingdom. The incarnational aspect is easy enough for people to grasp, since the story of Jesus' birth is so well known and beloved by the Christian community. The Advent Gospel narratives, as well as the prophecies from Isaiah, are important because they do for us what John the Baptist did for the people of the Jordan valley: call us to repentance and preparation for the coming of Jesus. However, the richness of the incarnational story is greatly increased by putting the birth narratives into dialogue with other readings pertaining to Jesus' second coming. The eschatological readings that end Ordinary Time and begin Advent each year work as a sort of linchpin, helping the wheel of the year turn steadily around its axis. Similarly, the Christmas season readings help move us past Jesus' birth and into his adult ministry at the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

The Easter Cycle

The Lent-Easter cycle centers around stories of the adult Jesus. Each of the three years begins with the same readings on Ash Wednesday—the middle portion of the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 6—which deals with the traditional

Lenten practices of almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. Likewise, each year on the First Sunday, we hear the story of Jesus' fasting and temptation in the desert. There is an obvious and intentional connection between the events of Jesus' life and the way we observe liturgical time in the Lent-Easter cycle. The forty days of Jesus' fasting are echoed by our forty-day Lenten fast.¹³ As Lent comes to a close on Holy Saturday and Easter emerges during the Great Vigil, there begins a fifty-day period of feasting, culminating in the Day of Pentecost, or the "fiftieth" day as recorded in Luke. Pentecost is preceded by the Ascension of Jesus, which, as in Luke's Gospel, occurs forty days after Easter Sunday. During Easter, the RCL retells many of the post-resurrection stories from the Gospels, and in lieu of Hebrew Bible readings, appoints the stories of the church's early expansion from the Book of Acts.

Ordinary Time

The Sundays not within one of the two great cycles are referred to as Sundays in Ordinary Time. They begin on the Sunday after Epiphany but are always interrupted in February or March by the Lent-Easter cycle. Therefore, some traditions have opted to refer to Sundays "after Epiphany" and Sundays "after Pentecost." The organization of readings for Ordinary Time, though, is basically laid out in the manner of *lectio semi-continua*, so that the readings heard on the last Sunday after Epiphany (before Ash Wednesday) are continued on the first Sunday after Pentecost.

The Gospel is the primary structural driver of the Revised Common Lectionary throughout the year, including in Ordinary Time.

The Gospel is the primary structural driver of the Revised Common Lectionary throughout the year, including in Ordinary Time. However, the RCL differs substantially from the Roman Catholic Lectionary for Mass in that, for the Sundays in Ordinary Time, the RCL provides a semicontinuous track of readings from the Hebrew Bible and the Epistles which *are almost never* chosen to complement the Gospel. That is to say that, within

the semicontinuous track of readings, the only complementary relationship is between the Hebrew Bible reading and the psalm. The positive effect of that structure, from a Reformed point of view, is that the RCL's semicontinuous track allows the Hebrew Bible to stand on its own, rather than in the shadow of the Gospel, for about three-fifths of each year. Nonetheless, the RCL also provides a complementary track of Hebrew Bible readings which closely mirrors the Lectionary for Mass and the (original, unrevised) Common Lectionary. Which set of readings to choose depends on one's context and good prudence on the part of those planning worship. The two tracks are designed to be used consistently. Skipping from one track to another loses the sense of continuity in the semicontinuous readings, and moving in and out of complementary readings leaves hearers confused as to whether or not the readings are meant to relate to one another.

Daily Lectionaries

The creation of the Lectionary for Mass in 1969 included a two-year cycle of readings for use at daily liturgies. The 1993 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* provided a version of this lectionary for use in daily prayer or devotional reading. While the two-year system affords the opportunity to encounter a much larger portion of the Bible than the Sunday lectionary alone, it doesn't always coordinate with the Sunday lectionary. Therefore, in 2005 the Consultation on Common Texts published *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings: Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts*. One fundamental difference between it and the older, two-year cycle is that its readings are chosen primarily to coordinate with Sundays and festival days. Each week's readings in the RCL daily lectionary are divided into two halves. Monday through Wednesday look back to the previous Sunday's readings, while Thursday through Saturday look ahead to the coming Sunday. The primary advantage of this system is that it allows the daily readings and Sunday readings to function as a single unit, where daily readings fill in the gaps from or complement the Sunday pericopes. The primary disadvantage for those who use the RCL daily lectionary as part of liturgical prayer is largely the amount of repetition in the choice of psalms.¹⁴

Sermon Series and *Lectio Continua*

Preachers sometimes criticize the lectionary for not allowing them the freedom to preach sermon series; the assumption is that these two things are mutually exclusive. Actually, those who use the lectionary in its fullness over time will discover that the structure of the Revised Common Lectionary provides multiple good opportunities to preach topical sermon series. Here are just three examples:¹⁵

1. **The last few Sundays in Ordinary Time and first Sunday of Advent.** In each of the three years these Sundays feature readings about the end times, affording a good opportunity to talk about the eschaton and the apostolic hope in Jesus' return.
2. **Year B, 17th through 21st Sundays in Ordinary Time.** These Sundays center around the "Bread of Life" discourse from the Gospel of John chapter 6. Here would be an excellent time to preach a series on the Eucharist.
3. **Year A, the Sundays after Epiphany.** This time features readings about Jesus' baptism and the calling of the first disciples, making it suited to preaching a series about baptism and the life of discipleship.

In addition to topical sermon series based on the lectionary readings, one might also choose to explore the traditional Reformed practice of exegetical preaching based on a *lectio continua* pattern. This is easy to do within the lectionary framework, especially using the Epistles and Hebrew Bible readings. The framers of the RCL recognized this possibility, in fact, and noted in their writings that the semicontinuous design of the readings in Ordinary Time were an intentional recovery of the ancient and Reformed practice of *lectio continua*. The following table shows which books and chapters enjoy a special focus in each of the three years of Ordinary Time and could thus be a target for *lectio continua* preaching. One should also remember that there are several other parts of the three-year cycle that contain semicontinuous readings of various other books, especially from the New Testament letters.

Year A

1 Corinthians (chapters 1–4)
Romans (1–14)
Genesis (1–4)
Exodus (1–33)

Year B

1 Corinthians (6–9)
2 Corinthians (1–12)
Ephesians (1–6)
James (1–5)
Hebrews (1–10)
1 Samuel (2–17)
2 Samuel (1–18)
Job (1–42)

Year C

Isaiah (43–62)
1 Corinthians (13–15)
Jeremiah (1–32)
1 Kings (17–21)
Minor Prophets (various)

It is important to note the reason for including multiple readings from Scripture in worship. Horace T. Allen, who was a Presbyterian pastor, one of the framers of the Common Lectionary, worship professor, and the first staff person in the joint UPCUSA/PCUS Office of Worship, offered a delightfully cheeky retort to the idea that the only Scriptures read on Sunday should be those for preaching in his introduction to the *Handbook for the Revised Common Lectionary*:

Why, if one is not going to use all three lessons in the homily, are the ones not to be used read at all? In certain traditions the assumption has been that one reads only from the scriptures for the purpose of preaching. This is why it is important to recall that there are other quite important reasons to proclaim the scriptures in the liturgical assembly. Surely such an assumption reveals a kind of Protestant "priestcraft" that is thoroughly inappropriate precisely in that tradition. One recalls a line from a much-loved hymn of William Cowper: "God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain."¹⁶

The Psalms

The place where the Revised Lectionary provides the most promise for liturgical reform for Presbyterians is in its inclusion of the Psalms. When Reformed communities dispensed with Gregorian chant (the texts of which are mostly drawn from the Psalms), they replaced it with metrical psalmody. This practice was so widespread that singing metrical psalms became a hallmark of Reformed worship. Yet this heritage has been largely lost, as freely composed hymns have come to supplant metrical psalmody today. Some congregations maintain the use of Psalms as a spoken part of worship, and of course much of the language of the liturgy itself is drawn from the Psalms and other Scripture. One of the most positive aspects of the lectionary is that it seeks to restore Psalms as an important and sung portion of Sunday worship. Psalms appointed in the Sunday lectionary are for the most part intended to complement the Hebrew Bible readings, and thus seek to avoid any problems stemming from a typological/Christocentric interpretation of the Psalms. There are exceptions to this, of course, since on some days, especially when the readings from the Gospel or Epistles directly cite a psalm, it is appropriate to pair those readings with the corresponding psalm. And even while Christians should be sensitive to the way that they interpret the Psalms for the sake of our Jewish siblings, there is a long history, beginning with the early church fathers and mothers, through Calvin and other Reformers, even into the eighteenth and nineteenth century, of psalm paraphrases written by authors such as Isaac Watts interpreting the Psalms as looking forward to the person of Jesus Christ. That being said, using the Psalms as appointed in the RCL, and always singing them as a response to the Hebrew Bible reading for the day, helps to protect them from being used in an insensitive way.

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Whereas the Lectionary for Mass typically appoints just a small portion of a psalm to be sung on Sundays, the Revised Common Lectionary typically appoints a complete psalm. This sometimes makes the singing of psalms in a responsorial fashion cumbersome, but provides a marvelous opportunity for Presbyterians to reclaim their heritage of singing metrical psalms. The new PC(USA) hymnal *Glory to God* includes a very large number of such settings, dispersing them throughout the hymnal in the same manner as 1955's *The Hymnbook*. There is also a growing body of psalmody in various styles being created by Christians of other traditions which can be used just as ably in Presbyterian congregations.

Conclusions

The Revised Common Lectionary is a great gift to the people of God, enabling us to better know and understand the Bible. First, it allows for congregations to engage the full gamut of the Scriptures. The Revised Common Lectionary ensures that about two-thirds of the Bible is proclaimed in worship over the course of the three-year cycle. Those who choose to augment the Sunday lectionary with one of the existing daily lectionaries encounter three-quarters or more of the Bible over those years.

Second, the RCL adds an important interpretive layer to the readings themselves by placing them within a liturgical context. The pairing of readings from the Hebrew Bible, Gospels, and New Testament letters allows the readings to take on new, more complex meanings for the Christian community. This is especially true when they are read within the context of a seasonal cycle; doing so helps congregations grasp the implicit connection between the Scriptures and the great theological themes of the Christian tradition.

Third, the embrace of the RCL has led to a plethora of complementary liturgical resources. For Presbyterians, among the most notable of these are the hymnal *Glory to God* and the Sunday proper in the new edition of the *Book of Common Worship*.

Lastly, and not unimportantly, the use of the Revised Common Lectionary provides wonderful opportunities for ecumenical engagement. I have, for instance, spent many a Sunday afternoon with my Roman Catholic mother-in-law discussing the readings of the day. Even though we attend congregations from different traditions, thanks to the structure shared by the Revised Common

Lectionary and Lectionary for Mass, we often hear the same readings and are thus able to build up our relationship in faith upon the foundation of Scripture during those afternoon conversations. I have had similar experiences with groups of clergy people and professed religious, who, when coming together from diverse traditions to plan common prayer, found that our shared practice of using the Revised Common Lectionary allowed an immediate sense of ease and community, as well as a natural baseline on which to build ecumenical liturgies.

I hope that this article has shown the Revised Common Lectionary to be something of real value to today's church. Use of the lectionary is not only historically grounded but also a pastorally and ecumenically sensitive way for Christians to structure the reading of the Bible in worship. It allows the people of God to encounter the fullness of Scripture while also celebrating those seasonal cycles which Presbyterians, after a centuries-long absence, have again come to cherish.

Further Resources

- www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/faq/faq-wordworship/
The PC(USA)'s Presbyterian Mission Agency already provides an excellent introduction to the lectionary as well as answers to a number of pastoral concerns likely to affect congregational leaders.
- <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>
A highly accessible and useful site offering the RCL itself as well as companion materials and integration with lectionary-based planning sites. Note that the Sundays in Ordinary Time are those listed in parentheses. For example, Proper 8 (13) for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, 2019, is the same as the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- www.textweek.com
The Text This Week is an online reference sheet linking to most of the other major worship planning resources for the lectionary.
- <https://hymnary.org>
Hymnary.org is a monumental database of hymnals and a hymnological encyclopedia maintained by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. In addition to indexing many thousands of hymnals from all eras according

to the Scripture reference and textual themes, it also provides carefully curated lists of hymns and songs chosen to go with the Revised Common Lectionary.

Notes

1. Directory for Worship, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2019), W-3.0301. "A minister of the Word and Sacrament is responsible for the selection of Scriptures to be read in public worship. Selected readings are to be drawn from both Old and New Testaments, and over a period of time should reflect the broad content and full message of Scripture. Selections for readings should be guided by the rhythms of the Christian year, events in the world, and pastoral concerns in the local congregation. Lectionaries ensure a broad range of biblical texts as well as consistency and connection with the universal Church."
2. There are, of course, options other than the RCL. The most popular currently is the Narrative Lectionary, produced by the folks at Luther Seminary.
3. See Eric Palazzo, *A History of Liturgical Books from the Beginning to the Thirteenth Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 83ff.
4. For specifics on this point, see Jonathan Hehn, "Liturgy and Hymnody," in *The Oxford Handbook of Presbyterianism*, ed. Gary Scott Smith and P. C. Kemeny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
5. Knox's *Book of Common Order* in Scotland and the *Book of Common Prayer* in England
6. In this author's mind, the individualistic system of worship planning promoted by evangelical preachers of this era is profoundly un-Reformed. It not only failed to present the full gamut of Scripture to the people over the course of time, but it also put the use and interpretation of the Bible back into the exclusive hands of the clergy. Of course, many of these negative effects were counterbalanced by creation of Sunday schools, public schools (where, in this period, the study of the Bible was a normal part of the curriculum), and the generally growing literacy rate which enabled the public to engage the Scriptures outside of worship. Family worship was also still prevalent in this age, wherein heads of households would lead their family through the reading and study of Scriptures on a regular basis. In any case, one can clearly see that the contextual situations of church in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were remarkably different, and thus called for a different approach to the use of Scripture in worship.

7. Preface, *Directory for Publick Worship*, www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/directory-of-publick-worship/.
8. Ibid.
9. The Westminster Directory commanded that “Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.” (Appendix to the Westminster Directory, “Touching Days and Places for Publick Worship.”)
10. Understanding the pastoral potential of the lectionary from early on, Presbyterians have long been in the forefront of that portion of Protestant liturgical reform. Every edition since the first *Book of Common Worship* has included a lectionary, but during the great liturgical convergence of the mid-twentieth century, which resulted in the ecumenically created Lectionary for Mass (1969), there arose a new opportunity. Recognizing the excellence of the Lectionary for Mass, Presbyterians were the first Protestant body in North America to adopt a version of it, including it in *The Worshipbook* (1970). That work, carried forward by Presbyterians such as Horace T. Allen, then influenced what became the Common Lectionary (1983) and its successor, the Revised Common Lectionary (1992).
11. The RCL does also contain a small handful of feast days, such as the Annunciation (March 25), Holy Cross Day (September 14), and All Saints Day (November 1), but the pericopes for these days are chosen independently, not in coordination with the Sunday readings.
12. Ordinary Time is so called because the Sundays are labeled using ordinal numbers, such as 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time. This phrase in English is a very loose translation of the Latin *tempus per annum*, perhaps better translated as “time throughout the year.”
13. It has again become commonplace among Presbyterians to observe some type of fasting during Lent. For those who choose to do so, it’s important to understand that the forty days are inclusive of Monday through Saturday in the Western tradition *but not Sunday*, which is never a day for fasting but always a feast day.
14. Those who use the PC(USA)’s Daily Prayer app will notice that it, like the bound volume, uses the two-year system.
15. Taylor Burton-Edwards, OSL, a United Methodist elder who is former director of worship resources for the United Methodist Church, has a very good article summarizing the theological themes for the RCL’s liturgical seasons, from which preachers might also glean topics for sermon series. It can be found at <https://blog.umcdiscipleship.org/the-christian-year-seasons-of-discipleship/>.
16. Horace T. Allen, Jr., “Introduction: Preaching in a Christian Context,” in *Handbook for the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. Peter C. Bower (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 12. The quotation of the hymn by William Cowper is from “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” which can be found in *Glory to God*, #30.



Amy E. Gray

Preaching Justice amidst Affluence

Casey Thompson

My bona fides as a person who pastors amongst affluence: My church is in a town where the typical salary is almost three times the average American salary. The zip code is the wealthiest in Pennsylvania wherein at least 30,000 returns were filed. The next-door zip code can boast the same distinction for areas wherein 20,000 were filed. For a short time, I lived next door to an heiress to an American fortune. (For the record, it was her starter home, next door on the other side to the house her grandmother grew up in. It was the same build as mine, a 1,400-square-foot box that cost me exactly three times what I sold the same size house for in Memphis.) Her family controls billions of dollars in philanthropic aid. My congregation has included CEOs and executive team members from very recognizable publicly-traded companies. I once officiated a wedding in which the bride and groom had to file with the Securities Exchange Commission before they could marry. I had to learn not to google my congregants because their salaries are often the first thing listed. I have walked into the church parking lot to see Rolls Royces and Lamborghinis. Whenever I could I would park my Kia Sephia next to them. During my time in this community, the school system my daughters attend has been ranked as high as the second-best public-school system in the country. I live and work among people of wealth. I mean, there's an actual cricket club not too far away.



When I first arrived in the church I serve, a legendary pastor from down the road, now twenty years retired, came to listen to me preach. When he entered the sanctuary, the waters parted. People

kept coming up to me to say, “Dr. W is here. Dr. W is here.” To be clear, these were people from a different congregation than his own—now awed as if a biblical prophet had entered their midst.

I went to meet him. He said, “I hear you preach a good sermon.” He sat down, worshiped. He seemed like a normal man worshiping. I shook his hand after the service and we never met again.

I found out later from one of his best friends (the person who told him to visit my church that Sunday) that the good doctor liked me and thought well of me. As his friend reminisced about the times they had together, he as the clerk of session and the other as moderator, he shared with me the secret of why this pastor was so beloved in my area.

He said, “For twenty years, he just told them to stop being so selfish.”

“Really?”

“Yes. That’s what most of his preaching was about, ‘Stop being so selfish.’”

“And that worked?”

“Well, they wanted to kill him for a long time, but eventually they turned to beatifying him.”

“Huh? Why was that?”

“The next guy was even harder on them.”



In a time when the United States is increasingly concerned about the opioid crisis—and rightly so—we almost never talk about an addiction nearly as widespread and pernicious: wealth addiction. An addiction is any attachment that perverts our priorities so we can get more of it, so we don’t run out of it. Out of curiosity, I decided to check the diagnostic criteria for substance dependence.

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- Tolerance—which is a need for markedly increased amounts of the substance, in this case money, to feel the same desired effect—security, for instance. Or that you begin to feel less secure with the same amounts. (“Is this enough? Is this enough? Is this enough?” In my first job as a pastor, one of my friends who knew my annual salary, \$45,000, said to me, “How can you live on that amount?” And I said, “You realize that about 60 percent of Americans make less than this, right?”)
- The second criterion is experiencing withdrawal—if you feel deeply unnerved by reduction in the amount you have.
- The third: taking the substance in larger amounts or more than is needed.
- The criteria continue: a great deal of time is spent in activities necessary to obtain the substance, and important events (family, social, religious) are skipped to secure it.
- Finally, even if you know it’s disrupting your life, you continue in it.

Obviously, there are certain substances we need. Air, for instance. I feel unnerved when I have less of it than before. If necessary, I would skip family dinner to make sure I had enough. However, I don’t use more than necessary. I don’t stockpile it. I don’t craft my life in such a way that it becomes the center.

Money can be addictive. Things can possess us. In the parable of the rich young ruler, the young man goes away grieving and in sorrow because of his possessions. He either goes away grieving because withdrawal hurts and he’s decided to follow Jesus, or, more likely, he goes away sorrowful because he knows he’s entrapped. He wants fullness of life. But he’s settled for a secure life.



One of my retired colleagues who lived in this area her entire life used to ask the WIIFM question.

“Wiff-em?” I would say.

“Wiff-em,” she would say.

“What’s that?”

“What’s In It For Me?”

“That’s a terrible question.”

“It’s human nature, Casey. Is there a way to make turning outward toward others something valuable to them as well?”

“How about WIIFT? What’s in it for them?”

“Lot less popular, Casey.”

She’s right, of course. People are self-interested. Or, if we prefer the theological language of Calvinism, totally depraved. Our decisions, unless prompted by God and unlocked by grace, have a decidedly inward curve. In my experience, affluence only heightens this phenomenon. A *Chronicle of Philanthropy* study from 2012 suggests the same: the most generous zip codes by percentage of gift are not the wealthiest.¹ In fact, people who live within wealthy enclaves are less likely to give than the more moderately wealthy people who live within communities where poverty is more apparent. Another old adage holds true here: Out of sight, out of mind.



My predecessor in my present call has probably done more for those who suffer than I will ever be able to accomplish. He, however, once used an analogy that I will forever regret.

He reminded the church that when they are on an airplane and the oxygen masks drop down, they are supposed to fix the mask to their face before securing it to the face of another. He used this as a way to encourage people to build up the church so it could be strong for reaching out into the community. He did this, however, in a time when churches were not struggling like they are today.

Over the last twenty years, so many of the churches in our denomination have struggled against the weight of their own past. We have buildings that are too big for us, memories of glorious Easters to which we can no longer live up, and regrets about who we are now. With such a load to carry, churches often turn inward and become fixated on institutional survival, an institutional depravity if you will. When we do so, our vision rarely carries beyond our own doors in a significant way. Preaching charity, much less justice, becomes a burden that overwhelms people. How can we take care of others when we can’t even take care of ourselves?



In an area of affluence, your congregation is made up of people who had success in their life—often incredible success. They are people whose opinions are typically met with approval and who are used to people listening to them and following their orders. By and large, they are incredible at what they do.

The reality is that affluence means you don't have to listen to anyone. Preaching is not authoritative in communities of affluence. It's suggestive. And it's easily ignored.

For some, they assume this will transfer to any portion of their life. Preaching justice in a way that upsets their worldview often simply meets incredulity and occasionally an anger that is usually sated by others acknowledging their status.

The reality is that affluence means you don't have to listen to anyone. Preaching is not authoritative in communities of affluence. It's suggestive. And it's easily ignored.

Some people have asked me how I get away saying certain things to my congregation about justice. I think it's fairly easy. If they don't like it, many of them just ignore it.



Here's the other side of that phenomena: people of significant wealth who bother to go to church often understand they have far more than they need. They, however, are often focused on other projects rather than what to do with the wealth that has been created. They are often in desperate need of anyone who can speak with them authentically about the best ways to use that wealth for the benefit of the world. Who is usually the person whose intentions they trust more than anyone else? Their pastor. The pastor who preaches amongst the affluent has an unusual opportunity to do wonderful things for God's kingdom in the world.

A young pastor who grew up in my church is a firebrand. He cares deeply about justice, and it is a fire he cannot keep shut up in his bones. While going through seminary, he also spent time on our staff as a director of young adult ministries. Because he was known and beloved by the community, the church had a specific desire to listen to him. Because they had known him since he was an awkward teenager, they were also willing to laugh off his incendiary statements.

We had a long talk one day about preaching for this community which can be summed up as such: "You can be a prophet to them or you can be a pastor to them. A prophet will try to change their mind in ten minutes. A pastor will try to change it in ten years."

In short, I chose to try to be a pastor rather than a prophet. It means my preaching is suggestive and

invitational rather than confrontational. In many moments, I want to preach confrontational sermons. I know they won't be heard in helpful ways. It means I end up keeping a fire shut up in my bones that sometimes threatens to burn me up. In short, I think this is my greatest obstacle to my own faith.

A person I love dearly likes to remind me that nearly all of us hurt people, and that hurt people hurt other people. When I look out at my congregation, the hurts I see are probably different than the hurts other pastors see. But a lot of the hurts are the same. She has cancer. He just lost his job. His wife hasn't touched him in two years. She hasn't talked to her sister for a decade. His mom criticized him nonstop. She can't stop taking pills. He drinks when he's alone and hides it. She's caught in a marriage that isn't working in part because she won't acknowledge she would rather be married to a woman. He fills up on sex but it's empty. She miscarried again and all she's ever wanted was to be a mother. Her husband is just mean.

The lie of wealth is that money can alleviate these circumstances. Many have sought it expecting that it will provide security against the pain they feel. The truth of wealth is that money can alleviate some of the consequences that arise from these circumstances, but money can't do anything to remedy the initial hurt, disappointment, or disillusionment.

So, preaching justice actually does require us to put on the oxygen mask first. The horrible irony of all this is that affluence allows us to hide these hurts from the world and, more insidiously, from ourselves. If you want to preach justice in the midst of affluence, you have to give a damn about how people hurt. If they think you do, they'll listen. If they think you don't, they won't.

As it turns out, doing justice
is also good for us.

Because WIIFM is a thing. And, as it turns out, doing justice is also good for us. This is counterintuitive for most and often carries a sense of disdain that people are doing things for the

wrong reasons. As a Calvinist, though, I assume most people are doing most things for the wrong reasons. If I can move them further along the spectrum toward right action and right thought, I am pleased.



In these circumstances, I think you can either try to compel people toward justice or you can invite them toward it. Compulsion is neither my gift set nor in my skill set, so I invite. The invitation often begins with a different invitation, one to charity. Quite literally, I have to invite people out of the bubble of affluence they live in to experience something else.

My church has a long-standing relationship with an area of Philadelphia that does not receive the resources it deserves. The relationship predates me by more than a decade and has been invaluable in introducing much of my congregation to the unfair deprivations that exist a mere thirteen miles from them. Often church people will understand poverty on an intellectual level (and many will have firm opinions about why it is so—usually based on false political rhetoric from the right and the left). When they engage with actual people—rather than statistics or stereotypes—they begin to have a visceral understanding. The visceral understanding may still be informed by junk political rhetoric, but now there is a human face to injustice.

Their first reaction is almost always one of charity. How can we give to alleviate this person's suffering? This reaction is a giant step forward from socially-conditioned responses of "not my problem." These are not cold-hearted people, after all. Also, it is pastoral malpractice to deny the significant charitable difference people of wealth can make. But it's also pastoral malpractice to leave it there.

One of the beauties of pastoring amongst the affluent is that by and large, people become invested in things they invest in. Charitable gifts are often the first step in a deeper understanding and care for questions of poverty.



Seven years ago, I convened a small group of mission and financial leaders of our congregation to pray about the next mission to which God was calling us. Because of the long-standing relationship with mission partners in Southwest Philadelphia, our prayers quickly revealed a desire to continue

working and building relationships in that area. How to do so was the question we spent another six months discerning.

At the end of that time, we suspected God was calling us to help bolster education in Southwest Philadelphia. We lived amongst what were recognized as the best schools in the country, and not that far away were schools that were failing their students (despite the often heroic efforts of teachers and administrators). We had long-term partnerships with the elementary, middle, and high schools in that region and a close working relationship with a private Christian school that provided an alternative path to education. We thought we might be able to bring some of our resources to bear upon an unjust situation. We had no idea how, though.

Eventually, the church decided to invest in a failing church property next door to the private school and three-tenths of a mile from the public elementary school. To do so, we launched a capital campaign wherein half of the money raised would launch an arts-based educational outreach center called The Common Place, which would also house a variety of social services within its building. Now celebrating its sixth year in operation, The Common Place hosts arts-based, after-school programs, a burgeoning orchestra program for the neighborhood, choir programs, Saturday Enrichment and homework programs, nutritional and health programs, and has become a meeting center and service hub for the community.

The other half of the campaign would remain at the church and take care of deferred maintenance issues. (WIFM rears its head again.)

People invested. Hundreds of them. Most of them from a viewpoint of charity. Though most believed that financial investment is a precursor to caring, the campaign began to engage people in a question and an area many of them had never considered. Hundreds of them then invested their time in bringing the dilapidated church building back to life.

In many ways, my conception of the project was less about education and more about the large-scale introduction of two very different communities to each other. It comes from a personal belief that it's easier to care about someone you know. For many of my congregation this has proven true. Many also have not accepted this invitation. (My large-scale experiment has probably failed more than it has succeeded in this realm.)

Preaching justice in an affluent community without an attempt to do justice is empty. It is the worst sort of placation for what is often affluent liberal guilt. It allows us to feel good about our just opinions without engaging in just actions.

You may have noticed that I have not truly mentioned preaching yet in this article about preaching. Here it is: Preaching justice in an affluent community without an attempt to do justice is empty. It is the worst sort of placation for what is often affluent liberal guilt. It allows us to feel good about our just opinions without engaging in just actions.

Ninety percent of my prophetic preaching can probably be reduced to a simple invitation that I make quite often: “Come meet someone in different circumstances than you.” Or when I feel more daring; “Come meet someone without the resources to hide the things you hide.”

It is typically acknowledged in conversations about inequality that systems of oppression distort the privileged party as well as the oppressed. Patriarchy hurts men by trapping them in a culture of masculinity that is poisonous for them. Racism distorts the hearts of white people through fear.

Wealth addiction puts idols in the place where God belongs and makes us chase after and worship that which neither saves nor secures.

That’s the real WIIFM in justice. It can free the affluent from wealth addiction. It can free them from fears of insecurity. It makes life more resonant and meaningful. It’s like oxygen when you’re suffocating.

Of course, those who would wave their arms and suggest that WIIFM is a terrible way to preach justice are correct. It’s just the first step that can lead to a second: What’s in it for them? But this is the wrong question too. The real question is: What’s in it for us? For all of us.

Note

1. See www.philanthropy.com/interactives/how-america-gives-opportunity-index.



Draw a Wider Circle: Disability Justice in Hymnody and Liturgical Practice

Alexandra Mauney

Draw a wider circle—or, perhaps, erase.
Spiral toward God’s center, gravity of grace.
Raze former fences marking out and in—
holy and unholy, sanctity and sin.

—Adam M. L. Tice¹

(In)Justice and Liturgical Language

Many of us who have worked in churches have likely shared the experience of finding a note from a church member on our desk on a Monday morning with feedback about the previous day’s worship services. More often than not, these notes are kind, and they have been an encouragement to me since I first stepped behind a congregation’s pulpit. One such note, from several years before I began seminary, remains in my memory. The writer expressed gratitude for many elements of Sunday’s service, but she offered one word of invitation to me, the church’s young intern with lots to learn. She encouraged me, the next time I invited the congregation to stand for a portion of the worship service, to use language that wasn’t exclusionary for those who are unable to stand. She shared with me portions of her own story, which informed her commitment to inclusive language for people with disabilities. She challenged me to use invitations like “Let us rise in body or spirit” instead of “Let us stand,” seeking to expand the embodied norm of standing in order to more fully welcome those with disabilities or limitations that inhibit their ability to participate in that way. I was humbled and challenged, and it was the first of many similar stories that I carry with me into my ministry.

Since that Monday morning, I have learned from many stories of those who have been harmed or excluded by turns of phrase and images that fill

our worship services. These forms of language that privilege certain embodied norms are sometimes overt (such as when we assume that all of our worshipers will be able to stand), but more often than not, they are subtle. In the following, I seek to lift up some examples of how this reality might present itself in our congregational song, alongside some possible strategies for constructively addressing these textual images in worship. Worship is deeply contextual, even while it links us with communities across time and space. For this reason, some of these examples may seem ambiguous. We each know and love our own communities, with all their particularities; there is no one-size-fits-all solution to our contemporary manifestations of centuries-long ableist tendencies in culture and language. Instead, we are each invited into the creative work of pursuing justice and liberation for all people in each of the choices we make about our communal worship.

The formative experience of receiving that thoughtful note from a congregation member helped me to realize for the first time just how important our words are. If before I had understood that the liturgy is the work of the people, I understood then that the crafting and performance of inclusive liturgy is truly the work of *all* God’s people. We learn together, and we need one another as we journey nearer to God’s vision of justice for the world. This journey of justice occurs throughout our lives of Christian discipleship, and our spaces of corporate worship are often starting places to which we continually return. Particularly in the Presbyterian tradition, worship can be word heavy and rich with multivalent language. Understanding this reality, those of us who craft and lead worship in our communities likely spend a great deal of time thinking about the words within and around our

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Lord's Day worship services. We employ metaphor, image, and narrative in the service of worship, trying (and sometimes failing) to express in concrete language the depth of our praise, petition, lament, and confession.

With this imprecise art of language crafting, we are inevitably confronted with the ways in which language—particularly, figurative language—can function to more deeply engrain unhelpful associations between elements of our faith and the realities of our beautiful and painful world.

With this imprecise art of language crafting, we are inevitably confronted with the ways in which language—particularly, figurative language—can function to more deeply engrain unhelpful associations between elements of our faith and the realities of our beautiful and painful world. Within the world of disability studies, scholars note that these kinds of associations often show up in metaphors that utilize disability language interchangeably with language related to shortcoming of some kind: consider, for example, the common expressions of “blind submission” or of words “falling on deaf ears.” This use of metaphor is pervasive in the English language and serves to ingrain, whether outright or subliminally, associations between disability and shortcoming. The late Nancy Eiesland, disabled theologian and scholar of disability studies, wrote poignantly of the ways this tendency plays out within Christian community and worship practice.² She noted that the Christian tradition has committed what she terms a “carnal sin” against people with disabilities by conflating disability with sin.³ Particularly in biblical texts, liturgy, and hymnody, Eiesland argued that the Christian church has perpetuated institutional injustice in its blatant use of disability metaphors to refer to spiritual weakness.⁴

These uses of language may play out in any number of ways within our worship services. Here, we will look at some examples within the corpus of the current Presbyterian hymnal, *Glory to God*, understanding that this set of examples is far from comprehensive; rather, they may help us to think more critically about embodied imagery in the wider

scope of our hymnody. In each of these sections, we will be invited to ask probing questions about these uses of embodied imagery in the context of our own worshiping communities. Your questions and their subsequent answers will be different from those of your neighbor at the church in the next town over. Trusting that God meets us where we are and calls us forth in our individual and communal lives of discipleship, we will each need to do the hard work of uprooting injustice in our communities. Though the hard work looks different for each of us, we seek a common aim: the full embrace of all those created in the image of the triune God.

The Bodies We Sing: Hymnody

The editors of *Glory to God* confront the histories of ableist religious language in their Appendix 2: “A Statement on Language.”⁵ There the editors note that “salvation history invites us to sing joyfully of the creative and healing presence of our God. We will be sensitive, however, to potentially denigrating implications of poetic metaphors in our songs, especially with respect to persons of color or with disabilities.”⁶ This appendix acknowledges directly the care with which worship leaders ought to approach their task of crafting and employing language for worship. The hymnal committee recognized the potential for harm and addressed many of the ableist uses of language that were present in the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* and other hymnbooks from which the *Glory to God* corpus was formed. The important work of addressing issues of language usage in hymnody is well underway within the world of Presbyterian hymnody, and for that we can give thanks to God. But language and culture shift rapidly in this current age, and as the Spirit leads us more deeply in an examination of expansive and inclusive language, we are invited again and again to rethink metaphor and image and how they shape our understandings of people and their stories.

The following is a set of examples in which certain turns of phrase or images may be indicative of the kinds of ableism that still lie latent within Christian vocabulary. With each set of examples, I offer a brief exploration of the particular use of embodied imagery, along with some questions that you, the worship leader, might utilize within your own community. These considerations might simply open up a conversation around disability justice in the words of our hymns. Such conversations lay the groundwork for the implementation of practical

changes; without a foundational understanding of the ways in which this kind of embodied language may harm those of us with disabilities, the practical changes are unlikely to be embraced. Together with other worship leaders and planners, worshipping communities might engage these questions of ableist language within their own contexts, seeking to more fully express God's wide embrace of all people.

Sight as Spiritual Metaphor

This first pair of hymns deals with the use of sighted imagery to denote spiritual perception and depth. Within the Presbyterian worshipping communities of which I have been a part, both of these hymns were part of what I would consider a "core canon" of hymnody. While this will not be the case for all communities, it is likely that at least one will be sung throughout the course of a liturgical year. For this reason, these selections merit close consideration for their employment of disability language.

"Open My Eyes, That I May See"

(Glory to God #451)

In this hymn text from the late nineteenth century, the singer petitions to God that her eyes, ears, and heart be opened in order that she might be illumined by the Spirit. The first verse begins, "Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me," and ends, "Open my eyes; illumine me, Spirit divine!" In this example, the text writer draws a connective line between the embodied image of opening one's eyes and the spiritual experience of glimpsing God's truth. This use of metaphor places normative value on sightedness, employing language in a way that may alienate the experiences of those who are blind or visually impaired. The second verse does a similar thing, this time alienating those who are Deaf⁷ or hearing impaired: "Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth thou sendest clear." We might wonder how these embodied images sit with those of us whose embodied realities are excluded from these images of enlightenment and understanding.

"Amazing Grace" (Glory to God #649)

In this most beloved of Christian hymns, the first verse ends, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." Similar to "Open my Eyes," this example of embodied imagery draws a connective line between the restoration of sight and the believer's experience of God's grace in

her life. A complicated element of this example is that for many of us, this image is likely evocative of the Gospel narratives in which Jesus restores sight to people who are blind. Much scholarly work has been done around the engagement of these healing narratives from a disability perspective (including Presbyterian minister Bethany McKinney Fox's recent book *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church*).⁸ For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that communities must engage images like the one from "Amazing Grace" with an eye toward their own communal hermeneutic (i.e., What do we believe is happening in the healing narratives of Jesus?). What is indisputable is the connection that the text draws between spiritual privation and blindness. This connection, whether biblical or not, is rooted in an understanding of blindness as a departure from the desirable embodied norm.

Questions for Communal Reflection

1. Identify the embodied image within this verse of text. Does this image imply an embodied norm, into which all of our bodies may or may not fit?
2. To what is this embodied image being compared, or with what associations is it being paired?
3. With these comparisons and associations in mind, for whom might this use of embodied imagery be troubling? For whom might it be a source of pain, exclusion, or marginalization? Think not only about members of our own community, but also those outside of our community whom we would like to welcome in.
4. How is this image operating within its respective verse, or even within the entire hymn? Is it a central image, or does it seem more peripheral?
5. In our seeking to more fully embrace all those whom God created, might this be an image to reconsider utilizing, or to more fully contextualize or offset through other creative liturgical means?

Disability Erasure

In the following two hymns, images of healing are used to image a promised future in which those with disabilities will be erased of their disabilities. For many Christians throughout the ages, these images of an eschaton free of disability have seemed unproblematic, if not desirable. Indeed, the argument goes, if disability is a difficult reality for those in our communities who are disabled, then the absence of such difficulty in our imagined

future with God is a positive thing. But as disability studies scholar Sharon Betcher has noted, “While perennially posed as a problem in need of a solution, disability is no more natural nor innocent as a social construction than race or gender.”⁹ Those who advocate for a social model of disability—in short, that disability exists as a result of social marginalization and lack of access—might argue that a truly liberatory eschaton is one in which access barriers (*not* physical differences) are transformed.¹⁰ This kind of eschatological imagination calls for a different kind of embodied imagery, and worshipping communities might wonder together what this imagery might look like.¹¹

“You Are Mine” (Glory to God #177)

This David Haas hymn from 1991 is sung from God’s perspective: God speaks to the worshiper in this text, promising God’s presence among the people and encouraging the worshiper with scriptural words, “Do not be afraid; I am with you.” The third verse includes promises for strength and healing: “I am strength for all the despairing, healing for the ones who dwell in shame. All the blind will see; the lame will all run free, and all will know my name.” Here, we see a future in which the disabilities of those who are blind and unable to walk will be erased. Rather than a future with barriers and ableism transformed, we sing of a day when embodied difference simply disappears. We might wonder how such an imagined future might feel for those in our communities for whom this image is not liberatory.

“Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn”

(Glory to God #107)

In this Advent hymn from 1983, Marty Haugen draws upon familiar Advent lections from Isaiah to illustrate the joy and anticipation of the Messiah’s promised arrival. One of these texts, from Isaiah 35, includes images of transformed embodied difference: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy” (Isa. 35:5–6). These images feature prominently in verse three of “Awake! Awake,” which reads, “Then shall the mute break forth in song, the lame shall leap in wonder.” Again, we sing images of an imagined future in which the embodied differences of those with disabilities are erased. This time, though, the images are more clearly part of our scriptural

imagination, coming directly from familiar passages often heard during the Advent season (in this case, Advent 3A). Again, we might wonder how these images of Christ’s joyful arrival might feel for those among us for whom these images are not joyful.

Questions for Communal Reflection

1. Identify the embodied images within this verse of text. Do these images suggest an embodied norm, into which all of our bodies may or may not fit?
2. How are these embodied images functioning within the larger scope of the hymn text? Are the images central, or do they seem more peripheral?
3. Do these images evoke in us a set of scriptural associations? Do the images allude to narratives or pieces of prophetic literature that have historically been difficult or harmful for those among us with disabilities?
4. What do these images imply about God’s future?
5. For whom might this use of embodied imagery be troubling? For whom might it be a source of pain, exclusion, or marginalization? Think not only about members of our own community, but also those outside of our community whom we would like to welcome in.
6. In our seeking to more fully embrace all those whom God created, might these be images to reconsider utilizing, or to more fully contextualize or offset through other creative liturgical means?

Poverty/Disability Conflation

This final hymn offers an example of textual associations between disability and material poverty. Only a slight departure from Nancy Eiesland’s understanding of the church’s “carnal sin” of sin/disability conflation, hymns that employ this kind of imagery draw a connective line between the experiences of those who live in poverty and those with disabilities. Examples of this use of disability imagery may be among the most ambiguous and difficult to parse, as communities answer questions about how they view their role(s) in addressing oppression and marginalization. To be sure, poverty and disability have certain elements in common, particularly as we consider a Christian call to love those who have been systematically excluded by our societal and ecclesial systems. But to place too heavy an association between these two social categories is to ignore the nuance in how these systems operate and how we are called to create access in our communities of worship.

“I, the Lord of Sea and Sky” (Here I Am, Lord)
(*Glory to God* #69)

In this Daniel Schutte hymn from 1981, the first half of each verse reads from the perspective of God (“I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame”), ending each time with the question, “Whom shall I send?” The second half of each verse answers that question, reading from the perspective of the worshiper, who answers each time, “Here I am, Lord.” Each verse includes a call for the worshiper to go out into the world in service, answering God’s call. In the third verse of text, the worshiper answers this call to participate in God’s work of tending “the poor and lame,” creating an associative connection between those in poverty and those with disabilities. Rhetorically, the implication is that poverty and disability—not the systems and situations that created social marginalization—are problems to be solved. Disabled Lutheran pastor Craig Satterlee further notes that in this verse, “those who cannot walk are equated with the poor, all of whom will be taken care of, rather than being given an opportunity to take care of themselves.”¹²

Questions for Communal Reflection

1. Identify the embodied image within this verse of text. Does this image imply an embodied norm, into which all of our bodies may or may not fit?
2. How is this image operating within its respective verse, or even within the entire hymn? Is it a central image, or does it seem more peripheral? Are there other verses of text that include images functioning similarly?
3. To what is this embodied image being compared, or with what associations is it being paired?
4. With these comparisons and associations in mind, for whom might this use of embodied imagery be troubling? For whom might it be a source of pain, exclusion, or marginalization? Think not only about members of our own community, but also those outside of our community whom we would like to welcome in.
5. In our seeking to more fully embrace all those whom God created, might this be an image to reconsider utilizing, or to more fully contextualize or offset through other creative liturgical means?

Practical Suggestions and Considerations

As with our answers to the reflection questions provided above, it is unlikely that any two communities will discern identical paths forward in addressing disability imagery in their hymnody. However, this set of practical possibilities offers a starting place for worshiping communities who seek fuller inclusion in their worship by pursuing justice alongside those of us with disabilities.

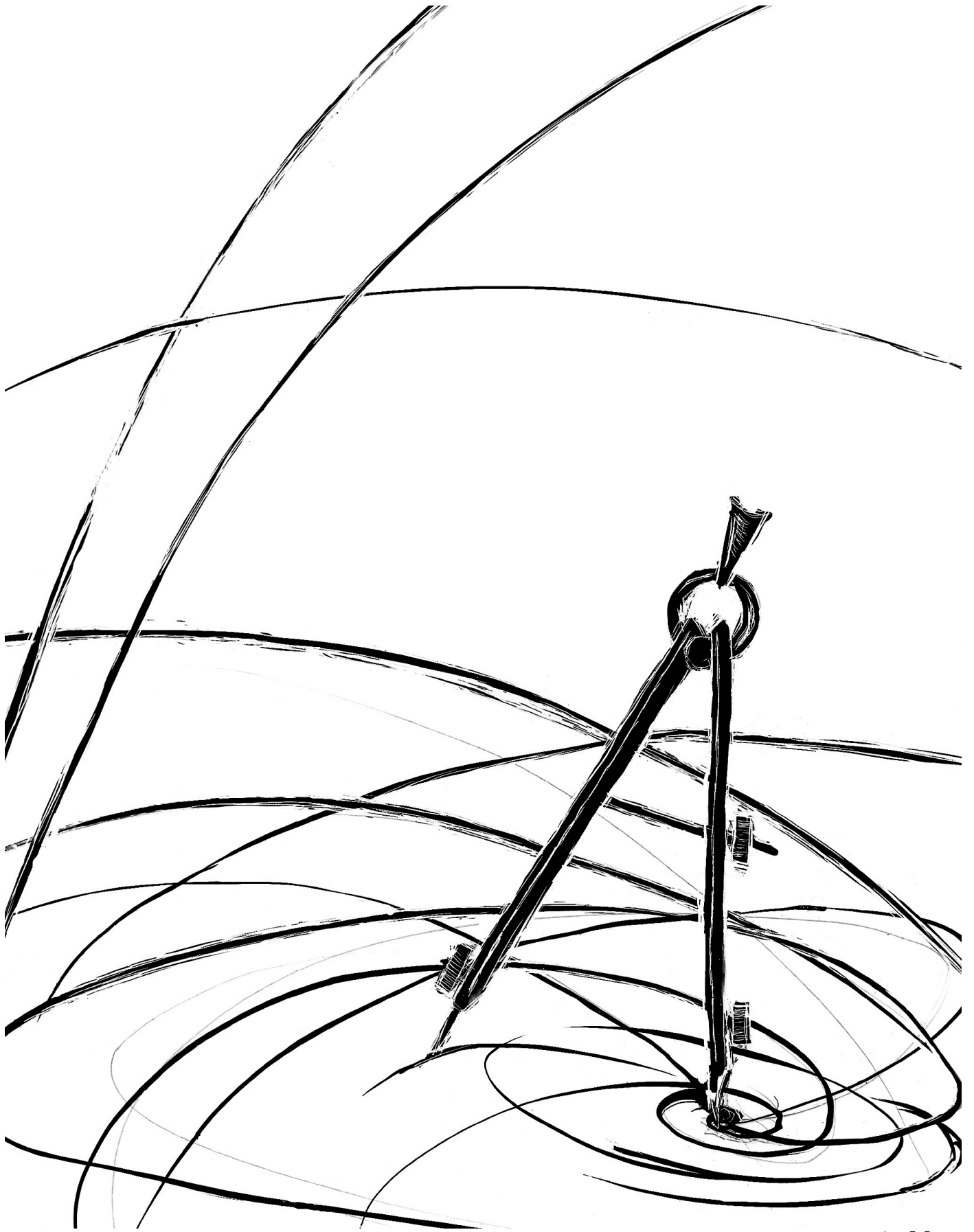
- Skipping verses of text: Communities may deem some images too difficult or oppressive to sing together in worship. In this case, a bulletin note or brief verbal acknowledgement of the skipped verse might help the worshipers to consider the possible function of such an image within their own community.
- Creatively reworking hymn texts: In order to transform a troubling image, musicians, worship leaders, and gifted writers might collaborate to rework those portions of text so that the meaning and poetic integrity are preserved but the image is removed. For example, in a resource from the United Methodist Church, a suggested reworking of “was blind but now I see” is “I slept, but now I wake.”¹³
- Centering the narratives of people with disabilities: If a community chooses to sing a troubling embodied image, worship planners might intentionally include another worship element that centers the experience of a disabled person. Planners might include another hymn by a disabled hymn writer, along with a bulletin note acknowledging her/his/their story. Leaders might also pair such hymns with a word of spoken testimony from the perspective of a person with disabilities.
- Singing hymns that include diverse images of human bodies, or that acknowledge diverse forms of “healing”: Worship planners and musicians might make a special effort to include hymns that embrace a wide diversity of human difference, and then include bulletin notes or spoken acknowledgement of these uses of language. Examples of these might include John Bell’s “We Cannot Measure How You Heal” (*Glory to God* #797) and Carolyn Winfrey Gillette’s “When Hands Reach Out” (*Glory to God* #302). Fred Pratt Green’s text “O Christ, the Healer” (*Glory to*

God #793) might also serve as an apt discussion starter for the ways in which our search for “wholeness” ought to include the transformation of access barriers and the full inclusion of those whose body-minds do not conform to society’s constructed norms.

This list of practical suggestions is, of course, not exhaustive. The holy task of seeking justice and full inclusion for all those whom God loves is a journey that reaches far beyond technical changes. However, if this work does not begin in our worship, it is unlikely to continue in the spaces we inhabit outside of our worshiping communities. May Adam M. L. Tice’s hymn text “Draw a Wider Circle” serve as a challenge and a call to us as we join in God’s life of love and grace in the world: “Draw a wider circle—or, perhaps, erase. Spiral toward God’s center, gravity of grace.”

Notes

1. Adam M. L. Tice, “Draw a Wider Circle” (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2013).
2. Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).
3. Eiesland, 71–72.
4. If the word *sin* feels too strong a term, consider this quotation from Eiesland: “To be human is to sin; to be a human institution is to institutionalize sin.” Eiesland “seeks not to vilify individuals or institutions, but rather to make it possible for people with disabilities to struggle for full-bodied participation in God’s community.” Eiesland, 70.
5. *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 928.
6. *Glory to God*, 929.
7. Within many Deaf communities, the word *Deaf* (with a capital “D”) is used to refer to those who consider themselves part of the wider Deaf community and culture, whereas *deaf* (with a lowercase “d”) refers to the embodied condition of deafness.
8. Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).
9. Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 62.
10. “The Social Model of Disability,” *Ithaca College: AccessibleIC* (2019), www.ithaca.edu/accessibleic/social/.
11. See especially Rebecca Spurrier, “Disabling Eschatology: Time for the Table of Our Common Pleasure,” *Liturgy* 31, no. 3 (2016): 24–36.
12. Craig A. Satterlee, “‘The Eye Made Blind by Sin’: The Language of Disability in Worship,” *Liturgy* 25, no. 2 (2010): 33.
13. “Songs,” *DisAbility Ministries: The United Methodist Church* (2019), <https://umcdmc.org/worship/songs/>.



Prophets and Slam Poets: An Interview with Samuel Son

David Gambrell

Editor's Note: Samuel Son is manager of diversity and inclusion for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). After hearing him speak at the Presbyterian Center in Louisville, David Gambrell, associate for worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), asked him about the relationship between slam poetry and biblical prophecy.

How are the biblical prophets like slam poets?

David Maxwell, vice president and director of curriculum and church resources at Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, shared with me about how Walter Brueggemann, in his book *Interrupting Silence*, wanted to refer to the Hebrew prophets simply as poets.¹ David dissuaded him, worried readers might get confused since they are more familiar with the title “prophet.”

Brueggemann wasn't trying to be novel, “hip,” or both in wanting to completely replace the title “prophet” with the title “poet.” He was trying to be more accurate about the work of those we call prophets. The title “prophet” emphasizes the gift to predict the future. So, when we studied the prophets at church as youth, we were tracing the prophecies that came true as a test of their authenticity. Then, in liberal circles we qualified their “supernatural” gift of prophecy by saying they weren't divining the future, but they possessed greater clarity about the future because the prophets were clear-eyed about the current moral situation and the consequences of a peoples' ethics. Ability to predict was not from a prophet's charismatic gift but his moral sensibility.

Seeing prophets as moral barometers is true in certain ways. But prophets aren't trying to just warn us; they are more interested in transforming us!

They want to change the future we are creating in our brokenness. And the main power the prophet employs is language (thus Isaiah's and Jeremiah's callings are described as the touching of the mouth—their work is their speech), specifically metaphors, metaphors to expose the clichés we hide behind (like “A rising tide lifts all boats” actually justifies capitalism for many people!), metaphors to help us imagine a future different than the destructive future we are running toward headlong by following the prose of oppressive policies.

There is a reason why all prophets speak in poetry. Not all poets are prophets, but all prophets are poets. Poetry is the form they need to speak truthfully. Poetry is free of grammar, which is a form of control via language. Poetry is free of argument, that is, the need to argue its point or to follow “rules of engagement” in arguing that are set up and monitored by those who have power. Prophets longed to be truth tellers, and to speak truth they needed to go to poetry—poetry not to sound eloquent, but poetry to be truthful. Poetry is how you subvert the language of those in power, how you create new language, images, and metaphors that are necessary for transformation.

There are different types of poems; there are epics and lyrics. There are sonnets and limericks. But I think there is a type of poetry that resonates most strongly with the poetry of the Hebrew prophets: slam poetry.

Slam poetry is not a form of poetry but a method/ritual of running a poetry reading contest. It's a type of poetry competition where people read their poems without props, costumes, or music. After performing, five randomly selected judges from the audience score them from 0 to 10, 10 being the greatest poem they've heard in their life. Because the

judges score on the experience of the poem as sound and the poem in the poet's own voice (you can't read another's work), in slam poetry spoken word is the favored form of poetry.

Spoken word is a poem written primarily to be spoken (experienced orally). Unlike written poetry, it has less to do with page aesthetics and more to do with phonaesthetics, or the aesthetics of sound.

So, there are technically no slam poems, though often poems performed in slam poetry are referred to as slam poems. And poets who perform in slam poetry are called slam poets. Poems performed by them are often referred to as slam poems, and the act of performing as slamming.

I recently attended two slam poetry events in Louisville. As I was listening, the poets sounded very much like some of the Hebrew prophet-poets. I imagined how Isaiah would have delivered his poems. I saw Isaiah getting up and performing his words and it seemed natural.

Here are some of the elements of a slam poem (the poem and the performance) and how I see many of them in Isaiah (and other Hebrew poets).

- Direct address. The slam poet makes a direct appeal to the audience. In a written poem, the poet never meets the reader, and in this way the reader is always an imaginary one. In spoken word, the poem is a poem only when it is spoken, so the poet always has a direct knowledge of the audience and speaks directly to the people.

Hebrew poets speak directly to the people. Some of them are even directly addressing specific kings and leaders.

- Authenticity. The connection is with the poet. The people don't want the poet's interpretation of other works. They want to hear the slam poet's own words from her own experience.

Hebrew poets speak the word that is given to them personally. In a society where identity is deeply grounded in a community (like my Korean identity, where in Korea I am first referred to as someone's son), the individuality of the poet comes to the foreground. Even though there is sparse biographical information, Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah come to us individuals.

- Representative. It is about the self, but the self by her authenticity comes to represent and speak on behalf of people with whom she shares similar identities and experiences. A poet who speaks personally about her depression becomes a poet for the depressed; her poem becomes a poem for the depressed, and the poet becomes a voice for the depressed.

A Hebrew poet's life is not separated from the people he performs his poem to. Hosea names one of his sons Lo-ammi, "not my people." Even more than a slam poet, in his individuality the Hebrew poet becomes intimately connected to the people he speaks to and speaks for.

There's another direction of representation in the Hebrew poet, a vertical direction. The Hebrew poet comes to represent God. That representation can go so deep that the poet even dares to say, "Thus says the Lord." This is not the case of mistaken identity (the poet seeing himself as God). The poet remains a poet, aware of the infinite gap between the human and the divine (Isaiah crying, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips" [Isa. 6:5]). Yet that divine gap is not closed by the denial of self but by the full acceptance of the self. With the full giving of the self (Isaiah saying, "Here am I; send me!") one becomes the conduit of God's voice. In God's speech, the identity of Isaiah (or any other poet) is not erased. It is in the full individuality of the poet that the voice of the poet becomes the voice of God.

- Physical. The speaking involves not just the throat but the whole body. It is not acting, but it is an embodying. The whole body becomes a throat. In slam poetry there are no props because the only medium needed is the word and the poet.

Isaiah walked around naked for three years. Not only did he speak the word, he lived it. This goes back to the deep connection between the poet, his message, and the people. Even in the severest judgment, the Hebrew prophet never saw the recipients of judgment as "the other." The prophet spoke judgment with heavy sadness because as the prophet, he carried the judgment in his own body.

- On behalf of the marginal. The poet speaks for the marginal, speaks of things not allowed to be said in public squares where the policies of

the power keep control by controlling language, determining who gets the mike. In slam poetry, anyone can come up to the mike, and any experience can be a subject of the poem as long as it is the poet's own subject.

The Hebrew poets spoke in behalf of the poor and exploited. In standing up to the mike, they become the mike to the experience of people who were silenced or ignored by people in power.

- Political. Slam poets are political because they won't abide by the power's censorship. Slam poetry doesn't organize. But in speaking of things that are censored and by speaking a very different language (poetic) than the language favored by power (prose, legal, essays), it challenges the power's legitimacy.

The Hebrew poet's claim to speak on behalf of God was this freedom from the censorship of the powers. They could speak against the temple and the court and by it challenge their claim to represent God. The temple's language of law and the court's language of policies were upended by the language of poetry.

“With righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of
the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of
his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill
the wicked” (Isa. 11:4).

Is Jesus also part of this tradition?

Jesus identifies his work in the tradition of a prophet when he laments over Jerusalem. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” (Luke 13:34).

But he also lived in the role of the rabbi (which was a role that had relative freedom from the Sanhedrin and Roman influence). His role as rabbi gave a different shape to his work as a prophet; at the same time his prophetic role brought another type of energy to his work as a rabbi. So, people said of his speech, “He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Mark 1:22, Matt. 7:29).

The sense of authority is directly related to his rhetoric. People first experienced his power in his rhetoric, and only to doubters did his miracles back up

his authority. His teachings, whether direct teaching (Sermon on the Mount) or parables, have poetic energy. His rhetoric embodied authority because he spoke without justification, he spoke as one without need of justification. It is the Pharisees, who want to weaken his position, who ask for justification of his words: one day as he was telling the good news, the elders said to him, “Tell us, . . . who is it who gave you this authority?” (Luke 20:2). Jesus never tried to argue his point; he declared his point. This was what set him apart from other teachers of the law, who probably quoted and referenced and argued for their statements. But like the prophets, Jesus' authority was himself because his voice was the voice of God. The slam poet's authority is herself. Her experience gives her the authority to speak of the content of her poem. The Hebrew prophet was an authority because the poem that he was performing was coming from his personal experience (his encounter with God). Jesus spoke with that same authority.

I think Jesus also used poetical techniques to keep the people entertained. He was a great speaker, able to hold a large crowd without them even hearing their growling stomachs (they forgot their hunger until the teaching ended). Entertainment is artifice only in that there's technique involved. But boredom is artifice too. Boredom is a way to lull people into misunderstanding and confusion or forgetting. Jesus, like the slam poet and Hebrew prophets, considered every word, imagining what rhythm, rhyme, parallelisms would create suspense and curiosity. Jesus' parables were powerful not only for their spiritual insight but because they were entertaining. But the spiritual insight is contained in the entertaining. Part of the “aha” experience of the audience is not when the poet speaks a new truth, but when she delivers a truth in an entertaining or beautiful way, when it is the perfect image delivered in a rhyme that echoes something previously said. The experience of revelation is an aesthetic experience.

Another way Jesus was like slam poets is that he never wrote anything. Everything was oral. Who knows whether he wrote out his teaching or not, but the primary way he taught was through performance. In slam poetry, the only experience of a poem for the audience will be the performance and not the reading. They know in reading much will be lost, so they are fine with the ephemeral nature of the experience (more important than the longevity of the word is the experience of it and its living on through memory). And the slam poet writes knowing

what's more important is the experience and not the longevity of words written.

That also means every performance is adaptable. It changes according to the audience. I think this probably accounts for some of the discrepancies in the Gospels. I don't think Jesus ever taught the same parable in the same way. Jesus, like slam poets, probably performed them with variations according to the audience.

What value is there in performing “scripture without a script” (memorized)?

When you recite it, you are getting out of the way. In a reading, the reader still stands between the words/poem and the listeners. That disconnect is embodied in the fact that the reader is not looking at the audience, or at best, gives cursory glances, which my speech professor called pecking—neck going up and down—itself a distraction. One can be a great reader and come close to the experience of a recital, but it isn't the same. Just imagine any musical done with an actor singing while occasionally looking at a song sheet. In fact, even just one glance breaks the directness of the performer and the reader because it breaks the relationship.

When you read, the words are still entangled in the text and are being transferred through the reader.

When you read, the words are still entangled in the text and are being transferred through the reader. When you recite, the text is coming from the performer directly to the audience. You are not reading Isaiah. You are Isaiah speaking to the people. The paradox is that in reciting, the performer is giving so much more. There is, in one sense, more of the performer in the recital, in the fact that it is the performer who is making eye contact, the performer whose arms and body are moving. This is where the self is both more evident and transcended. Here the paradox occurs again, that the more of the self there is in the recital, the more one becomes the voice of the poet (of the written word).

The performer in reciting spends more time preparing. For the performer must get comfortable enough with the text. But more importantly, she is trying to make it hers, and in that way she is

asking what it means. There are a lot of questions of interpretation that are both answered and raised as you think about how each word should be performed. You realize that the verbalization, the slightest change of tone, has significant suggestion of meaning.

Why is it important to hear and see the word performed in an embodied way?

When reciting, you are thinking about phrasing. Embodiment is an extension of those choices of phrasings. You are thinking about how that word can find expression in your body. In this way, it is also an act of interpretation. But you are getting to it from another level. You are not just looking at it from mere word study, what those words meant in other contexts, but what that word means in the audience before you. We forget how sensitive words are, that words take different shifts according to where and how they are said. In fact, the most powerful influence in a word is not how the word was used in another document but how it was used in that intimate experience between the speaker and the audience. Embodiment is awareness of this; a bodily expression of a word is aware of the ephemeral expression of a word.

Embodying also forces you to spend more time in verbs. Most scholarly studies focus on nouns, what a certain word meant in that historical context. But embodying pays attention to verbs, as embodiment pays attention to movement. Take, for example, the sentence “The wolf and the lamb will live together.” The embodiment (bodily performance) won't mime the wolf and the lamb but will consider gesture to express “live together.” The gesture might be simple, but the performer is imagining what that living together would look like. Though the performer might not have the same image as Isaiah, who first performed it, I am sure that Isaiah also had a vivid image when he penned those words; so, there's a resonance of process. And the audience is brought into that imagination by the physical gestures. Consider another image in that poem with the wolf and the lamb. Isaiah goes on to say, “The little child will place her hands in the nest of deadly snakes.” What a very specific image! And a powerful one, with all the emotional resonance the images of “little child” and “snakes” create. But it is the verb that is so beautiful in its specificity. It is a line made for embodiment/gesture.

What can preachers and other worship leaders learn from the spoken word poetry movement?

- Prepare the message and liturgy as an oral experience. Although every leader (from here on I am referring to both preachers and worship leaders) knows that there is the audience, all our nervous energy is spent on the written word, in our sermon manuscript and in our worship bulletin. When we are trying to perfect that sentence with the right preposition and the right combination of adjective and noun, it really doesn't take in the audience as co-creators of the event. We are working to make it look good in print. So, the print still stands between the worship leaders and the worshipers. Print demands perfection (because grammatical mistakes are easily picked out on page), and perfection is a closed system.

Everything must be sounded out. Everything must be thought through its physical gestures. Word on paper sounds different than word read, and word read (spoken quietly) is different from word spoken (spoken out loud and for an audience).

- Trash the manuscript when you go up to the pulpit. As I have said, even good reading is still an indirect relationship. Reciting allows the most direct connection. Now, in reciting, you are not looking for perfect recital, no word left or forgotten. Such perfection is required for written work (that there are no grammatical mistakes). No such perfection exists in oral presentation (a lot more flexibility of grammar is allowed in speech because you have more than words to get your meaning across). Slam poets memorize and know that every word is important for the beats of a line. However, even the best slam poets miss words, phrases, even whole sentences. But they keep going. Nobody in the audience knows as long as you don't break from the connection. In fact, listeners don't want perfection. They want connection. They want you to speak God's word to them, not read about it.

Preaching without manuscript causes great anxiety. But it is an anxiety worth facing and overcoming. It is worth abandoning the pursuit of perfection for the purpose of connection. And what you will find surprising is that in the moment, because you are not tied to the perfectly ordered

manuscript, you can wander into some amazing words that are timely. Inspiration is more possible where there are imperfections, that is, openings.

- Listen to the poets in the bars and other slam scenes outside of the church walls. In every assembly there are spoken and unspoken rules of engagement, that is, what can be talked about, in what way (subject and rhetorical style). There is a tacit agreement made when people gather in a space. The church crowd sets up limitation in subjects and how a preacher (length of message and the type of discourse) and worship leader can speak of them. Rhetoric is reality. It's important that preachers and worship leaders go out to hear God speaking in the streets, in the pubs, and in poetry slams. The church rhetoric can be its own sort of trap. We get stuck in "accepted" ways of speaking about God, which means "accepted" ways of thinking about God. It is not enough to learn and adapt the latest concepts from society; we need to hear the music of different rhetoric and see the performance of words of the people in the street.

In the slam poetry scene, other voices take center stage. The church guards its stage. And those allowed to deliver God's Word are often people who represent the "best" of the social makeup of the congregation. So, a white congregation will call a white pastor, a person whom they consider a representative of their congregation, someone of high moral caliber and intelligence. This is truer of our Presbyterian church; we have a very narrow version of those called.

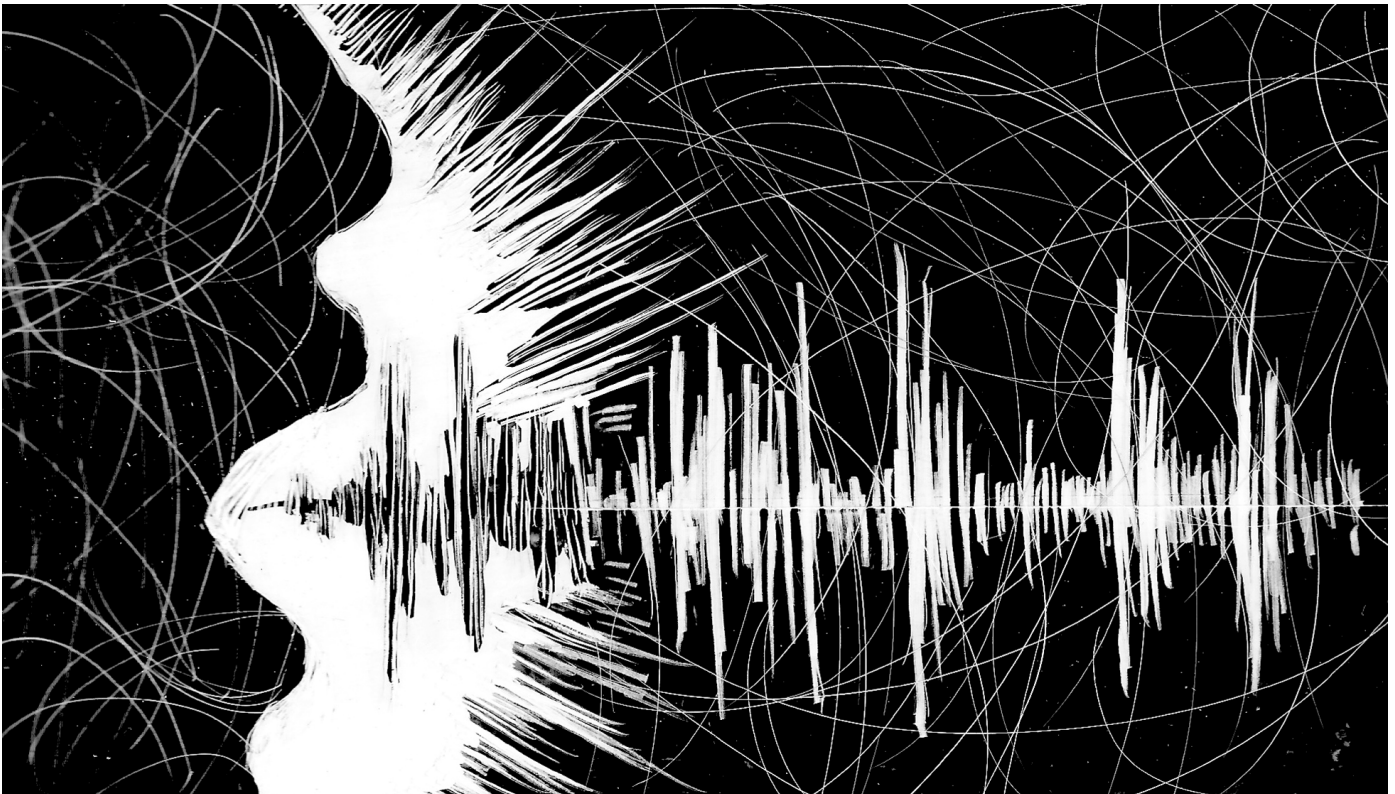
In a poetry slam, anyone on that day can come up to the mike as long as they have a poem of their own. In hearing their poems we are hearing it directly from the poet. Their experience is not being relayed by an official pastor. In hearing it directly from them, we are entering a relationship. It might be momentary (for the moment of performance), but it is a relationship. And it is different from listening to your friends in different social contexts. For in slam poetry, an authority is conferred on them when they stand up and perform. The courage to stand up, the courage to speak truth, the artistry of crafting a poem confers authority. It is a place of authority that we don't usually give to the marginalized. In the performance, the voices without political power have power.

We are not hearing them in a presentation. A presentation is an invitation to conversation, conversation is an invitation to argument, and sometimes you can argue away a point. We can use conversation to dilute truth. A poem has no place for argument. Not that it thinks argument useless, but it has reasons to suspect arguments. A poem is whole. It needs no justification. It simply declares. The listener can't pick and choose. Either they are convicted by it or reject it. In short, we are confronted the way the religious

leaders were confronted by Jesus, not simply for what he said—because content wise he was very similar to the Pharisees—but in the way he said it. We must be confronted with the authority of truth from the voices of the margins or we will not give them due diligence, we will not hear them as the voice of God.

Note

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Disrupting Silence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).



Amy E. Gray

Part One

Columns

On Liturgy: Living into and Out of the Word

Christopher Q. James

This past Sunday my congregation embarked on a listening campaign by commissioning to service ten of our members as listeners in an effort to get to know our congregation better. Over the next six weeks, these listeners will meet one-on-one with a large percentage of our congregation to hear each person's story. Where are you from? How did you get here to St. Charles? Why did you choose the New Hope congregation as the group of people with whom you want to live out your faith? What is it about your faith that gets you up in the morning and compels you to put one foot in front of the other? These are just some of the questions that might guide the conversation as our listeners strive to get a better sense of who we are as a congregation of Christ followers in this place and at this time. At the end of these six weeks, we may glean some information that will help our session plan for our ministry and mission. That would be icing on the cake. At the very least, however, we will have given a lot of people the opportunity simply to be heard.

Of course, that is what words are for, to be heard. Some words are heard by the ear, and others are heard nonverbally through such gestures as facial expressions or sign language. At their best, words reveal something real and true and meaningful. Why is this so important? Each of us has a story and each of our stories is unique, important, and holy. The word that was spoken by God "in the beginning" to bring everything into being (Gen. 1) is the same Word that, in John's Gospel, was "with God" and "was God" (John 1:1). In the waters of baptism this Word names each of us as God's beloved children.

I rely on that every day, to be sure, but perhaps most especially on Sunday mornings. On many Sundays, I am ready to lead worship. My sermon

is together. I feel good about how the music and prayers support one another. No one is asking to make that last-minute announcement that promises to be short but I know good and well will go on way too long. But most Sundays I find myself scrambling to edit my sermon and revise the prayers because something in the weekend news needs to be addressed in that day's proclamation or in the prayers of the gathered assembly. On many Sundays I simply feel unprepared because the week was too full of unproductive meetings or the unable-to-anticipate pastoral visit to the hospital.

Those Sundays I feel least prepared to lead worship are also the Sundays I feel most grateful for the purposeful words of the liturgy that help to bring forth the Word into the midst of our assembly. From the Greeting to the Blessing and Charge, worship is replete with Scripture, the words of which enable us to encounter the glory of the Word that became flesh and lives among us still (John 1:14). "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all" (2 Thess. 3:18), we begin. The apostle Paul invites us to confession: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Our old selves were crucified with him so that we might be slaves to sin no more" (Rom. 6:3, 6). He also declares us forgiven: "If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. Therefore, consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:8, 11). The Revised Common Lectionary provides three Scripture readings and a psalm, all of which contain words meant to reveal the Word. As we ready to offer ourselves in response, Paul urges us: "Let us present ourselves to God as those who have been delivered from death to life" (Rom. 6:13). We do not leave before being blessed: "The grace of the Lord

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Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:13). In and amongst these spoken words of Scripture, we enact the Word through gesture using such things as water stirred and lifted, bread broken, and wine poured out.

I am grateful for these words of the liturgy because I could never come up with them on my own and, even if I did, I would not believe them anyway. Biblical scholar and Episcopal priest David Adams writes about how our practice of praying the Lord’s Prayer has developed from the words of the prayer Jesus taught in Matthew’s Gospel. The development of this prayer indicates that

members of the faith community gradually mingled their voices with the voice of the One they worshiped, his words becoming their words and their words becoming his. With the growth of the tradition of the Prayer and our praying of the Prayer, we witness something striking: people living into Christ, bonding with him, identifying with his deeds and words so completely that who he is and who they are begin to merge. They speak with him and through him.¹

If that is true of the Lord’s Prayer, then it is also true of the liturgy. Of course, our Christian liturgy has developed over centuries, and even then it is not its own, but rather developed from the practice

of first-century synagogue worship. The words of the liturgy, so many of which come directly from the words of the Scriptures themselves, are put on our tongues in worship and, from there, sink into our hearts and minds so that we find ourselves living into them, forgiving and being forgiven, loving and being loved, and seeing ourselves in the Story of all stories that calls us from different directions, unites us as one, and sends us out to share this Word with all the world. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God’s sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith.”² And so it is.

It is healing, really. The words of worship have a way of revealing *the* Word so that the too-long announcement or extraneous, fruitless meeting no longer controls my mood and I am set right again in a world that so needs this creating, uniting, loving Word. We are set free from ourselves to go out and live our story within the larger Story of who we are as children of God.

Notes

1. David R. Adams, Chapters 1–13, in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 125.
2. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 107.

On Preaching: Word in Worship

Kaci Clark-Porter

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

—John 1:14

All you need do is walk into the nearest Reformed church sanctuary and find the largest piece of furniture in the room. Chances are good it's the pulpit. Ironically, it goes without saying there's nothing Reformed Christians take more seriously than the Word read and proclaimed. How seriously? Calvin himself went as far as contending that if a pastor did not first become a student of the Word, "it would be better for him to break his neck while climbing into the pulpit. . . . For there is nothing higher than preaching the gospel . . . because it is the means to lead people to salvation."¹

As a preacher I've never felt the height of that responsibility more keenly than on my first Sunday at Grace Presbyterian Church in El Paso, Texas, where my wife, Holly, and I serve as co-pastors. Our first day on the job was just twenty-four hours after a racially driven mass shooting at a Walmart that left 22 people dead, 24 wounded, and a city in shock. For three years running, the border town of El Paso has ranked as one of the top ten safest cities in America—last year at number seven, and this year at number six. For El Pasoans, what happened here on August 3, 2019, *doesn't* happen here.

A couple days before the shooting, my wife and I had visited that very shopping center. It's a hugely popular shopping locale close to Target, Costco, Sam's Club, a mall, and numerous restaurants. Truth is, we had several items to return to that Walmart but didn't on that Saturday because we were at home working on our sermon.

After reassuring family and friends of our safety, we got to work rewriting the sermon we had intended to preach. It began with the words, "So often our stories don't go as we had planned." Then we told them about the sermon we had planned to preach. We told them about the multitude of mishaps which had occurred during our two-thousand-mile move from Wilmington, Delaware, to El Paso, Texas, and how the trouble didn't stop when we got here. The house we'd bought sight unseen was fraught with problems, including a serious gas leak on our first night. And then, (as if they needed reminding) we told the congregation about how their own plans for this particular Sunday had been derailed. For weeks they had been planning a massive fiesta to celebrate the arrival of their new pastors. They had collected bushels of groceries, cleaning products, and coffee for us, as well as kitty litter and dog food for our fur babies. "So," we continued,

then real life and the real world interrupted our plans. Instead of today being simply a fiesta, we climb into this pulpit with the weight of tragedy, with violence and death on all of our minds.

But we are all in the right place today regardless of what we had hoped for. We are in the right place because we follow a God who does incredible work when the story doesn't go as planned. In fact, that might be when God does God's best work. Over and over, Scripture lifts up these kinds of moments and says love is stronger than what goes wrong. And it is Jesus' story, a story gone wrong in so many ways, that gives the final word on violence, on tragedy: that not even death can overcome God's love.

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When the service ended, we heard again and again how it was the reminder that “love is stronger than what goes wrong” that was means to salvation. In some ways it’s no different from what we say every other Sunday; but the Word takes on new meaning when it assumes the flesh of human sorrow and heart-wrenching pain.

Through uplifting music, stirring liturgy, and timeless rituals, worship has the capacity to leave us as changed beings. But in the sense that incarnational preaching is the collision point of truth and experience, word and flesh, it is powerful enough to birth a being of its very own, to create life, not in spite of death, but from it. Preaching powerful enough to create life. Perhaps that’s what Calvin meant when he said preaching leads to salvation, to life without end.

We chose Hebrews 12:1–2 as our Scripture for the Sunday following the shooting. You’ll recognize the familiar words, “. . . and let us run with perseverance the race set before us.” Little did we know that the beginning of our race as pastors and congregation would prove so challenging: our hearts racing, our muscles giving out, our feet on fire, and we’d only just started. And there would be more to come, more to endure. Death and sickness, divorce and lost jobs, chaos seeking to unravel us.

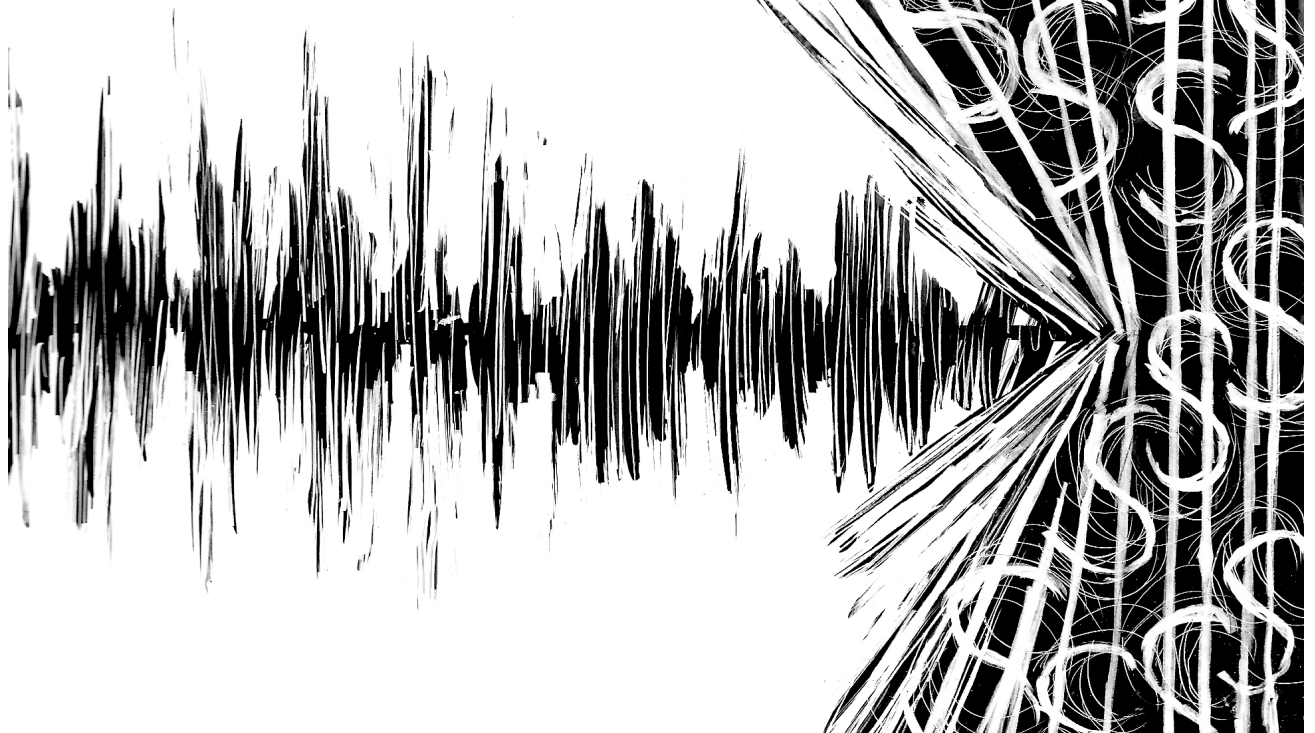
We concluded our preaching that day with these words:

Our new partnership is not going to make the world any less chaotic or tragic; the purpose of our partnership is to uphold one another, to remind each other of grace, and to point to the One who guides our feet on the uneasy course set before us.

And so, as we run this race together, let us tell the story of a community who is not defined by tragedy and darkness, hate and fear, but by a God who redefined death, so that even death’s story doesn’t go as planned. And so, when the chaos comes, not only to our lives but to our doorstep, may we have the courage to respond, not just as concerned citizens, but as people of the resurrection, trusting that beyond the destructive powers of this world there is a God who is now charting an even greater course. A story unplanned. And a grace to see it through. Amen.

Note

1. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press), 40.



Amy E. Gray

On the Arts: The Word of God Is More than Words

Deborah Sokolove

It is easy to forget that the Word of God is more than mere words. Worship is often so full of words—greetings, prayers, hymns, sermons, Scripture readings, and various incidental instructions to sit, stand, kneel, or find the right page in a hymnal—that it is easy to lose track of the ancient tradition that the Word of God is written not only in the natural world and in our hearts, but also in the paintings and sculptures that still fill many places of Christian worship.

For the Eastern Church, this is less of a problem. Orthodox theology insists that icons have the same authority as the Bible. The basis for this claim is the belief that the first icon was painted by the same St. Luke who wrote the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, and that he was equally inspired in both cases. And just as the handwriting of each scribe who writes out the Bible looks different from that of another, yet the resulting manuscript is considered as the authoritative text, icons made by different iconographers may differ in color or certain details, yet still be considered as faithful renditions of their divine original and thus equally authoritative in proclaiming the Word of God to the faithful. While the majority of depictions of Luke—like a medieval image of St. Luke writing the book of Acts, found in an Armenian Gospel book illuminated by Toros Roslin¹—show him writing the Gospel, others—like a sixteenth-century Russian icon of Luke painting the image known as the Theotokos of Vladimir²—show him in approximately the same posture but sitting at an easel, brush in hand as he records his vision of the Mother of God.

In the Middle Ages, to walk into a church building was often thought of walking into a foretaste of heaven. Along the porticos of small churches and great cathedrals all over Europe, statues of saints and

angels greeted the faithful as they mounted the steps to the main doors, Christ sitting in majesty above them.³ Once inside, all of creation history was laid out on the walls and ceilings, inviting worshipers to enter the eternal story even though they were still in their mortal bodies. While these paintings and mosaics have often been described as lessons for the illiterate, they were much more than that. Experiential rather than didactic, they were the visible proclamation of God's majesty, speaking the Word of God even when no one was talking.

One of the most profound examples of this invitation to feel oneself present at the moment when God spoke the universe into being is in the Creation mosaics in the late twelfth-century cathedral of Monreale, near Palermo, Italy. The upper tier of the south wall of the nave is filled with glowing depictions of the first chapter of Genesis, interrupted only by the clear glass of clerestory windows.

The story begins, as it must, with the spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters, with a thick, nearly black band separating the chaos below from the golden, heavenly realm above.⁴ In subsequent panels, God sits on a radiant, blue orb, setting the sun, moon, and stars in the glittering sky;⁵ calling forth the fish and birds;⁶ and breathing life into the first human.⁷ The central image in this tier proclaims that on the seventh day, tired out with all this creative work, God rested.⁸ Once again we see the familiar, white-haired, bearded figure. Now, no longer actively calling stars to twinkle, commanding fish and other animals to go forth and multiply, or breathing life into the human beings he had formed out of the clay beneath the trees, God simply sits on the glowing, blue orb of the earth. As before, his feet are firmly planted on some invisible yet substantial floor, but instead of exuding the confident energy of creation,

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now his shoulders sag, his eyelids start to droop, and it is clear that he needs to rest. This weary God doesn't quite pat the seat beside him, but he does seem to invite the faithful to join him as they drop their heavy burdens, let everything go, and simply enjoy the luxuriant shade and fruit of the trees that surround him. Indeed, even the celestial orb seems to rest at last, no longer sending light outward from a blue core but rather drawing its white radiance inward, where it can be protected by the increasingly solid blue circles that surround it.

It is easy to criticize the Monreale artist's image of God as an old, bearded man, to wish for a more nuanced understanding of the triune God as creator, sustainer, and lover of the universe. But that is the work of the twenty-first century, not the twelfth. The glittering mosaics of Monreale are not an assertion about the gender of God. Rather, they are a reminder of the astonishing paradox that the eternal, transcendent, powerful God whose Word called the entire universe into being is the same old, tired, aching God who needed a rest after six straight days of hard labor, just like any human. They proclaim the mystery that the very God who put the sun, moon, and stars in the sky, who created birds and fish and everything else, knows what it is to be tired. After all, the Word who was God in the beginning later took on human flesh and lived among us. It is this Word, not mere words, that is at the heart of worship.

Notes

1. A medieval image of St. Luke writing the book of Acts, found in an Armenian Gospel book illuminated by Toros Roslin at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/00/Luke_by_roslin.jpg.
2. An image of St Luke painting the Theotokos of Vladimir at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Luke_painting_the_Virgin#/media/File:Evangelist_Luka_pishustchiy_ikonu.jpg.
3. The image of Christ in majesty at the entry to Chartres Cathedral at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chartres_Cathedral#/media/File:Chartres_-_portail_royal_tympan_central.jpg. A detail showing some of the saints at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chartres_Cathedral#/media/File:Saints_Martin_Jerome_and_Gregory.jpg.
4. In the beginning, God creates heaven and earth out of the waters of chaos at www.duomomonreale.it/indexd680.html?option=com_content&task=view&id=67&Itemid=115&lang=en.
5. God puts lights in the firmament at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cathedral_\(Monreale\)_-_Old_Testament_mosaics#/media/File:Monreale_creation_earth.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cathedral_(Monreale)_-_Old_Testament_mosaics#/media/File:Monreale_creation_earth.jpg).
6. God creates the fish and the birds at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cathedral_\(Monreale\)_-_Old_Testament_mosaics#/media/File:Monreale_creation.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cathedral_(Monreale)_-_Old_Testament_mosaics#/media/File:Monreale_creation.jpg).
7. God blesses the first human with breath and life at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cathedral_\(Monreale\)_-_Old_Testament_mosaics#/media/File:Monreale_creation_Adam.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cathedral_(Monreale)_-_Old_Testament_mosaics#/media/File:Monreale_creation_Adam.jpg).
8. On the seventh day, God rests at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cathedral_\(Monreale\)_-_Old_Testament_mosaics#/media/File:Monreale_god_resting_after_creation.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cathedral_(Monreale)_-_Old_Testament_mosaics#/media/File:Monreale_god_resting_after_creation.jpg).

O Save Us, Lord! Hosanna!

Meter: 7.6.7.6.D

Chris Shelton

“O save us, Lord! Hosanna!”
the people cried and sang;
through pillared court and temple,
their urgent anthem rang.
To Jesus who stood by them,
the One who heard their plea,
the people sang their longing,
their hunger to be free.

They followed down the mountain,
a cheering, chanting crowd,
their palms raised high in protest,
their voices clear and loud.
They sang no songs to Caesar;
they gave the king no laud.
Instead the donkey rider
they hailed as blessed of God.

From Seneca to Stonewall,
from Selma till today,
in chants of “*¡Sí, se puede!*”
in voices bold and brave,
when people cry for justice,
for rights, or for release,
still echo those “Hosannas!”
still rides the Prince of Peace.

“O save us, Lord! Hosanna!”
we hear our children sing.
From school, and street, and sidewalk,
we hear their voices ring.
And there in every protest,
till weapons kill no more,
still rides defiant Jesus,
just as he rode before.

Text: Chris Shelton, 2018; © 2020, GIA Publications, Inc.

Written shortly after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, this text seeks to reclaim the protest march that is Palm Sunday. Many Palm Sunday hymns are written with the church’s own pageantry in mind—singing about gleeful little children while obscuring the radical nature of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. When focusing on the Palm Sunday story, this text fits well on ELLACOMBE, in place of the more traditional “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna.” On a Passion Sunday, or during Holy Week, it is also well suited to the more somber PASSION CHORALE.

O Save Us, Lord! Hosanna!

TEXT: Chris Shelton, 2018
MUSIC: Hans Leo Hassler, 1601; harm. Johann Sebastian Bach, 1729

PASSION CHORALE
7.6.7.6.D

1 "O save us, Lord! Ho - san - na!" the peo - ple cried and sang;
2 They fol - lowed down the moun - tain, a cheer - ing chan - ting crowd,
3 From Se - ne - ca to Stone - wall, from Sel - ma till to - day,
4 "O save us, Lord! Ho - san - na!" we hear our child - ren sing.

through pil - lared court and tem - ple, their ur - gent an - them rang.
their palms raised high in pro - test, their voi - ces clear and loud.
in chants of "¡Si, se pue - de!" in voi - ces bold and brave,
From school, and street, and side - walk, we hear their voi - ces ring.

To Je - sus who stood by them, the One who heard their plea,
They sang no songs to Cae - sar; they gave the king no laud.
when peo - ple cry for jus - tice, for rights, or for re - lease,
And there in ev - ery pro - test, till wea - pons kill no more,

the peo - ple sang their long - ing, their hun - ger to be free.
In - stead, the don - key rid - er they hailed as blessed of God.
still ec - ho those "Ho - san - nas," still rides the Prince of Peace.
still rides de - fi - ant Je - sus, just as he rode be - fore.

"O Save Us, Lord! Hosanna!" is from the collection *Sing No Empty Alleluias*, to be published by GIA in 2021.
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This Is the Feast of Freedom

Meter: 7.6.7.6.D

Chris Shelton

This is the feast of freedom;
the table has been spread
with wine of liberation,
with boundary-breaking bread.
So, come, all you who hunger,
who yearn to be set free—
come dine at heaven's table;
of freedom, taste and see.

This is the feast of justice;
the tables turned at last—
the lowly are exalted,
the mighty are downcast.
So, come, all you who hunger,
and take the highest seat—
come dine where all are welcome;
of justice, drink and eat.

This is the feast of courage—
a meal some may dismiss—
and yet each crumb has power
for such a time as this.
So, come, all you who hunger,
and share this ancient food
that gives strength to the weary;
of courage, be renewed.

This is the feast of Jesus
and all who walk his way,
of Moses and of Esther,
and all who dare to say:
“Give freedom to my people;
let justice be outpoured;
give courage and compassion—
the banquet of the Lord.”

Text: Chris Shelton, 2018; © 2020, GIA Publications, Inc.

This text was written for a worship service centered around the story of Esther. Esther uses a banquet as a vehicle for the liberation of her people—much as Moses before her, and Jesus after. God sets an eternal feast of freedom, justice, and courage. We are invited to share in it and to share it “for such a time as this.”

This Is the Feast of Freedom

TEXT: Chris Shelton, 2018

MUSIC: Welsh Folk Melody; *Llwybrau Moliant*, 1872; harm. *The English Hymnal*, 1906

LLANGLOFFAN

7.6.7.6.D

1 This is the feast of free - dom; the ta - ble has been spread
2 This is the feast of jus - tice; the ta - bles turned at last—
3 This is the feast of cour - age— a meal some may dis - miss—
4 This is the feast of Je - sus and all who walk his way,

with wine of lib - er - a - tion, with bound - ary - break - ing bread.
the low - ly are ex - al - ted, the migh - ty are down - cast.
and yet each crumb has po - wer for such a time as this.
of Mo - ses and of Es - ther, and all who dare to say:

So, come, all you who hun - ger, who yearn to be set free—
So, come, all you who hun - ger, and take the high - est seat—
So, come, all you who hun - ger, and share this an - cient food
“Give free - dom to my peo - ple, let jus - tice be out - poured;

come dine at hea - ven's ta - ble; of free - dom, taste and see.
come dine where all are wel - come; of jus - tice, drink and eat.
that gives strength to the wea - ry; of cour - age, be re - newed.
give cour - age and com - pas - sion— the ban - quet of the Lord.”

“This Is the Feast of Freedom” is from the collection *Sing No Empty Alleluias*, to be published by GIA in 2021.
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Book Reviews

Re-Forming the Liturgy: Past, Present, and Future

Paul Galbreath (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019)

Reviewed by Brenton Thompson

From the beginning, you need to know that I genuinely hope you pick this book up and read it for yourself. In this collection of writings Paul Galbreath pushes us to engage liturgy as a living and breathing embodiment of our faith. As a collection of his writings, in one way this feels like a selection of Galbreath's Greatest Hits but in reality it is more of a touching on the wide breadth of his explorations on the importance of liturgy in the life of the church. His use of short stories punctuate real, lived expressions of liturgy in action; and coupled with actual examples of written liturgy, this book represents something not only practical but experiential. Broken into three parts, the "Past, Present, and Future," he naturally frames where we've come from, what we are doing now, and how we might continue to live out our faith in worship as a reforming people.

He begins by exploring how parts of our liturgy came into being. Something as simple as the Prayer for Illumination, I discovered, has a much deeper history than I'd ever given thought to. This served as a reminder to me to be thinking more intentionally about the church's liturgical practices, especially ones that I seemingly take for granted or accept at face value.

Once we move into the "what we are doing now" section, Galbreath centers the conversation on Word and Sacrament. A few essays are devoted to preaching; it is the essays that follow that have stayed with me, especially his writings on communion. Galbreath raises issues such as how we define whose table it is and the makeup of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. I found myself beginning to look more closely at the ways that I lead worship and serve communion. The critiques and questions he raises have encouraged me to reexamine and refocus my use of language in the sacramental practices of the community in which I serve.

In the third part of the book, Galbreath points us to the future by grounding us in creation. His subject matter is timely as we, our congregations, and the world around us grapple with the effects of climate change and wrestle with ways to be better stewards of the earth. By envisioning a return to our earthly roots in creation, Galbreath asks us to think seriously about the ways in which we care for the earth, not only with our actions but in our worship of God. In what could be an esoteric conversation, Galbreath offers a very real and grounded look at the issue, both by providing sample liturgies and by pushing readers to bring into the conversation their own creativity.

Part of what makes this a valuable read are the footnotes. The information found there is invaluable and in some way indispensable. Sometimes, the note is a reference to a specific document, but other times it is a teaser to delve more deeply into the subject matter. Often I found myself making notes to explore further topics he mentions.

It is safe to say that when I sit down to read books around my vocation, works about liturgy tend to fall lower on the list of topics. After reading this book, I am painfully aware of the things that I have been missing. What has stuck with me after reading this book is the way that it challenges me to reevaluate my own assumptions, my practices, and invites me to do my due diligence in preparing and discerning around worship.

I can only hope that many of you, after taking the time to read this review, will follow my recommendation and pick it up for yourself. *Re-Forming the Liturgy* is an approachable read that encourages us to think intentionally and faithfully about how we live out our faith as expressed in worship.

Brenton Thompson is pastor of Crossroads Presbyterian Church in Limerick, Pennsylvania.

The Lord's Prayer, Interpretation Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church

C. Clifton Black (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018)

Reviewed by Buz Wilcoxon

Give us this day our daily bread . . ." we are taught to pray—not more, not less, but just what we need for this day. C. Clifton Black's masterful commentary on the Lord's Prayer is just that: daily bread, the nourishment that is appropriate for this particular day and time in the life of the contemporary church. We are in need of sustenance that is sifted through careful attention to the witness of Scripture, kneaded throughout by a deep devotional sense of relationship to God, and baked with the warmth of love lived out through the worship, preaching, teaching, and missional life of congregations and other communities of faith. In his work, Black speaks to this hunger in intentional ways.

Black's text weaves in and out of various perspectives on the Lord's Prayer. At times it reads as a traditional biblical commentary slowing down and mining the meaning of each phrase of the prayer with ample attention to the nuances of Greek and Hebrew vocabulary. Black deftly navigates the textual criticism of various versions of the prayer as they appear in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as well as the post-canonical *Didache*.

At other times this work reads as a theological discourse connecting the ancient text to classic and modern confessions of faith. For instance, Black notes that the Lord's Prayer is "the *only* place in the Gospels where Jesus speaks of 'our Father'" (p. 65). The uniqueness of such a personal reference invites us "to confess our mutual accountability within a family," and such "plural pronouns pull the Prayer's supplicants out of selfish individualism into a relationship of ever-expanding generosity" (p. 78).

Black's work also includes deep attention to the devotional prayer life of its readers. This can be

seen in his discourse on "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." To pray this petition with integrity is, ultimately, to yield our own wills to that of God's, and to reorient our lives to the multivalent character of "the kingdom" as expressed in Scripture.

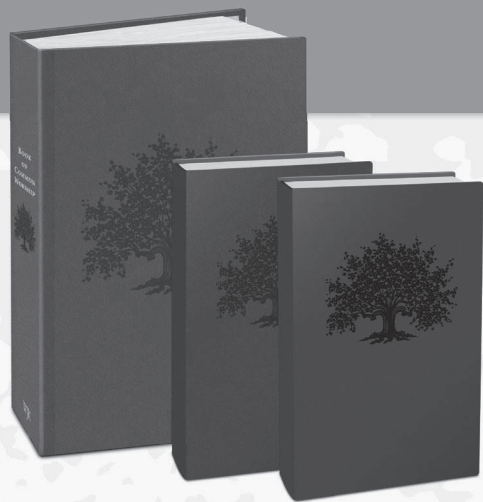
At other times, Black's voice shifts to that of a historian. He skillfully traces the Greco-Roman and Hebrew sources of ancient prayers. He also introduces his audience to a vast array of reflections on and interpretations of the Lord's Prayer from two thousand years of Christian history, some of which are woven throughout the text and others of which are gathered in a wonderful concluding appendix.

Of all the perspectives that Black adopts, however, the homiletical voice is perhaps the most touching and timely. In extrapolating the meaning of "forgive us our debts" he touches on the epidemic of gun violence in the United States and the legacy of racial segregation. In his section on "daily bread" he concludes with two beautiful stories about cooking that will quickly find their way into sermons preached by many of his readers.

At the outset of this comprehensive commentary Black states this his primary goal is to help church leaders "pray the prayer Jesus taught his disciples with better understanding and deeper appreciation" (p. xii). The structure of his study, intentionality in research, and depth of devotional attention more than succeed in meeting this goal of his work. The interdisciplinary nature of the book enables it to serve as an important resource for anyone teaching or preaching about the Lord's Prayer and for all of us who yearn with hunger as we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Buz Wilcoxon is senior pastor of Spring Hill Presbyterian Church in Mobile, Alabama.

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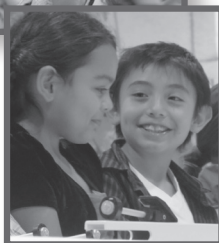
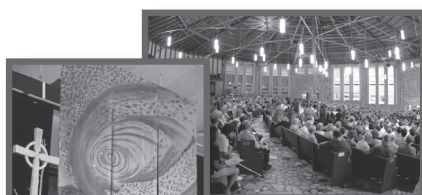


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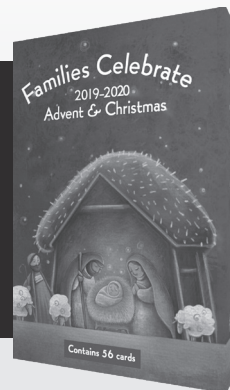
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