

Liturgy and Modern Life: The Use of Corporate Worship to Inform and Shape Christian  
Behavior Within and Beyond the Gathered Assembly

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University 2024

ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

Every Christian worship gathering rehearses the story of God in community. Liturgy provides the structure through which that rehearsal takes place. Despite declining church attendance and an exodus from North American Protestantism, corporate worship and the liturgies that shape it still play a significant role in spiritual formation and hold tremendous power to shape behavior among Christian communities. This thesis argues that liturgists and worship leaders must fully understand, teach, and employ their liturgies to tell God's story in a way that shapes flourishing communities. Exploring the fields of liturgical theology and liturgical history, this thesis will first cover the power of Gospel storytelling. Next it will offer an overview of the Biblical and historical use of liturgies including the damage caused by liturgies that marginalize some while elevating others. The final chapters will provide a close examination of three liturgical elements: the call to worship/gathering, benediction/sending, and proclamation/preaching. These three illustrate well how liturgical elements shape habits in everyday life. Contrary to what some who have left the church lament, liturgy remains a powerful tool to shape Christian thinking and habits. Liturgists and worship leaders who understand the powerful way liturgy shapes Christian behavior hold significant, historic, and sacred opportunities in their hands every single week.

## Acknowledgements

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## Preface

On a recent routine Sunday morning when I was serving as a staff liturgist, I had a profound experience that reshaped the way I lead and think about liturgy. I stood in my usual spot among our congregation as the worship band was on their third song in a high energy set. The room was buzzing, and people were still walking in, hugging one another, finding their seats. We were clapping, awake, and motivated. I was wound up on a few cups of coffee, swaying with the music, waiting for my turn up front with my toes tapping. Our liturgy that morning was telling the story of God's abundance, and my pastoral prayer was focused on gratitude and joy. We had just emerged from another gray Chicago winter and the whole city woke up to its first morning of warmth and bright sunshine in weeks. It was also a season when many in our church would celebrate graduations, weddings, and all the gifts of a midwestern spring. As I stepped up excitedly to lead the prayer, I noticed smack in the middle of the room sat a couple whose family I have shared space with for many years. A decade earlier I participated in the funeral for their then 21-year-old son who tragically lost his life just one week after his college graduation. Every time I make eye contact with the father, we both get choked up. There they were singing along, trying to keep up with the pace of joy in the room but for them spring was a reminder of loss. What did our liturgy say to them? Was there a place for this family in it? Would we pause long enough to give them space? Did the story of God we were telling that day include them? I made a quick liturgical pivot and opened my prayer with a comment on the way our human experience can leave us carrying grief and joy at the same time and we worship a God who lived within that same tension. Then I left a short moment of silence before praying. After worship as the dad and I hugged it out he held my shoulders and said, "I

always feel like you see me.” Liturgy shapes the way we see one another and the story we tell about how/if God sees them. Every single week, liturgists and worship leaders hold sacred opportunities to welcome and embrace as they work to tell the story of the God who sees and knows us all. Liturgy holds an incredible opportunity to welcome and embrace others in the story of God’s endless love for humanity.

Liturgy also shapes habits that can stick with us long after corporate worship is over. Prayers of forgiveness and assurances of pardon from Sunday might offer an example for apologizing at a family dinner. When embraced and practiced repeatedly in worship, liturgical elements shape habits beyond the sanctuary. Moments from worship can help expand the story a family tells itself and open the possibility for relationships known for grace instead of shame. The practice of confession followed by assurance creates a habit that extends beyond worship. In a corporate confession, the congregation sits exposed, their shortcomings, addictions, omissions, and prejudices laying open and bare across the pews. Then the liturgist steps forward and enters that space on behalf of God with God’s people. In this moment, God speaks to us, and we respond. You are forgiven. No shame. No earning back your spot. Go freely. In worship we repeat words, we believe them, and we act upon them. God promises to act when we do, we are participants in liturgy, enacting a practice in that moment and for the future.<sup>1</sup> Habits formed in worship shape life beyond the pews.

A nuanced call to worship once helped a couple I pastored sort out their anxiety-producing visits from out-of-town family. We discussed the way our call to worship in service honors and welcomes God. Even when we feel angry or confused by God, we can be honest about those emotions and still offer praise and welcome. Every week people enter worship with a

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<sup>1</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, *Pilgrim Journey: Instruction in the Mystery of the Gospel* (Fortress Press, 2023), 94-95.

mixture of suspicion and need, hope and skepticism about who God is and what God might do. In a similar way, this couple could mimic that practice by extending an authentic welcome and even find reason to praise difficult guests while at the same time recognizing the tension that came with their arrival. We can hold caution and welcome at the same time. The liturgical habits from weekly worship helped this couple see their story as one that included welcome and respect even in tenuous moments. Corporate worship offers templates like this for building community, healing relationships, and providing presence. To be certain, this can feel idealized as we are people whose pace rarely slows down to consider how liturgy shapes life. However, ministry leaders must recognize the power of their liturgies to shape habits and create formation opportunities. In so doing, they expand the telling of God's story. Liturgy orders both our worship and our everyday life.

### **Context for this Project**

Christ Church of Oak Brook is the congregation I serve and the source for many of the personal stories and experiences that appear throughout this thesis. This is a faith community for which I have a deep and long-standing affection and to which I have given most of my twenty-year pastoral career. Christ Church is a sixty-year-old congregation located within a predominately white, middle to upper-middle class community in the Western Suburbs of Chicago. It pulls worshippers from over forty surrounding communities that are very close to the city, densely populated, and easily accessed by commuter rail lines and public transportation. Many of our congregants work for major global corporations headquartered downtown but like many suburban communities, those who live in our area can enjoy the rich entertainment and cultural life of their city while buffering themselves from the challenges inner-city neighborhoods face.

The Chicagoland area is diverse and some of that diversity is increasingly represented in our pews.<sup>2</sup> We work hard to include communities who have not historically worshipped with us and the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of our staff and attenders expands every year. However, our demographic shifts are not yet at a pace that match those of the wider Chicagoland area. Chicago is a city known globally for its racial tension and violence; Chicago also faces greater income disparity than most urban areas in the United States. According to the 2020 US Census, the city of Chicago had a population of roughly 2.7 million people with the wider Chicagoland area a population of 9.5 million. Within the city itself, 28% of the population is African American, representing the largest non-white group.<sup>3</sup> Conversations about race in Chicago are often wisely criticized because of their narrow focus specifically on the relationship between white and African American communities. I recognize that conversations on race are incredibly complex and extend far beyond just two groups of people. However, because of the national and historic tension between African American and white communities in Chicago and because most people of color at Christ Church are African American, my work around race and liturgy will often focus on relationships between African American and white communities.

White households in the Chicago area hold more wealth than the national average while African American households have less wealth than the national average.<sup>4</sup> In 2016 Chicago lost more of its residents than any other major city in the US in part due to loss of entry level jobs

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase, “Chicagoland area” is commonly used to describe the entire Chicago metropolitan region and includes the communities that extend beyond the border of the actual city itself. The wider Chicagoland area has roughly three times the population of the city. According to the 2020 US Census, the city had a population of 2.7 million and the wider area reported 9.6 million. The Chicagoland area has over 100 diverse suburbs in thirteen different counties that that extend from the south at the Indiana border then north around Lake Michigan to communities that border Wisconsin.

<sup>3</sup> “Chicago city, Illinois,” United States Census Bureau, 2020, accessed, September 1, 2024, [https://data.census.gov/profile/Chicago\\_city,\\_Illinois?g=160XX00US1714000](https://data.census.gov/profile/Chicago_city,_Illinois?g=160XX00US1714000).

<sup>4</sup> Danjuma G. Gibson, “Rituals of Lament and Agency in the Aftermath of Anti-Black Racial Violence,” *Liturgy* 39, no. 2 (2024): 56.

and increasingly difficult access to neighborhood public housing.<sup>5</sup> As a result, many marginalized groups relocated to the suburbs and now live closer to suburban churches like ours. Christ Church sits at a complex intersection in this conversation. There are many in our congregation who care deeply for justice and work professionally or volunteer with dozens of aid organizations aimed at alleviating the rigors of urban poverty. We partner directly with twenty-five local organizations whose work specializes in everything from resettling refugees and supporting the unhoused to English classes, legal aid, affordable health care, and our food pantry. Christ Church is directly involved in both serving alongside and resourcing many urban ministries yet at the same time, our congregation was birthed at the time of “white flight” from the cities into the suburbs. Many in our church benefit from the privilege of generational wealth, advanced degrees, and home ownership which are more common in white communities.

Conversations about race are important to our staff and the leaders in our congregation yet at the same time, we worship alongside congregants who are not aware of or interested in this dialogue. For example, Emmet Till’s cousin has worshipped with us for years, she teaches Sunday school and is an active participant in our church yet every week she sits alongside worshippers who have never heard the name Till or understand the significance of his story. We have been led by members of our community who marched with Dr. King or used their voices in civil rights events and protests, and they sit next to others who struggle to understand why people march and are often frustrated by those who do. When I criticize our congregation on matters of race and income disparity, my critique is couched within the wider trends and observations on predominately white suburban communities throughout the United States.

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<sup>5</sup> Gibson, “Rituals of Lament,” 55-56.

Many attenders, young and old, are familiar with some version of formal liturgy having practiced it with us or in nearby Roman Catholic parishes where they were raised.<sup>6</sup> Due to our emphasis on historic, fixed liturgies, congregants value liturgy and pay attention often noticing new or missing elements. However, most could not explain the power their liturgical practices hold. They cherish liturgy but are not often able to articulate why or how it shapes habits beyond worship. Our church offers two different worship styles with parallel yet distinct liturgies, a classic/traditional service, and a modern/contemporary service. Multiple generations are represented in each expression with the modern services drawing more from younger generations and people of color. Christ Church is an independent, non-denominational congregation with deep connections to the Reformed Church in America, the Dutch Reformed tradition, and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Our polity and liturgies align with those from several Presbyterian denominations, yet we are not technically a denominational church. We have eight ordained pastors, of which I am one. We hold our ordination credentials in several Reformed denominations and are considered, “on loan” from our presbyteries and denominations to Christ Church.

When writing about liturgy it is difficult to narrow a focus due to the thousands of liturgical expressions that exist around the world and across history. It is important and powerful to explore global liturgies as well as diverse expressions of liturgy within the US however, my objective here is quite limited. I will cover some elements from various liturgical traditions but

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<sup>6</sup> There is a significant Roman Catholic presence in the Chicagoland area and many worshippers at Christ Church come from a Roman Catholic background, even if it was a nominal experience from their childhood. Exposure to some form of historic liturgy is common in our congregation and across our area. A 2024 Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center shows 34% of people from Chicagoland identify as Roman Catholics, 11% as Mainline Protestants, and 16% as Evangelical Protestant. While Christ Church does attract newcomers to Christianity, we have a significant number of former Mainline and Roman Catholic attenders who left their tradition for a variety of reasons and joined our congregation because they value our approach to liturgy and the sacraments. See also <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/chicago-metro-area/>.

for the sake of narrowing a focus and my desire for this thesis to directly serve my immediate context, the liturgical elements and stories explored here are predominately rooted in white European Protestantism as it is expressed through Reformed traditions. I will offer both a critique of these liturgies as well as celebrate the possibilities within them.

My critique will also explore the colonizing aspect of liturgy and how white Protestant liturgies still hold prominence in many parts of the world. In her famous TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns against the abuse of power that take place when forcing others to fit into a single dominant narrative: “Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”<sup>7</sup> While Christians do believe in the power of one overarching narrative, how that story gets expressed must be wonderfully diverse throughout different cultures and communities around the world. I will embrace both the power that is the single story of the Gospel while celebrating the myriad of ways that story is told around the world and across history. I will also explore the danger of Christian liturgies that force assimilation to a single dominant story as took place during colonialism.

James K.A. Smith is a professor of philosophy at Calvin University whose work includes significant research on the intersection of liturgy with modern life. In his book, *You Are What You Love* he notes the power of Christian worship to orient us toward the goodness of God, “Worship that restores our love will be worship that restores our imagination. Historic Christian worship has a narrative arc that rehearses the story of redemption in the very form of

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<sup>7</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” filmed in July 2009 at TEDGlobal, TED Video, 18:32, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?subtitle=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?subtitle=en).

worship.”<sup>8</sup> Liturgical theology is the field of study that explores how liturgy can restore, and re-story and it suggests liturgy as a primary way to express theology. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of praying is the law of believing means that the way we craft and move through our liturgies represents what we believe and ultimately shapes the way Christians live.<sup>9</sup> A significant and growing field of study, I will draw upon liturgical theology’s historical approach and research as well as my experience in a setting that deeply values the role of historic liturgies in Christian formation. Ultimately, my goal for this thesis is to remind those who plan and lead worship of the remarkable gift they hold in their hands every week, the power to shape how God’s story is told and lived out by their faith communities.

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<sup>8</sup> James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Brazos Press, 2016), 94.

<sup>9</sup> Historically associated with the fifth century theologian Prosper Aquitaine, the phrase, *Lex orandi, lex credendi* is translated as, “the law of praying is the law of belief.” In worship studies and liturgical theology, it carries the idea that the practice and teaching of liturgy precedes and shapes belief. Right belief stems from and is found first in liturgical practice, not the other way around. See Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold SJ and Paul Bradshaw, eds., *The Study of Liturgy* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 6. See also Mike McCallion’s article from the University of Notre Dame, <https://sites.nd.edu/thecc/2013/04/22/lex-orandi-lex-credendi/>.



## Chapter 1

### Worship as Storytelling, Rehearsing the Story of God

There is perhaps no greater way to make meaning of the world than through storytelling. Unless our career depends on it, many of us have long forgotten the periodic table of elements or how to diagram a sentence but with little effort we can recall the way a childhood story moved us. I remember sitting on my bed crying when Piggy died in *Lord of the Flies* and the powerful way William Golding's novel shaped my adolescent thinking. I can recall with vivid detail the sandalwood, vanilla scent of my uncle's pipe as my sister and I sat at the foot of his recliner while he regaled us with tales from his French-Canadian childhood and adventures on the Mississippi River. There is no form of communication across all human history that rivals the power of storytelling. In his 1961 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Yugoslavian poet and novelist Ivo Andrić reflected on its historic power to make sense of the human condition:

In thousands of languages, in the most diverse climes, from century to century, beginning with the very old stories told around the hearth in the huts of our remote ancestors down to the works of modern storytellers ... it is the story of the human condition that is being spun and that men never weary of telling one another. The manner of telling and the form of the story vary according to periods and circumstances, but the taste for telling and retelling a story remains the same: the narrative flows endlessly and never runs dry. Thus, at times, one might almost believe that from the first dawn of consciousness throughout the ages, mankind has constantly been telling itself the same story, though with infinite variations, to the rhythm of its breath and pulse.<sup>1</sup>

Andrić believed that “the words of a good storyteller often shed light on our acts and on our omissions, on what we should do and on what we should not have done.” Stories draw people together by putting words to our experiences and giving voice to the voiceless. They shape the way communities define themselves and how we make sense of our world.

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<sup>1</sup> Ivo Andrić, “Banquet Speech” (speech, Stockholm, Sweden, December 10, 1961), The Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1961/andric/speech/>.

Christians are a storied people whose tradition holds the Gospel as the grand narrative that ties all of humanity together. Jesus himself was the master storyteller whose parables shaped and told his Gospel message. It is through this narrative of faith that Christian communities work to understand the joy, pain, and complexity of life. Across Christian history, the primary vehicle for telling and retelling the story of God is corporate worship where the story of God is regularly rehearsed. This rehearsal took shape in a myriad of ways across time and in thousands of places, languages and dialects, and through diverse theological lenses. The story of God echoes today across marble cathedrals, prison chapels, urban churches, and remote villages. It is whispered as people draw together around a hospital bed and it is proclaimed on a jumbotron at evangelistic stadium events. It is told through song, poetry, visual art, dance, digital media, sermons, prayers, and other unique expressions. And the story is told by different generations, genders, skin colors, trained clergy, and volunteer laity. While there are unchanging essentials in the Christian narrative, there are as many ways to tell God’s story as there are congregations who gather to tell it. As Andrić stated, “[hu]mankind has constantly been telling itself the same story, though with infinite variations.”<sup>2</sup> Christian worship holds both orthodoxy and individuality in tension.

Liturgy creates the framework through which the Christian story is rehearsed in corporate worship. In liturgy this narrative is told through spirituals, modern worship songs, intercessory prayers, preaching, the eucharist, baptism, lighting of candles and incense, and dozens of ways aimed at encountering the divine. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, professors of liturgy and pastoral theology at Catholic Theological Union write, “The public worship of organized religions is regarded as a particularly privileged place where the divine—human relationship is

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<sup>2</sup> Ivo Andrić, *Banquet Speech*.

rehearsed and realized.”<sup>3</sup> Liturgies provide a reliable structure through which to encounter God’s story and liturgy orients the worshipper, guiding them through their experience so that they are as fully present to God as possible. Church historian at Duke University Lauren Winner writes about liturgy that, “When you don’t have to think all the time about what words you are going to say next, you are free to fully enter into the act of praying; you are free to participate in the life of God.”<sup>4</sup> For Christians who regularly practice a liturgy, how they view others and themselves is often shaped by their that practice. Who does the pastor say that God is? Who does that song say that we are? For which issues and people do we pray? What do we lament? Who is my neighbor? And who has the power and authority to answer these questions? How a Christian community answers these questions can be found in their liturgies. Liturgies serve as the primary structure to guide worshippers and as a result, hold tremendous power. James K.A. Smith writes about this power of worship to shape our Christian imagination: “Intentional, historic liturgy restores our imagination because it sanctifies our perception—it implants the biblical story so deeply into our preconscious that the gospel becomes the ‘background’ against and through which we perceive the world.”<sup>5</sup>

No single liturgy can entirely capture the majesty of God and the fullness of God’s love just as no single human mind can fathom all that God has done and will continue to do (1 Cor 2:11). Human beings exist as finite, limited creatures so Christian worship is always inadequate in its endeavor to capture the fullness of God. At times, those inadequacies are noted and honored as mystery, but they can also be unknown or ignored. While attempting to share God’s

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (Fortress Press, 2019), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Winner, *Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline* (Paraclete Press, 2003), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 94.

narrative, the lived experiences of worship planners also get worked out in a liturgy. Liturgists bring to worship planning their own pain, heartache, frustration, exhaustion and joy. They also bring their flawed agendas and ideologies as well as those of their congregations and time in history. Liturgical retellings of God's story can teach against the heart of God because they are crafted by fallible leaders whose range of human experiences and beliefs play a role in shaping their liturgy. Throughout human history, Christian liturgies brought comfort, peace, and hope for some while liturgies promoted violence and injustice against others. Congregants can leave praising the grandeur and rescue of God or wondering if they are safe, known, or if they matter to God at all. Congregants as well as liturgists are active participants in worship as both interpret and act in ways that can use well or distort liturgy.

As a young seminary student, I encountered two remarkably different stories about the value of women that were told through liturgies. I was invited to guest preach at a local church and introduced before my sermon as a future pastor who might one day lead a church. The liturgy for that morning included time of prayer for seminary students and specifically, for women students to continue using their voices to build the Church. I left that morning feeling energized and part of a story that included my gifts and calling. Later that afternoon I compared notes with another female student who also completed a visit to a nearby church. As a woman, she was not allowed to preach and had just experienced a liturgy where the leadership of women was considered dangerous. Every leader at the chancel was male from the pastor to the liturgist to the worship leader. At one moment in the service a mom rose to announce an upcoming mother daughter retreat and as she stepped up, the men in the congregation turned around to face the back of the room so as not to be tempted by her appearance or risk affirming her leadership. Their liturgy required men keep their backs to her until she was seated. My classmate

encountered a retelling of God's story that left her deflated and hurt. Both churches employed liturgies to tell their version of God's story as it engaged with women.

Women in ministry is not the only area where prejudice is rehearsed in worship. So-called Christian liturgies in the American South were once a vehicle for white slave owners to perpetuate the belief that African lives were somehow deficient and could be captured and held against their will. In this retelling of God's story, various elements of worship were manipulated to support oppression. White churches that served local communities, as well as plantation owners who presided over slave worship, protected this pallid narrative. By teaching slaves that God demanded their submission through truncated or edited readings from the Bible or music and prayers that promised God's reward for their docility, captive communities were led to believe God's story called for their capitulation. One desired outcome from white plantation worship was that enslaved people might believe that God ordained their oppression.

Yet at the same time, when enslaved people gathered to worship on their own, their retelling of God's story was a version that elevated the themes of exodus and redemption. Slaves who were literate, often reading from prohibited copies of the Bible, told a bigger story of God's love. Even under the watchful eye of a white pastor slaves worshipped with coded prayers and music that held secret meaning and told a different story (I will explore this in chapter three). Liturgies can both oppress and free. Every liturgy retells one version of God's story and shapes a narrative in those who gather to experience it. As liturgies rehearse God's narrative, they create the narratives by which we live. Some for good, others for harm but both options exist in every worship experience crafted by finite human hearts. Howard Thurman noted this disparity when

he wrote, “Because a man [sic] is a Christian is no indication to me what his attitude toward me may be in any given circumstance.”<sup>6</sup>

Human beings cannot ever fully represent the image and glory of God so worship liturgies will always risk reflecting our broken humanity instead of the God they seek to serve. Sometimes that reflection means an honest sharing of our experiences and emotions that can unite people around a common experience. Encountering these tender and vulnerable spaces can open others up to God. However, this also means our liturgies risk perpetuating narratives that go against the hope of the Gospel. Liturgists and worship leaders hold tremendous possibility for embracing others with deep love and care and they also risk telling stories that injure and isolate. Who determines what version of God’s story gets told? What elements of worship represent that story? Which voices and faces are marginalized or missing from the telling? Who emerges from worship with rescue and release and who emerges with burden? Liturgies represent the value system held by a congregation and that value system in turn informs the way God’s story is rehearsed. In this thesis I will explore the power that exists in liturgy, how liturgy shapes different versions of the Christian narrative, and how the liturgical rehearsal of God’s story extends beyond corporate worship as it helps shape habits for everyday life.

Congregants at the church where I currently serve, like those throughout Christian history will at times lament that our liturgy feels rote or inconsequential, a boring ritual to be endured before brunch or an afternoon nap. I have occasionally felt this myself over my decades in worship and have watched my own children and congregation struggle along the way as well. Liturgy asks us to pay attention, and attention is an increasingly rare commodity. Lauren Winner,

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (Harper and Row, 1965), 64.

reflecting on her own distracted experiences in worship once wrote, “Liturgy can be dull, and its dullness can be distracting...my mouth may have been mouthing psalms, but my brain was thinking grocery lists or weekend plans.”<sup>7</sup> Providing instructions on liturgy will not solve a blasé experience of worship, but it can help engage worshippers or at least allow their minds to wander in the direction a liturgy leads. When liturgists engage the imagination, they can direct our distractions. When a liturgy invites us to confess, our minds might wander to that moment last week when we were not at our best. When liturgy asks for us to greet one another or pass the peace, we might spend the next hour thinking about that person we struggle to understand whose hand we just shook. Indeed, liturgy can leave our minds to wander in boredom or it can lead them toward a holy distraction.

### **Liturgy as a Primary Resource for Christian Formation**

The decline of Christianity in Europe as well in the United States is well documented. When Gallup first surveyed church membership in 1937 it revealed that 73% of all Americans both claimed a Christian faith and were regular church attenders. That number held steady for over fifty years until a sharp decline in the early 2000’s. Today, less than 50% of Americans affiliate with the Christian faith and attend church with any notable consistency.<sup>8</sup> Ryan Burge, Associate Professor of Political Science at Eastern Illinois University, is also a leading data analyst on religion and politics whose work on the religiously unaffiliated (known as the nones) gained considerable attention in pastoral and political circles. According to Burge, by 2022, “The religiously unaffiliated went from no more than a rounding error throughout the 1990s to about

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<sup>7</sup> Winner, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, 59-60.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, “US Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

thirty percent of the US population.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, this decline is taking place today alongside unprecedented access to Christian formation resources through our rapidly expanding digital world. The story of God is experienced as increasingly irrelevant or unnecessary even as the number of faith-based digital media platforms is on the rise. In fact, Ryan Burge cites the internet as a major causal factor that gave rise to the nones as it provided a space to explore a wide variety of religious traditions or find comfort and friendship with others who claim no tradition at all. In short, the internet helped normalize disaffiliation.<sup>10</sup> This, in part, explains why engagement in Christian digital spaces remains miniscule when compared to massive global platforms like Snap Chat, Instagram, and TikTok, even while some influencers on those platforms tell the Christian story. A combined 86+ million people follow the top two American Instagram influencers. In comparison, YouVersion, the most downloaded Bible app in the world has only 3.1 million followers. The Bible Project, an oft touted Christian formation success story, has less than one-million followers.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, 136 million Americans still attend church at least once per month.<sup>12</sup> All of those attenders follow a liturgy and engage in some telling of the Christian story. Every Sunday pastors hold what is still arguably one the biggest opportunities for ongoing Christian formation, their liturgy. Pastors have a captive audience to teach and equip that currently extends far beyond any other platform. Liturgy is the most encountered and frequently experienced tool for Christian

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<sup>9</sup> Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Fortress Press, 2023), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> The YouVersion App is the most downloaded digital Bible. Launched in 2008, in 2021 it hit a milestone as the most installed, faith-based app with 500 million downloads. This is significant yet it pales in comparison to the dominance of apps like TikTok with almost 3 billion downloads in just four years. See also, “Bible App Installs and Use Show Global Bible Engagement is on the Rise,” <https://www.youversion.com/press/500-million-installs/>.

<sup>12</sup> “How Often Do You Attend Church or Synagogue – at least one a week, almost every week, about once a month, seldom, or never,” Statista, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/245491/church-attendance-of-americans/>.



formation. Sister Mary Alice Piil, c.s.j. writes on the intersection of liturgy and daily life and encourages her parishioners to understand their liturgy as a way deepen their discipleship. The liturgy, according to Piil, “expresses the reality of the Christian life, yet is also the font from which we draw the strength necessary to live the paschal mystery in the modern world.”<sup>13</sup> Connecting liturgy with everyday life is essential for ongoing spiritual growth and engagement with the issues of our time. To do so, liturgy, although often historic and fixed, must evolve to meet people where they are at today. The human brain no longer works the same as it did four centuries ago. Attention spans have shifted, delivery systems for worship changed, and liturgy must remain current to be relevant for modern people. After two decades of pastoral leadership, I have read dozens of articles and books on declining church attendance, yet I rarely hear conversation on the role liturgy plays in that decline or could play in its reverse. Armand Léon van Ommen’s work calls attention to the role liturgy can play. His research focuses on the intersection of suffering and liturgy as well as on the intersection of mental health, dementia, and autism with liturgy. Ommen suggests that part of the reason Christianity lost influence in Europe and the United States is because of the church’s inability to teach and engage with its power, “If liturgy’s power has waned in a secularized Europe and a rapidly secularizing America, one reason may well be that those controlling it misread the true power of its performed content – namely, the Gospel mystery of Jesus’ life, passion, death, and resurrection.”<sup>14</sup>

God is ever-present. The Apostle Paul writes about God’s ongoing availability and accessibility: “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Y. Koester, ed., *Liturgy and Justice: To Worship God in Spirit and Truth* (Liturgical Press, 2002), xii.

<sup>14</sup> Armand Léon van Ommen, *Suffering in Worship: Anglican Liturgy in Relation to Stories of Suffering People* (Routledge, 2017), viii.

him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Col 1:16-17) God is everywhere but distracted humanity has always needed help to connect the sacred and the ordinary and to ultimately discover that the ordinary is saturated with the sacred. If liturgy is a primary shaper of formation, the intersection of liturgy with everyday life should be noted and celebrated. Instead, liturgy and worship are often experienced as something people do “over there” while the rest of their life is lived “here.” As Episcopal priest and author, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish—separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. But we should not be surprised when God does not recognize the distinctions we make between the two. Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.”<sup>15</sup>

One mark of a thriving Christian faith is an ongoing awareness and engagement with this divine possibility. The opening question of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Westminster Shorter Catechism is, “What is the chief end of man [sic]?” to which the catechist responds, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”<sup>16</sup> When pastors teach congregations about their liturgy, they make connections that can help people learn how to glorify God and form habits that shape an ongoing enjoyment of the divine. Worship leaders can encourage an awareness that the lessons from liturgy linger long after the service hour ends, and they serve as a resource for navigating life. Liturgy should express the story of God and then help shape a Gospel narrative by which people live. What story does a liturgy tell? What kind of God is expressed in a liturgy? What is my expected response to that God? What kind of people does the story want us to become?

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (HarperCollins, 2009), 15.

<sup>16</sup> B. Rollinson and Frederick T. Marsh, eds. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1986).

People long for forgiveness, repentance, connectivity, and peace. We are all eager to feel safe, known, and loved. Our 24/7 news feeds replay global and local tragedies, as our congregations are filled with people who struggle with grief and loss many forms. Among those who do come to church, they arrive looking for a story that includes their poverty, struggle, and exhaustion. Those on the fringes want to know, am I safe here? Christian liturgies give a hope-filled response when they offer moments to encounter God's story of healing, welcome, and presence. After the 2022 mass shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, the nearby All Souls church quickly adjusted their Sunday morning liturgy to accommodate the significant loss that just took place. Writing about the event for *Liturgy, The Journal of the Liturgical Conference*, Elizabeth Eliot tells the story of pastors and volunteers who pivoted immediately to create a liturgy that met the community's needs and sat with them in their heartbreak. Eliot explains this pivot, "The worship team prioritized elements that most provided comfort in times of crisis: prayer, music, and story. To accommodate the many visitors and guests joining the service, many elements were more contextualized."<sup>17</sup> She goes on to explain the careful way they reworked their liturgy to reflect the practice of love and presence. The shooting took place at an LGBTQ+ bar and many from that community had not experienced church as a place of love and care. All Souls was eager to adjust their liturgy to comfort people on those fringes. They selected liturgical elements that promoted healing and courage demonstrating, as Eliot put it, that "in doing the mundane tasks of the everyday Sunday church service in the most extraordinary circumstances, they were living into that orthopraxy."<sup>18</sup> Liturgies can create space for hope and healing in our

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Eliot, "All Souls and the Club Q Vigils," *Liturgy: Journal of the Liturgical Conference* 39, no. 2 (2024): 45.

<sup>18</sup> Eliot, "All Souls," 48.

complex world when they invite people to reflect together upon their shared experiences and lead them to locate those experiences in the story of God's love.

## Chapter 2

### A Brief Overview of Liturgical History

A worship liturgy, simply defined, is an ordered set of rituals and embodied practices shared in a religious setting. While the term liturgy is most often associated with Christian traditions, all religions as well as many secular events, like concerts or political rallies, hold some form of ordered, expected behavior that points toward an object, idea, or person of affection. Christian liturgies can include songs, chants, repeated words and phrases, use of incense or candles, specific attire, moments of silence, prayer, dance, or any expression that aims to lead people to worship God. The Greek word for liturgy, *leitourgia*, is a literal translation of two words, *litos* and *ergos*, which mean, *public work*.<sup>1</sup> A liturgy is the public work of a gathered people. Liturgies both point people toward something to love and teach them how to love that object. James K.A. Smith writes, “liturgies are pedagogies of desire that shape our love.”<sup>2</sup>

In Christian traditions, the term liturgy refers specifically to the ordering of worship, administration of sacraments, and instructing people on how to love and respond to a holy God. Liturgical elements like confession, assurance of pardon, passing the peace, the eucharist, and the benediction orient worshippers toward God’s story and their place in that story. Every culture and context throughout Christian history expressed their worship through unique liturgies that reflected the traditions, practices, and customs of their time. As I will explore in this chapter, most modern liturgical movements can be traced back to the early church and to the original Scriptures that inspired them. As with every human endeavor, God’s ideal is never realized this side of heaven. Liturgies do not exist in vacuum and are flawed by the egos, attitudes, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Etymology*, s.v., “liturgy,” accessed July 10, 2022, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/liturgy>.

<sup>2</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Baker Academic, 2013), 137.

prevailing ideas of their time just as every human institution. While Christian liturgies can rightly claim to employ the Holy Spirit as their guide, there is no perfect liturgy as no liturgist or liturgy exists outside of an imperfect human context. All liturgies carry with them the ability to build up or tear down.

The word *ritual* often appears alongside conversations about liturgy and the terms are at times used interchangeably but have different nuances. Ritual is a broad category that extends beyond Christian worship to include various ceremonies, routines, and customs that help people make meaning out of ongoing or unique circumstances. Families and organizations like civic clubs and academic institutions follow various rituals throughout the calendar year like anniversary celebrations, commencements, or parades. In times of loss, customs and habits often anchor people as they lean into familiar rituals to honor a memory or create a new ritual to navigate a loss. Attending church to experience a worship liturgy is one among many other cultural and familial rituals. Attending worship includes experiencing a liturgy and corporate worship itself is one of many cultural and social rituals in which Christians engage. Liturgies help shape religious rituals.

However, liturgies also contain rituals. Attending church and engaging in a liturgy is a ritual but also, liturgies provide an order by which a more specific set of rituals are experienced. Consider baptism as an example. Baptism is one of many moments that takes place within a worship liturgy. The ritual of baptism is preceded or followed in the larger liturgy by elements like prayer, communion, or the offering yet the baptism ritual itself holds its own liturgy, it has an ordered pattern of events like the offering of an historic prayer and the symbol of a cross on the forehead of an infant or as adults are immersed. Baptismal liturgies often include a specific phrase that consecrates the water. Many baptismal liturgies include a recitation Scripture like

Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28:19: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" or Acts 2:38: "Repent and be baptized." Liturgies contain rituals.

In their book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*, Anderson and Foley point to the power of ritual for survival and as a tool that can help foster healing, bring comfort, and make meaning out of life.<sup>3</sup> The ritual of attending church and working a liturgy is one way that people orient themselves in a confusing world. It is a repeated pattern that can help understand one's part in a larger narrative. The stories we tell and ceremonies we repeat to make meaning out of life rely upon rituals.<sup>4</sup> Attending worship and practicing a liturgy is the predominant ritual Christians choose to make meaning with their lives as they rehearse the story of God. From the Israelites in the Old Testament to modern congregations gathered across the world today, Christians engage weekly in the ritual of attending worship that locates them in God's story through their liturgy.

### **Old and New Testament Liturgies**

The Bible opens with a liturgy. Genesis chapter one creates an ordered pattern, declaration, blessing, and repetition, "It is good, it is good...it is very good." (Gen 1:1-31)<sup>5</sup> From the beginning of Scripture, God works to create order and purpose from chaos. The Israelites later followed a liturgical calendar that included a rotation of feasts and festivals around which their lives were religiously, socially, and culturally oriented. Pilgrimages aligned with

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century*, March 24, 1999.

agricultural seasons and significant moments in Israel's history that gave rise to celebrations like The Feast of Weeks, Passover, and The Feast of Tabernacles. Liturgical notes are scattered throughout the Torah including specific attire for worship leaders (Ex 28), plans for building the altar (Ex 20:24-26), instructions for sacrifices and ceremonies (Lv 1-7), ordination (Lv 8), blessings (Nm 6:24-26), and a myriad of commands about worship found in the Mosaic Law. The Old Testament is saturated with details on Israel's liturgical life. Old Testament worship acted out and portrayed the story of God's love and redemption and foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah. Old Testament worship rehearsed the story of God and invited the Israelites to remember the story of God and God's provision for God's people.

This liturgical life continued into the New Testament. Jesus was a devout Jewish rabbi who followed the liturgical year and festivals of his Jewish culture. Throughout their time with Jesus, his followers continued to mark designated hours for Jewish prayer (Acts 2:46; 3:1; Acts 10:9). In Acts 2:42, the believers were together following a liturgy: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Acts 20:7 indicates that weekly worship was already taking place, and it included certain rituals and repetition like the eucharist and preaching: "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread," and "Paul spoke to the people." James 5:13-16 suggests liturgical practices for believers that include prayer, songs of praise, the practice of anointing with oil, and confession. Since the first century, Paul's well-known eucharistic instructions and his words of institution (1 Cor 11:23-34) have been recited when Christians gather to worship. Revelation is filled with liturgical symbols like robes, incense, altars, and golden crowns as well as a picture of how God's people will worship into eternity. In Revelation 7:12, the angels offer a doxology that still echoes throughout modern worship services today: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and



thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” Liturgy and the role it played in rehearsing God’s story and shaping God’s people is threaded throughout the entirety of Scripture.

### **Early Christian Worship as Diverse**

Throughout early Christianity, the church continued to practice this ordered worship that was rooted in Scripture. One of the most comprehensive examples of liturgical instruction from the second century is found in Justin Martyr’s, “Apology,” *On the Day Called Sunday*:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.<sup>6</sup>

Here Martyr’s record of Christian worship closely resembled the Jewish customs and liturgical expressions from which it was birthed. Practices like gathering for a meal, praying, caring for orphans and widows, following a religious calendar, and reading the Old Testament aloud in worship had roots in Jewish liturgies that predated Christianity. These common liturgical elements were celebrated in many cultures and communities yet how those elements were ordered and expressed varied depending on the specific context of each church.<sup>7</sup> There was no single, uniform liturgy in the early church from which all others took their cues. Liturgical

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<sup>6</sup> Justin Martyr, “Apology,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe, (Wipf & Stock, 2022), 1:186.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, and Maxwell E. Johnson, “The Apostolic Tradition,” *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 68.

diversity was threaded into the fabric of worship during this period. Throughout the first two centuries of Christianity an order and pattern for worship gatherings was important, but surprisingly there was no one universal order for early Christian worship. English theologian Geoffrey Wainwright notes that in the early church, a “pure core” of Christian worship simply did not exist.<sup>8</sup>

Worship then, as now, could not be separated from the specific cultural context within which a church was formed. The code for worship, meaning what is done and how it is done, was inextricably linked to the local culture. Commentary on uniformity and code is missing from early descriptions of worship and liturgies because those liturgies were so varied. Wainwright states, “The history of Christian worship in the early church is not the history of a single tradition of worship that undergirds the diversity of liturgical practices ... rather, it is itself the history of plurality of liturgical practices from the very beginning. There is no one clearly deduced ‘apostolic tradition’ of Christian worship.”<sup>9</sup> What is consistent, however, is that albeit different from place to place every Christian community had a liturgy that ordered its regular corporate worship gatherings to rehearse the story of God and God’s people.

### **Early Christian Liturgy as Private**

Liturgy, by definition, is corporate but early Christian worship had a decidedly private element to it. Dom Gregory Dix, an English monastic and priest from the early twentieth century was long considered the premier scholar on liturgy. In his seminal work, *The Shape of Liturgy*, Dix explains that today we experience Christian worship as an invitational activity. Skeptics and seekers alike are broadly welcome to attend worship services and encouraged to join in at least

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<sup>8</sup> Wainwright, Tucker, and Johnson, *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Wainwright, Tucker, and Johnson, *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 67.

some elements of the liturgy even if prohibited from taking the eucharist. The idea today is that an onlooker might find Christian worship compelling and attractive enough to at least attend and later join the faith to fully participate. “All are welcome in worship,” is an ongoing mantra of most churches today. However, as Dix writes,

The apostolic and primitive church, on the contrary, regarded all Christian worship, and especially the eucharist, as a highly *private* activity, and rigidly excluded all strangers from taking any part in it whatsoever, and even from attendance at the eucharist. Christian worship was intensely corporate, but it was not ‘public’. Our own attitude is the result of living in a world which has been nominally Christian for fourteen or fifteen centuries. The attitude of the ancient church did not arise, however, from the circumstance of a non-Christian world, for it was adopted before opposition began, and continued in circumstances when it would have been quite easy to modify it.<sup>10</sup>

One example of Dix’s note on private worship can be found Book of Acts. Widely considered a record of the early church, 1:13-14 begins with prayer and discernment in an upper, secluded room. While their time together was communal, it was not promoted as an invitational opportunity to the wider community in Jerusalem. This was, in part, driven by their likely fear of the Roman authorities after the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus however, this was also a trend they carried with them from Judaism into the early Christian Church. Throughout the Gospels in places like Mark 13:1; 14:26 and Matthew 26:30 we find the disciples joining together in Jewish worship, often in a private home around a table with friends. Even though that worship had a public nature, Jewish worship took place within a decidedly nonpublic community.

For the first two centuries of the church until cathedrals became the default location for worship Christians met privately in homes rather than large public spaces.<sup>11</sup> To Wainwright’s point this allowed for as many variations in the liturgy as there were meeting houses. Several core liturgical elements like the eucharist and prayer were practiced in each location but how

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<sup>10</sup> Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Bloomsbury, 2005), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy*, 18.

those elements were expressed differed from home to home and city to city. At its best, early Christian worship was a creative expression of local communities where the story of God was told in a variety of ways. As is true in any group of fallible people, early Christian communities also navigated disagreement and tension, so the story of God as told in worship was never fully realized as evidenced by racial and cultural division in the church as well as other arguments found in places like Acts 15, Peter and Paul at Antioch, and 1 Corinthians 8.

Christians in the first and second centuries had patterns for trying to shape their private devotional life through the practice of liturgical elements like fixed hours for prayer. Early on we see lessons from corporate worship shaped community life and private devotion. Apostolic Father Hippolytus offers extensive instruction on prayers and specifically prayer at certain hours of the day. taught three daily prayers encouraged at the third, sixth, and ninth hours and encouraged both prayer and scripture reading at home as well as in the gathered assembly.<sup>12</sup> This custom, borrowed from Judaism (Dn 6:10) eventually encouraged The Lord's Prayer as a daily utterance for Christian communities. The Lord's Prayer was practiced corporately in many liturgies then encouraged as a devotional practice in daily life. In one of two letters to his friend Proba, a Christian widow and noblewoman, Augustine offers instruction on how to follow fixed times for daily prayer within the busyness of life.<sup>13</sup> The *Didache*, believed by many scholars to be one of the most comprehensive and early forms of catechesis, outlines practices to be followed in corporate worship as well as the private devotion recommended to prepare for a worship gathering. For the early church, liturgies from corporate worship also served as resources to shape practice among the faithful in their daily lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Hippolytus, "Lay Devotions," 35-36 in *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* trans. and ed. Burton Scott Easton (Cambridge University Press, 1962), 54-55.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher A Hall, *Worshipping with The Church Fathers* (Intervarsity Press, 2009), 173.

## Liturgy as Christianity Expanded

As the influence of Christianity spread liturgical expressions continued to shift within the dominant culture and context for corporate worship. Under Constantine, Christianity in third century Rome gave rise to new elements like local shrines honoring saints and martyrs or exhibiting relics. During this period liturgical language shifted from Greek to Latin as the *lingua franca* shifted as well. Pope Damasus I commissioned St. Jerome to create a revision of the widely used *Vetus Latina* to bring it and several other translations together into one place. Completed in 405, Jerome's Vulgate expanded to include most books of the Bible. For centuries it served as the primary Bible translation for Western churches until the Protestant Reformation. It is still used in various Roman Catholic liturgies today.<sup>14</sup>

By the fourth century, Christian worship began to experience more homogeneity or what Father John Baldovin, Professor of Historical and Liturgical Theology at Boston College calls, "a time of ritual consolidation."<sup>15</sup> For the first time in liturgical history a uniform structure for the eucharistic liturgy became widely used. As the Roman Empire dissolved, the church began to unify around this emerging and agreed upon set of rites and liturgical practices. Liturgical scholar, George Lathrop, credited with the popularization of Alexander Schmemmann's term *ordo*, writes that this early *ordo* was a unified set of practices that included gathering, word, meal, and sending.<sup>16</sup> A unified liturgical calendar also appeared at this time as did an early version of a lectionary. Periods of instruction before full participation in a liturgy became normative.

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<sup>14</sup> Glenn Davis, "The Development of the Canon of the New Testament," *The Development of the Canon of the New Testament - Vulgate*, 1999, <http://www.ntcanon.org/Vulgate.shtml>.

<sup>15</sup> Wainwright Geoffrey, Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, and John F Baldovin, S.J., "The Empire Baptized," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>16</sup> Dirke G. Lange and Dwight W. Vogel, eds. *Ordo: Bath, Word, Prayer, Table: A Liturgical Primer in Honor of Gordon W. Lathrop* (OSL Publications, 2018) 59-60.

Catechisms that included instruction on sacraments such as baptism and the eucharist were formalized and unified across regions as well. These instructions included elements like repentance as well as preparation periods for baptism that might last up to three years.<sup>17</sup>

The physical location for Christian worship also experienced a dramatic shift near the end of the second century from small house groups to substantial church buildings, shrines, and basilicas located in public squares.<sup>18</sup> The Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome, completed in 440 and the sixth century construction of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople serve as examples of the stunning shift in where worship took place during this time. Cathedrals often featured long hallways for processions, gold covered baptismal fonts, cavernous narthexes, halls, and even thrones upon which to seat a bishop.<sup>19</sup> Worshippers now left their small homes in ordinary neighborhoods to practice their liturgies in massive cathedrals adorned with artwork, gold, and symbols that felt otherworldly to the average person.

As buildings grew in complexity and stature, liturgies followed. Worship practices became increasingly intricate and demanding in part to help financially support construction.<sup>20</sup> The more elaborate liturgies became the farther removed they were from everyday life. The retelling of God's story became elegant and perhaps out of reach for ordinary people who were separated from the mystery of worship yet expected to fund it. As these disparities continued so too did the need to send people from extravagant worship spaces and experiences back into their regular lives with concrete ways to live out God's story. John Chrysostom's *Baptismal Homily* and his instructions for newly baptized women is one example of the pressure placed on liturgies

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<sup>17</sup> Wainwright, Tucker, and Johnson, *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Wainwright, Tucker, and Johnson, *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 81.

<sup>19</sup> Wainwright, Tucker, and Johnson, *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Wainwright, Tucker, and Johnson, *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 78.

to send people purposefully from corporate worship and sacraments back into their routines with Christian purpose:

When you are about to pass over the threshold of the gateway [leaving the church building], say this word first: I leave your ranks, Satan and your pomp, and your service, and I join the ranks of Christ. ... This shall be a staff to you, this your armor, this an impregnable fortress ... even the devil himself, will be unable to hurt you at all ... discipline yourself by these means henceforth, in order that when you receive the seal you may be a well-equipped soldier, and planting your trophy against the devil, may receive the crown of righteousness, which may it be the lot of us all to obtain, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom be glory to the Father and to the Holy Spirit for ever and ever — Amen.<sup>21</sup>

Chrysostom's liturgical language of sending and elements like a dismissal reflect the story of Christians sent into the world on mission. Liturgy provided a way for bishops and priests to prepare their congregations to carry the story of God out from magnificent cathedrals and corporate worship into daily life.

As Christian worship encountered an impulse to unify and organize its liturgy the understandable tension this created among priests and church leaders created historic fractures in Christianity from the Great Schism to the Protestant Reformation to the thousands of Christian denominations around the world today. Debates on how to baptize people, what the proper age for baptism might be, who could participate in the eucharist and who was qualified to lead worship illustrate many liturgical points of contention that led to fractures and denominations. Liturgy was not the primary pressure for these breaks, but it was through liturgy that the differences in theology and practice were expressed. Just as liturgy could be a tool to unite people it just as easily became a point of contention and anger through which lines of exclusion were drawn.

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<sup>21</sup> Chrysostom, "Baptismal Homily," 1 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series*, trans Philip Schaff, (Eerdmans, 1993) 12.

## Contemporary Worship in the United States

Christianity expanded into the Western hemisphere as European explorers landed on the shores of what is now the United States. Christianity and colonization were intertwined upon their arrival as both Roman Catholics and Protestants wrongly envisioned themselves on mission as saviors to a savage continent that needed their help. With arrogance and urgency white Europeans worked to “tame” the Native cultures they encountered with their truncated version of God’s story. Liturgies were employed as weapons to perpetuate the myth in worship that God disapproved of Native cultures and rituals and God could only be found in European expressions of faith. Liturgies became tools that perpetuated fear and oppression. Mark Charles is a consultant from Navajo and Dutch descent who teaches on the complexities of American history, race, and culture. Alongside Soong-Chan Rah he writes about the narrative of American exceptionalism that was intertwined with Christian worship when the American colonies were formed. Through the work of Puritan pastor John Winthrop, Charles and Rah explain,

Puritans in the New World believed themselves to be especially favored by God, the vessel through which the light of the gospel would shine forth into this dark world ... The colonists claimed their identity as the chosen people. The narrative of European supremacy, now fully realized in the European body and mind, compelled them to seek out the mantle of being God’s chosen people, which had been previously reserved only for the Jewish people. This dysfunctional theological imagination now affirmed the European body as superior to the Native body that already inhabited the Americas.<sup>22</sup>

Winthrop and others like him illustrate how religious leaders in the American colonies held the power to decide what a liturgy pointed toward and how it was practiced. It often pointed to a story of white European supremacy rather than the love and presence of God that was already among Native populations long before colonists ever arrived. Who gets to decide what is liturgically correct? How can we ensure that a liturgical practice does not claim to honor God at

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of Doctrine of Discovery* (Intervarsity Press, 2019), 71-72.



the expense of another? What is the right use of power in a liturgy? And what story does a liturgy tell us about who we are and how we are to live alongside one another?

The impacts of colonization remain today as many worship styles in the US still give primacy to white European liturgical expressions even within congregations that were traumatized by them. Voices calling for a shift in this narrative add much needed texture to liturgical theology today. Native American theologian Richard Twiss writes,

There is an increasing awareness of the need to contextualize worship as an act of defiance over the assumptions of western, white centrality in the worship life of the American Church. All worship is contextual, but there may be an underlying assumption of European American primacy in worship and the failure to recognize the captivity of the church to European American norms.<sup>23</sup>

Twiss goes on to explain the deference many Native communities give to white European expressions of worship, as if they are the ultimate *ordo* to follow. Beyond Native communities, failure to address the colonizing aspect of liturgy shows up today as mainstream Christian culture as found in the United States now exports its American-centric style of worship around the world. In its attempts to tell God's story this worship culture shares powerful music and ideas for formation yet at the same time, it inadvertently distributes American individualism, materialism, and the predominately white, and often male, leadership inherent in popular versions of American Christianity.

Harvard professor and filmmaker, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. expands this conversation through his work on the Black church in the US.<sup>24</sup> He unpacks the historic role that movement and music play in Black liturgies and worship, many of which are not included in white North

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<sup>23</sup> Charles and Rah, *Unsettling Truths*, 86.

<sup>24</sup> I use the broad phrase "Black Church" as Gates uses it. There is no one universal expression of the Black Church and Black congregations hold as much diversity of liturgical expression and theology as any other group of churches. Use of the phrase, "Black Church" is not meant to overlook or injure this reality however, this is the phrase that many historians and researchers use to speak about unique elements from the African American expression of Christian faith as it exists in the US today.

American worship exports. Rhythm and song shaped Black worship in a dramatically different way than music shaped white Protestant worship. Liturgical traditions from the Black Church hold ritual, story, and history with a different posture than white Protestant liturgies. In the Black Church, liturgical elements, especially music, express lament, healing, storytelling, and hope that unite congregations with their past more tangibly than in white Protestant churches. Gates explains the progress of music in the Black church, “The grand legacy of the spoken-word tradition, starting in slavery, without a doubt reached its crescendo in the Black Church. ... In black music [this] past is ever present.” T.D. Jakes, via Gates, writes, “The singing on the wounded soul goes all the way back to Africa. We have always been a people that sang out into the wind and exhaled what hurt us.”<sup>25</sup> John Legend writes, “[Black worship music] is its own thing. It’s a very American thing. It’s a very Black American thing.”<sup>26</sup> Worship music in Black liturgies tells an important story that is different than the traditionally white European story of God. It is the song-saturated narrative from the God of rescue, presence, release, and redemption. It is the story of struggle and freedom rarely found in liturgies from predominately white congregations. And it is a story that is finally expanding. Today, the influence of performing artists and hip-hop culture through musicians like Lecrae and Marcus Tyrone Gray now influence the broader worship culture in the United States when they tell the story of God as it is rehearsed in many Black churches. Yet despite this expansion, North American Contemporary worship culture still exports a predominantly Euro-centric style of worship music and liturgy around the world.

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (Penguin Press, 2022), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 9.

Comparing the rhythmic liturgical expression from many Black churches with Western liturgies in the fourth century from which white Protestantism took its lead reveals stark differences. European Protestant worshippers likely stood for up to three hours without any music at all then at the end they might receive a short, spoken benediction. In Black churches, after dancing and singing, benedictions were often sung by the choir or the choir would underscore, hum, or help bring forth a crescendo of voices as a spoken or sung benediction was offered. White American Protestantism muted the liturgical expressions of numerous cultures and people groups. Recovering, elevating, and learning from these traditions is an essential part of the conversation on liturgy in the United States today as well as is discerning which elements of North American Contemporary worship culture get exported and why.

In the US, prior to the 1980s, terms like “liturgy” or “liturgical” were not words to be shirked or avoided, they were simply terms that defined how Christians gathered to worship. Around 1980, a growing congregation in Southern California assembled in a gymnasium around what they defined as a simple order of worship. They did not use the word liturgy but nonetheless, they followed one as they met with a small band led by an acoustic guitar player. The pastor, John Wimber, served as both preacher and keyboard player. John spoke in an easygoing, accessible manner. There was no pageantry, no cross or Christian symbols to be found anywhere in the room. This community rejected more formal, liturgical practices and shared a commitment to shed what they considered the ill-fitting adornments of denominational liturgies. They gave preference to everyday vernacular saying “meal” or “communion” instead of eucharist. They prayed extemporaneously instead of reciting scripted or historic prayers. This

congregation eventually grew to become the Anaheim Vineyard Fellowship, the community largely credited with beginning mainstream Contemporary Christian Worship in the US.<sup>27</sup>

As the Vineyard movement exploded, pressing social and political issues of the late 1970s and early 1980s intersected with worship. This turbulent decade included the Vietnam War, the rise of Feminism, the passage of *Roe v. Wade*, and a growing mistrust of the federal government after the Watergate scandal. Liturgical historian Lester Ruth writes, “Both tumult and creativity marked American Christianity in this period, a mix which lay behind the emergence of new forms of church life and worship.”<sup>28</sup> The mistrust of institutions was carried into denominational and liturgical life and accelerated the growing disdain for traditional expressions of worship. Denominations who had been the purveyors of liturgy for centuries were now suspect as new non-denominational churches started without any formal tradition or expectations about how to order their worship. The rehearsal of God’s story shifted during this era to reflect a casual beachside Savior who was mostly unattached to history and unencumbered by tradition. Some elements of this shift were necessary adjustments to what was experienced as overly formal or dramatic liturgies yet one critique of the Contemporary movement is that it too quickly separated itself from the historical church and the story of God as expressed throughout centuries.

The Contemporary movement was marked by an increasing dislike of formal liturgy. Phrases like “non-liturgical” described services driven by long sets of music, vulnerable displays of emotion, and a relaxed atmosphere. In my congregation we call our two worship expressions “classic” and “contemporary,” yet I still hear worshippers say they go to the “liturgical” or the

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<sup>27</sup> Andy Park, Lester Ruth, and Cindy Rethmeier, *Worshipping with The Anaheim Vineyard: The Emergence of Contemporary Worship* (Eerdmans, 2017), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Park, Ruth, Rethmeier, *Worshipping with The Anaheim Vineyard*, 7.

“non-liturgical” service. As American Evangelical Protestants began to grow in numbers, they carried with them an increasing fear of sacramental traditions believing the pomp and circumstance surrounding many historic liturgies robbed communion of a sense of intimacy with God and neighbor. This disconnect, in part, was due to a lack of liturgical instruction and the growing inability of pastors and liturgists to connect the work of worship to daily life. Church historian Christopher Hall writes, “Many people moved from sacramental traditions into the evangelical world, a largely nonsacramental world, because they felt the lack of a personal relationship with Christ. Indeed, some evangelicals feel they never really heard the gospel in churches representing a sacramental perspective.”<sup>29</sup> The term “non-liturgical” is a misnomer but it stuck. Even research organizations like the widely cited Barna Research Group falls prey to this nomenclature. In their 2018 survey titled, “How Liturgical are Today’s Christians?” Barna sought to discover whether churchgoers were familiar with Christian liturgy by asking whether those who attended worship on weekly basis were liturgical or non-liturgical, as if non-liturgical was truly an option.<sup>30</sup> Every worship gathering follows a liturgy. Non-liturgical worship does not exist.

Alongside the burgeoning Contemporary movement, denominational Mainline churches continued their expressions of worship rooted in historical liturgies but with new tension over worship styles. The American Contemporary movement sprung up alongside and in reaction to some Mainline liturgical expressions and at other times merged with them. In working to join the momentum of Contemporary worship many Mainline congregations shifted their approach to offer a traditional expression at one hour and a “modern” expression at another. Worship wars

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<sup>29</sup> Hall, *Worshipping with The Church Fathers*, 59.

<sup>30</sup> “How Liturgical Are Today's Christians,” Barna, February 13, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/liturgical-todays-christians/>.

suddenly pitted casual, denim wearing, guitar driven bands against traditional choirs as choir lofts were repurposed to fit drum sets and keyboards. One casualty in this shift was the incorrect assumption by Evangelicals and non-denominational churches that somehow traditional, Mainline liturgies were universally unable or unwilling to address the issues of modern life whereas emerging Contemporary liturgies were. At the same time, both styles and expressions carried with them elements of white European Protestantism and were often blind to the way those roots infiltrated their liturgies. The Contemporary movement did offer several helpful corrections for churches with traditional, high church liturgies. It provided a good read on the part of God's story that is marked by easy accessibility for seekers new to faith and for those who lacked the background or resources to dress up or attend worship services that demanded formality in dress and language. In Jim Davis and Michael Graham's book, *The Great Dechurching*, research revealed that while church attendance is declining, membership in the Assemblies of God tradition is up 50% over the last three decades and nondenominational Protestant Christianity is also seeing growth.<sup>31</sup> Most Assemblies of God and nondenominational churches offer casual, Contemporary worship services. We have found this to be true where I serve at Christ Church. We are a nondenominational church that saw our Contemporary worship services grow in average weekly attendance from 150 to 1500 over the past fifteen years.

The word contemporary itself simply means, "marked by characteristics of the present period."<sup>32</sup> However, in the overwhelming use of that word to describe only one style of worship it somehow indicated that all other expressions were therefore out of touch and no longer

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<sup>31</sup> Jim Davis and Michael Graham with Ryan Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Zondervan, 2023), 16.

<sup>32</sup> "Contemporary (a.)," Merriam-Webster, accessed January 14, 2024. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contemporary>.

relevant. The reality is that fixed, sacramental/traditional liturgies found in denominational churches engage with the issues of modernity just as Contemporary expressions do, albeit often in liturgically and sometimes ideologically different ways. Every liturgy, regardless of style, calls people together to rehearse the story of God. Good liturgies are those that engage with the realities of modern life regardless of the form they take. The modern versus traditional debate often pitted one style of music, dress, and venue against another when it should have offered a closer critique on how well any liturgy was rehearsing the story of God, regardless of style.

The beauty of many historic liturgies was lost or rejected during the past five decades as the Contemporary movement accelerated. The benediction is one example. To capture the casual vibe prescribed as necessary in contemporary services pastors often skip a formal benediction and in so doing, forego a significant tradition in favor of an easy dismissal or to make room for announcements. We have debated this exact liturgical element in many of our worship planning meetings. A worship leader can wave or offer a simple, “you all can go home now,” at the end of the hour to make space for announcements. In some services, after the closing song an excited staff member hops up to rush through announcements before everyone exits. Whatever was sung or said in the hour prior is lost in the flurry of information on registration, deadlines, and golf outings. We feel this tension when we plan liturgy. Announcements need to be made but our people also need to be sent out from our spaces with purpose and meaning.

In this seemingly benign shift away from a formal benediction congregations can lose the sacred moment of sending that a benediction offers. This shifts the story a congregation tells itself. Without a benediction, the last word for congregants is not a reminder that they are the sent ones of God but instead that they are part of a story focused on events, sign ups, and doing. This example errs on the side of overstating a benediction’s power but as chapter six will

unpack, elimination of this element marks a significant shift. To be certain, worship must adjust to reflect the needs of the context yet at the same time worship pastors should avoid casually overlooking centuries of Christian practice in favor of a relaxed atmosphere or to make space for announcements, important as many of them may be.

### **Modern Liturgical Calendars and Architecture**

A different way of engaging liturgical time also emerged during the American Contemporary worship boom. While not entirely discarded, liturgical calendars that informed practice for over two millennia in the Western church were often overlooked in favor of perceived relevance to popular culture leaving little to no connection with the historical Christian year.<sup>33</sup> In John Wimber's early records from 1981, his personal planner lists frisbee and Christian conferences but not a mention of any date from the liturgical year like Advent or Lent.<sup>34</sup> Impromptu "Spirit-led" moments and an earnest desire for immediate cultural relevancy meant that many Contemporary churches throughout the United States often engaged time in a different way. Today, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and even Valentine's Day are easier to find on some church calendars than are Pentecost or Ascension. To be fair, coming to church on Mother's Day or Father's Day is likely more attractive to those outside the faith and they provide a cultural opportunity to pray for and honor parents, but it is possible to do both. In our congregation we mark All Saints Day and acknowledge all the moms and dads on their days. We pray for guidance from the Spirit on Pentecost, and we also ask people to consider an act of generosity in contrast to consumerism on Black Friday. While the Contemporary movement gifted many

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<sup>33</sup> Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Abingdon Press, 2017), 25.

<sup>34</sup> Park, Ruth, Rethmeier, *Worshipping with the Anaheim Vineyard*, 55.



congregations with a renewed commitment to authenticity, easier access to clergy, and flexibility in planning it also left many Christians afloat in a sea of rapidly growing congregations without a storied anchor in church or liturgical history.

As with the church during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, the physical location for worship in the American church experienced a dramatic shift in the 1980s. The growing distrust of institutional power and desire of Baby Boomers to separate from the worship traditions of their parents led many churches to abandon historic buildings in favor theaters, gymnasiums, and in favorable climates, beaches. The Jesus People movement in the early 1970s was determined to use spaces just as they were with little to no modifications.<sup>35</sup> John Wimber once told his Anaheim congregation that all he needed to start a contemporary church was, “a Bible, a teacher, and a rock band.”<sup>36</sup> With this casual connection to sacred space, the Contemporary movement created for itself a similar space challenge but at the opposite end of the spectrum from churches in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. In austere 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century cathedrals, one could experience awe and inspiration as well as a disorienting sense of separation from God in everyday life. Rote adherence to intricate liturgical practices could also leave congregants with a distant, confusing experience of God. By contrast, in the American Contemporary movement there was little delineation between normal life and church life. The issue became finding the sacred in a movement designed to offer comfort and imitate everyday life. Words like *auditorium*, *worship center*, and *stage* replaced terms like *sanctuary* and *altar*. In our building, the classic/traditional expression meets in our sanctuary and the contemporary/modern expression meets in the auditorium. How does a pastor bless worshippers as they exit a rented movie theater when they

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<sup>35</sup> Park, Ruth, Rethmeier, *Worshipping with the Anaheim Vineyard*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Park, Ruth, Rethmeier, *Worshipping with the Anaheim Vineyard*, 43.

may just stick around to catch the first film of the day? New church buildings were designed with suburban, mall-like features including food courts, bookstores, coffee shops, and massive parking lots.<sup>37</sup> Despite close to five decades of reworking of calendars, liturgies, and worship spaces, American Christians still struggle to communicate and live out the story of God together. The Contemporary worship movement drew many newcomers into faith communities yet created a new set of problems generated by the loss of tradition and historic liturgical expression.

### **Conclusion**

For over 2000 years, Christian liturgy continued to change and evolve. Early expressions rooted in local cultures drew upon their specific context to help worshippers rehearse and live out the story of God. As Christianity grew, so too did the demand to formalize liturgical expressions. This ultimately created spaces like cathedrals and basilicas that inspired awe and reverence yet at the same time, diminished local, “grassroots” liturgical expressions. Centuries later, the Contemporary movement renewed the less formal liturgies of the first century yet at the same time, rejected the power of liturgy to shape congregations and at times overlooked centuries of liturgical history. The story of God came through liturgies that emphasized certain elements based on their context and reaction to the historical moment in which their liturgists lived. In all every liturgy there exists power to decide and determine what gets expressed and by whom. Often, power plays a role in shaping liturgical expression. I will now explore the use and abuse of power in liturgies.

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<sup>37</sup> This information was provided on a tour of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois during the early 2000’s. Similar detail was replayed on a separate tour, ten years later, at Life Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A former executive from a major American retailer shared the vision behind their buildings and their plan for uniformity and consistency across the “brand” as was the case at that time among several retail chains.

## Chapter 3

### Compromised Liturgies, Fear and Abuse of Power

Walter Brueggemann and James K.A. Smith both suggest that we live in a world saturated with liturgies, some of which exist as direct competitors to the Christian narrative.<sup>1</sup> Beyond corporate worship, Smith and Brueggemann assert that liturgies order many events in modern life like political rallies, sporting events, network news, and television sitcoms.<sup>2</sup> While the term *liturgy* is a religious word, they argue that liturgical elements are often found outside of church worship services. In many cultural events we find an expected pattern of behavior, music, elements of call and response, corresponding attire, and a gathered focus on an object of affection like a politician or soccer club. Smith suggests that we are creatures born to love and we cannot help but worship because we were created as beings that must love something. Smith argues that so strong is the pull of secular liturgies that going about our daily lives puts us at ongoing risk of prostrating ourselves before other idols. He suggests we might come to church and fall in love with the God of our liturgy, but we might just as easily orient ourselves to love an object or idea from the marketplace.

The question human beings must ask is, what do you desire. Smith suggests, “You are what you love because you live toward what you *want*.”<sup>3</sup> What do we want? Why do we want it? How does living toward what we want impact others? Much of human flourishing hinges upon how we answer these questions. To flourish means that we are in right relationship with God and

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Materiality as Resistance: Five Elements for Moral Action in the Real World* (John Knox Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity.” *Christian Century*, March 24, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 13.

with one another as we find our place together in God's story. Flourishing echoes the Biblical idea of *shalom* and seeks peace with God and with others. As Smith notes, simply getting what we want, even if a spiritual pursuit, does not immediately equal flourishing or success. In fact, chasing what we desire can lead to addiction or it can serve as a distraction to avoid the pain points in our lives that need attention. Our desires can also lead us to overlook and injure others. True flourishing holds a desire for God that is honest and engages with the challenges and limits of being human. It expands our personal desires to include a desire for others to flourish. In a world filled with competing stories vying for our affection ultimately, God or another will receive our love. We live in a culture that is eager to offer, what Smith calls, secular liturgies that order our affections around anything other than God.

I believe the word *story* is a better fit to describe this tension than *liturgy*. Over time, liturgy became an exclusively religious term that intentionally carried forward Christian formation. For Smith and Brueggemann, while they identify several secular liturgies, most cultural events and experiences would not say they follow a liturgy. Most organizations they cite as purveyors of secular liturgy (like sports franchises or political rallies) would not use that term to define themselves. Liturgy, as a decidedly religious term, does not adequately portray the intention or expectation of those attending a public event, rally, or gathering. Rather than define them as liturgies that order our affections, these are public events that, through pattern and repetition, tell us the story of our lives. They teach us who we are as well as what and who to love and where we spend our time and resources. These are important stories; at times they collide with the Gospel and lead people away from the story of God. Like a liturgy, they rehearse part of a larger story, but the use of the term liturgy does not fit within broader cultural use of the term.

## The NFL as American Storyteller

The National Football League serves as perhaps one of the most prominent American examples of a secular event designed to tell a grand narrative as well as lead people to affection or even worship. NFL games always begin with a robust display of patriotism including a giant American flag paired with the National Anthem. This moment is quickly followed by a fight song, chants, and dance by a mascot as the home team enters through a tunnel with fans in matching jerseys hailing their players. As the next three hours unfold, the litany continues both in the stadium and for those watching from home who often wear the same jerseys and shout the same chants. On any given football Sunday, millions of Americans follow one or more of seventeen games designed to draw affection and dollars for the home team. I was born and raised a Chicago Bears fan. Commitment to team, game schedules, knowledge of players, and game day traditions is expected in my immediate and extended family. It is part of the social fabric for most of the community within which I live as well. The NFL tells stories of athleticism, power, and patriotism and Americans love it. Per Nielsen media research, in 2023, 93 of the top 100 most watched television programs were NFL games, up from 61 out of 100 in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Individuals, families, and at times entire communities orient their weekends around NFL games. As a personal anecdote, in my congregation we receive negative feedback on a worship liturgy that runs long only when they overlap with early kick off times or playoff games. We often plan significant Sunday morning worship experiences or announcements for Super Bowl Sunday because most of our people are in town that weekend in preparation for the game and therefore church attendance is higher on that Sunday.

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Fischer, "NFL Dominates What's Left of Live TV Viewership," Axios, January 7, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/01/07/nfl-tv-ratings-live-events-viewership>.

The story of professional football extends beyond the actual game. It tells a national story that holds a real or perceived value for American well-being. As such, it has been employed as a tool for escapism and a distraction from grief that is turned to in times of nationwide crisis as a tool to regroup and reunite the nation. In 1963, just 48-hours after President Kennedy's assassination, NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, in consultation with the President's Press Secretary, authorized the playing of Sunday games. The idea was that football could help bring the nation together. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the NFL skipped the upcoming Sunday then immediately resumed play. NFL expert Judy Battista writes,

With the NFL scrambling to reconfigure its schedule, teams returned after the off week to resume their seasons. The NFL wanted to create a feeling of coming together for the return to action. Jon Bon Jovi, flanked by firefighters, would sing America the Beautiful in front of one of the Manhattan fire houses that had suffered terrible losses, and video of the performance would be played in every stadium that weekend. Firefighters' boots would be passed through every crowd to raise money for a 9/11 fund.<sup>5</sup>

Of all the possible narratives to unite a nation after the 9/11 tragedy, Americans turned to football to unite them. American Football is one of the most powerful storytellers in the United States, perhaps rivaled in the world of sports only by the global power of professional soccer.

According to Smith, "Liturgies – whether 'sacred' or 'secular' – shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. They tell stories about who we are and how we are to live. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we love."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to explain that liturgies prime us to approach life in a particular way and to order our affections around those things. "Every liturgy constitutes a pedagogy that teaches us, in all sorts of precognitive ways, to be a certain

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<sup>5</sup> Judy Battista, "Remembering 9-11, This Wasn't the Time to Play Football," NFL Sidelines, September 7, 2021, <https://www.nfl.com/news/sidelines/remembering-9-11-this-wasn-t-the-time-to-play-football>.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 25.

kind of person.”<sup>7</sup> Liturgies tells us a story about who we are, even in secular settings that do not use the term liturgy, significant national events and pastimes train us to see ourselves as characters in a particular story. Those stories include social privileges and oppressions and liturgized patterns of behavior can uphold or challenge these stories. Secular liturgies shape national and local interests and desires. The example of American football organizes tens of millions of people around Friday Night Lights, College Game Day, and Any Given Sunday. They take time our calendars, impact our social gatherings, and reorder our spending priorities. Awareness of them is important because they intersect and interact with our Christian liturgies and the people who worship in our churches spend time in multiple stories all vying for their primary affection.

To engage with the NFL is not inherently wrong however, love for American football, when left unexamined, can teach us to be a kind of people who accept as normative a story that includes excessive acts patriotism, commitment to sport over health, and exploitation by white owners of players of color. Secular rituals and events have a dark side when their overarching narratives tell stories that promote nationalism, racism, or injustice. As we engage with and live within them, we must ask, to which story is this event leading me? What am I learning to love? What kind of person is this event or experience asking me to become? What does this story tell me about who I am and what is important? And how does that story unite with or compete with the story of God and God’s people?

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 25.

## Liturgies and Fear

Narratives driven by fear are direct competitors with God's story. Stories rooted in fear can create anxiety and suspicion of other. Even as fear comes from understandable places that inspire compassion like a tragic event, significant loss, or people raised in a culture that perpetuated other false narratives, fear still should not be the primary shaper and driver of liturgy. Brueggemann in his book, *Journey to the Common Good*, explains the significant role that the narrative of scarcity played in the life of Israel and the role it continues to play today, specifically in American Christianity. Scarcity creates fear and drives people to live from an anxious place. Brueggemann offers the Exodus narrative as both an origin and explanation for the way this posture played out in Israel's worshipping life.<sup>8</sup> Israel's driving memory begins in captivity submerged in fear. They are an exploited people who live with ongoing anxiety (Ex 1:10-22). As the Exodus narrative unfolds, Pharaoh continues to dehumanize the Israelites by cruel labor practices and murder of their newborn sons until God's plan for relief is in full, visible motion (Ex 3:10). As the Exodus journey unfolds, fear of scarcity is embedded into Israel's narrative and even as they emerge into freedom, memories of Egypt haunt them. Hoarding bread (Ex 16:20) or begging for a return to Egypt (Ex 16:3) reveal their understandable struggle to trust God's story of abundance. Even though God tangibly provided for their needs and promised to continue doing so, they could not shake their fear of scarcity and it was replayed in their worshipping life. Despite the long memory of their tradition, Israel held a short memory of God's provision.

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), ix.



Fear is a lens through which we can also understand the dominant American culture today. One of Jesus' most repeated commands throughout the New Testament is, "Do not fear" and yet, fear drives so many of the narratives by which Americans live. Even as the United States claims to be a nation of vast resources they are not evenly distributed as millions live in poverty and struggle with scarcity. Fear of scarcity is legitimate, whether real or perceived need.<sup>9</sup> Those in power, including places of power within Christian congregations and organizations, can perpetuate narratives of scarcity and inadvertently encourage withholding resources. Even among claims to be a "Christian nation," the story of God's concern for those on the margins has yet to be realized as worship liturgies can ignore need or justify inaction. Who gets prayed for in a liturgy? What needs are addressed? Is there confession for missteps that led to the marginalization of others? Is there opportunity for reconciliation or an invitation to give freely and care for other in the way of Jesus? What is said about the offering and where resources go? How congregations answer these questions can reveal the role fear of scarcity plays in shaping their story.

The American marketplace also stokes fear by reminding people of their inadequacies as it points to unattainable idols of power and status. This creates a chaotic intersection with the American church as it increasingly leans into corporate, marketplace strategies for growth. Advertising campaigns are often designed to perpetuate a sense of need and stoke fear by both convincing people of their lack and demanding a response to it. When we consider the fact that Americans are already saturated in fear-based marketing, adding another layer to it in our

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<sup>9</sup> Fear of scarcity is not always bad; at times it is a response to the very real conditions in which people work to survive when living without reliable access to food and shelter. I acknowledge this reality and honor liturgies that address true need and scarcity, however this section it is focused on the often-manufactured fear of scarcity created by the marketing and advertising of our time.

worship liturgies often goes unnoticed. Jonah Sachs is an advertising expert who created some of the most significant global campaigns for social change including for the ACLU and Greenpeace. In his research, Sachs describes playing to fear as “inadequacy marketing.” He writes,

All story-based marketing campaigns contain an underlying moral of the story and supply a ritual that is suggested to react to that moral. In inadequacy stories, the moral always begins with ‘You are not ...’ and plays off at least one negative emotion [greed, fear, lust]. In their early experiments, inadequacy marketers learned that they could easily invoke several of these emotions at once by designing stories in which the problems associated with each lack spelled disaster in the lives of reliable characters.<sup>10</sup>

In a traditional myth or story, the pending disaster Sachs describes is often overcome by the reliable, hard work of the lead character to triumph over their deficits. This is the hard work that makes for storybook heroes. Inadequacy marketing, according to Sachs, leaps over this hard, heroic work with a simpler solution. Inadequacy stories offer a quick fix for the long process of formative work. “To believe stories that tell us that objects can satisfy these deep feelings of inadequacy takes a tremendous feat of symbolic, mythical thinking. ... Tell a story that will create anxiety then introduce the magic solution.”<sup>11</sup> Afraid that you lack this? Buy that! When paired with rampant American individualism and competition, people fall prey to a fear-based story that believes another person’s success must mean their failure. There are only so many pieces of one pie. If you win, another loses.

This experience transfers over into worship when liturgies offer easy solutions to overcome grief, loss, or any of life’s struggles. Liturgies are also, inadvertently, marketing strategies in and of themselves. For example, the church has marketed sin, and liturgies can perpetuate shame when they emphasize or distort the narrative of the fall with an acute and

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<sup>10</sup> Jonah Sachs, *The Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell (and Live) the Best Stories Will Win the Future* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 88-89.

<sup>11</sup> Sachs, *Story Wars*, 90-91.

ongoing emphasis on that sin. Evangelical liturgies in particular focus on separation from God and emphasize the widening of this chasm often overlooking Jesus' invitation in John 15:15 to dwell with Christ in friendship. Friends do not hold shame over one another yet often, in Christian liturgies, we hold up sin and shame as a dominant part of God's story. I've seen this play out as liturgies also heap shame on people when they are reminded more of their brokenness and need rather than the love of God and the hope of the Gospel. American Christianity often shames people by focusing on what people have done wrong rather than on the God of abundance who lavishes love upon them.

Liturgies in the US, as with the dominant culture, are also tempted to move quickly past loss and grief. As actors in the story of the American marketplace, there is an appeal for liturgies to move on quickly or deny hardship. In his book *Prophetic Lament*, Walter Brueggemann notes this liturgical danger:

In civic culture, the loss of lament invites denial and so enhances the dominant social system as though it were beyond failure or critique. In the church, with such a loss, the gospel becomes one of unmitigated happiness where 'never is heard a discouraging word.' Many pastors, moreover, are paid to sustain exactly such a practice. But, of course, in prophetic realism (as with real life realism), such an illusion is unsustainable because there is much about which to lament, protest, and complain. The 'costly loss' is to sign on for the illusion of well-being, or a 'Theology of Glory' to the disregard of a summoning 'Theology of the Cross.'<sup>12</sup>

Saturated themselves in our dominant culture, unless worship leaders determine otherwise, liturgies can naively overlook lament or rush quickly through it seduced by a return to happiness and feel-good moments.

The pace of modern life adds a sense of urgency to liturgy as well. As in advertising, decisions must be made quick, act fast or the deal is gone and someone else will take your rightful place. Repent as soon as you can. Find the five ways to spiritual health as soon as

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 2001), 130.

possible. I recently heard a prayer inviting people to make a “decision for Christ today” because they might not wake up tomorrow morning. Another sermon indicated that God’s rescue of others relied heavily on our prayers. The preacher encouraged continual prayer suggesting that if one stopped praying, the person they prayed for might not receive salvation. The rescue of souls rested in our hands. Fear and competition are deeply ingrained in capitalist societies and people carry these postures with them into the pews. Miroslav Volf writes that in a capitalist, free-market society like the US, “Mainly we’re set up to sell and buy, not to give and receive. We tend to give nothing free of charge and receive nothing free of charge. . . Far too often, power – not fairness and certainly not generosity – is the name of the game.”<sup>13</sup> This posture infects our liturgies often without our knowing it. Volf continues, “Slowly and imperceptibly, the one true God begins acquiring the features of the gods of this world. For instance, our God simply gratifies our desires rather than reshaping them in accordance with the beauty of God’s own character. Our God then kills our enemies rather than dying on their behalf as God did in Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

Brueggemann suggests that in a chaotic, consumer-driven culture like the United States, there is hope that Christian liturgy can reorient congregations toward God’s alternative story of abundance:

There is an alternative to the kingdom of paucity – the practice of neighborhood. It is a covenantal commitment to the common good. Such an alternative is not an easy one, because the kingdom of scarcity is totalizing in its claim. The Biblical narrative, and much that is derivative from that narrative, is a sustained insistence on an alternative. That alternative is not easy or obvious or automatic. It requires a *departure*, an intentional departure from that system that the Bible terms ‘exodus.’ ... The capacity to think and imagine and act and live beyond that system requires imagination that has dimensions of the psychological, the economic, and the liturgical. Indeed, the core liturgy of Israel (Passover) and the derivative liturgies of the church are practiced departures that now and then take on reality in the world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Miroslav Volf *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Zondervan, 2005), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Volf, *Free of Charge*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, 30.

Christian liturgies provide these “practiced departures” when they include invitations for rest and space for gratitude as well as reflections on the abundant presence of God. Liturgies can provide an intentional departure from places in modern culture that are jealous and disorienting. Christian liturgies hold the possibility to reorient people to the story of an abundant God whose pathway to fidelity is not bred from fear.

The work of Christian liturgy, in part, is therefore the work of resistance against competing narratives. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells suggest worship and liturgy together is the lens through which Christians should think about and engage with the world in every sphere: “Worship, especially the Eucharist, offers a lens through which to see life.”<sup>16</sup> Worship as corporate practice can help Christian communities live into God’s story as they navigate the complexities of life. Congregations experience God’s counter-narrative when they gather for worship and work to bring their full presence to God and to one another. According to Hauerwas and Wells, “Blessing and breaking bread is the heart of the Christian response to what seem to be the most powerful forces in the world – such as war and capitalism.”<sup>17</sup> It is in the Church, in the act of Christian worship then, that individuals set aside what they know of scarcity and engage as a community with the story of God’s abundance.<sup>18</sup>

### **Ancient Stories for Modern People**

From the Reformation forward, pastors could at least assume regular church attendance, familiarity with a form of liturgy, and a basic understanding of Scripture and prayer.

Worshippers may not have been able to articulate exactly the role liturgy played in their lives,

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<sup>16</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*. Blackwell Companions to Religion. (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Hauerwas and Wells, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Hauerwas and Wells, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 13.

but they knew a certain body of practices could lead them personally into the presence of God. In the Medieval Church, liturgies and individual spiritual practices were often mediated by priests, passed down through generations. These practices were widely known because of social and cultural expectations for adherence to Christian worship. Priests could shape worship with an assurance that under these pressures, congregants would attend. While forcing worship is never a good idea, the intricacies for those creating liturgies were much different than from today. As Barna's research suggests, in the US today, when working to reach newcomers, pastors can no longer presume those who do attend church hold even a baseline understanding of the Christian story, let alone intimate knowledge about how their liturgy shapes that story. For all the transfer growth that takes place in American churches, there are still significant numbers of those in the pews who are entirely new to faith.<sup>19</sup> Burge's research on the nones reveals that the total share of religiously disaffiliated among Gen Z (roughly ages 12-25) is 48% while 22% of Gen Z are Protestant and 14% are Roman Catholics.<sup>20</sup> To be religiously disaffiliated in this age bracket makes it likely that Gen Z has not left the church, they have never been there in the first place. To reach the disaffiliated who decide to attend means worship leaders must teach their liturgy, we can no longer assume people who come to church know the history, tradition, or meaning behind any of the liturgical practices played out there.

For some, liturgy is experienced as a disconnected set of archaic practices that one mumbles through every seven days. James K.A. Smith tells the story of a young boy, Andrew, who weekly viewed the worship bulletin not as a guide, but as "a checklist to mark the droning

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<sup>19</sup> "A New Chapter in Millennial Church Attendance," Barna, August 4, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-2022/>.

<sup>20</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 83.

passage of time.”<sup>21</sup> Young Andrew is not alone. Some congregations do teach their liturgy to help congregants understand what they do every week, but most churches assume liturgical understanding by absorption. Historic prayers, creeds, or confessions are often read without an introduction or any supporting verbiage that might help a confused newcomer or even longtime attendee understand what is happening. In so doing, churches miss an incredible opportunity to instruct their congregations on the power of liturgy as story. African American liturgist Cole Arthur Riley writes, “When practiced well, religion—or more broadly, spirituality—has the capacity to tether incomprehensible mystery to the beauty and pain of the human heart. It is not the only way to do so, but it is one way.”<sup>22</sup> Teaching liturgical elements to congregations helps to guide worshippers into mystery.

If Christian liturgy is the work of resistance, as Hauerwas and Wells suggest, many congregations, particularly predominately white ones, struggle to understand exactly how their creeds, the eucharist, and baptism work let alone serve as acts of God’s resistance against empire. Black congregations may fully embrace that their liturgy is a work of resistance yet still struggle to teach how their hymns, prayers, and rituals like baptism further that work. Or they may carry forward elements exported from white congregations that when left without explanation or instruction, can inadvertently injure. Riley writes, “Liturgy can feel eerie, especially to those of us who know what it is to have a mob chant words in unison, not for beauty or mystery, but for destruction.”<sup>23</sup> A new worshipper in our church once remarked on how unsettling a moment of corporate prayer was for her. It was the beginning of a new school

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human* (Random House, 2024), xiii-xiv.

<sup>23</sup> Riley, *Black Liturgies*, xvi.

year, and we invited prayer for all the educators in our community. Because they were scattered throughout the room, we invited worshippers to lift their hands as a gesture of praying over people as we recited a unison prayer. At that moment, most of the congregation simply raised one arm high and then recited the prayer in unison. This gesture was extremely uncomfortable to the new attender I spoke with who was Jewish and whose grandmother was a Holocaust survivor.

Even congregations more attuned to inclusion of other their liturgical practices can still exclude and isolate. The DNA of many Black churches in the US holds a stronger commitment to activism and justice around race than is found in predominately white congregations yet many conservative Black congregations also hold positions of fear and exclusion that are misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist. The boldest statement I ever received against women serving as pastors came from a person of color who was leading an initiative to reclaim space in churches that he believed had been ruined by worship that was overly feminine. Both embrace and exclusion exist in congregational life and liturgies are a place both get played out. Pastors and worship leaders must teach how their liturgies demonstrate the ancient wisdom and redemptive stories they hold can inform life and overflow with God's narrative of abundance instead of fear and exclusion.

Abuse of power appears in liturgies when the personal agenda of a pastor, preacher, denomination, politician, or the dominant culture seeps into a narrative that perpetuates exclusion in the name of Jesus. Abuse of power can also be found in overt manipulation. Modern Christendom is rife with leaders who used the power of their platform to abuse others often as they presided over so-called Christian liturgies. Evidence of this failure can be seen today in the fall of high-profile Evangelical celebrity pastors like James MacDonald, Mark Driscoll, and Bill



Hybels whose liturgies propped up their own power and platform at the expense of other.

Research suggests that white American Mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Evangelicals consistently hold more racist views than those unaffiliated with any faith tradition, all while going regularly to worship. According to Public Religion Research Institute, a majority (54%) of white Evangelical Protestants believe that becoming a majority-nonwhite nation in the future will have negative consequences. More than half of Evangelical Protestants also believe that immigrants threaten American customs and values (57%). Almost half of white Mainline Protestants (48%) and Roman Catholics (47%) believe the same.<sup>24</sup> When those who hold the keys to worship planning harbor unjust and hateful perspectives toward others, the liturgies they control will lead people into stories that perpetuate injustice.

### **Liturgies that Oppress and Liturgical Acts of Resistance**

Throughout American history, liturgies were part of an arsenal to support dangerous ideologies. Within congregations that lacked literacy or the resources to study Scripture on their own, many worshippers, led to believe what they heard was the will of God, naively followed where their liturgy led. Prayers could be manipulated to subdue people of color, women, the under resourced or those who lacked even the most basic education. A misreading of Scripture to an illiterate congregation easily propped up systems of abuse. American slave owners regularly used their white Protestant liturgies to perpetuate myths of white superiority by invoking the name of God as the one who ordained it. The popular misinterpretation of Genesis 9:18-27,

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<sup>24</sup> Alex Vandermaas-Peeler et al., “Partisan Polarization Dominates Trump Era: Findings from the 2018 American Values Survey,” Public Religion Research Institute, October 29, 2018, <https://www.ppri.org/research/partisan-polarization-dominates-trump-era-findings-from-the-2018-american-values-survey/>.

known as “The Curse of Ham,” was propagated throughout the American antebellum period and sustained through liturgies.

In this myth, flawed theology set Noah up as an unquestioned patriarch and the exemplar of plantation life. Shem and Japeth were respectable siblings while Ham played the vilified brother and father of the dishonored African race. However, prominent as this myth was, Stephen Haynes, Professor of Religious Studies at Rhodes College, notes that rarely do pro-slavery documents from this period go into detailed exegesis on exactly how pro-slavery activists arrived at this conclusion, it was assumed by white pastors and pundits as truth without detailed exegetical work. The myth was typically repeated, quoted, and accepted without any substantiating proof. When centering discussions on race around this myth, white slave owners brought this position into in the public square without supporting material where it was widely accepted and unquestioned. Haynes notes that this narrative of Noah and Ham met the need for a Biblically based intellectual argument for the proslavery movement without any robust Biblical exegesis: “Because many antebellum proslavery intellectuals sought a rationale for the *perennial* servitude of Ham’s descendants, they sought to uncover a sin that merited punishment as long as sinful human institutions endured.”<sup>25</sup> For slave owners and those who benefitted from that system of abuse, this myth became God’s ordained and therefore unquestioned narrative in their rehearsal of God’s story.

Passages like Ephesians 6:5-8 were also regular features of plantation liturgies and in congregations throughout the American South:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, “Original Dishonor: Noah’s Curse and the Southern Defense of Slavery,” *The Journal of Southern Religion*, 3 (2000). <https://jsr.fsu.edu/honor.htm>.

Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. (Eph 6:5-8)

Taken out of context and preached to a captive audience, Ephesians six appears to support pro slavery ideologies. Thornton Stringfellow, pastor of the Stevensburg Baptist Church in Virginia, is perhaps one of the most notorious clergymen who used a ministry platform and passages like this to advocate for the institution of slavery. Both a pastor and slaveowner himself, he used his pulpit and influence to promote bondage in the name of God. His theology held that a proper reading of the Bible would reveal the four following “truths” about slavery:

- 1) The sanction of the Almighty in the Patriarchal age.
- 2) That it was incorporated into the only National Constitution which ever emanated from God.
- 3) That its legality was recognized, and its relative duties regulated, by Jesus Christ in his kingdom.
- 4) That it is full of mercy.<sup>26</sup>

Through his ministry and detailed essays, Stringfellow’s version of God’s story taught white supremacy and led white men to believe they were superior and justified in perpetuating the horrific institution. His liturgies did not serve the story of God but instead, served the pro slavery ideologies of his time that elevated white establishments, and the commerce generated by enslaved people.

When white slave owners presided over plantation worship, white preachers could manipulate Scripture, choirs could instill fear through hymns, and liturgists could pray for the ongoing submission of slaves to their owners. Christian liturgies became vehicles for oppression and abuse. For 300 years, many colonial Christian liturgies operated on a theological distortion that elevated white bodies above all other. As Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah write, “This sinful expression [elevation of white bodies] racializes the image of God and links God’s image

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<sup>26</sup> “A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery, in an Essay, First Published in the Religious Herald and Republished by Request: with Remarks on a Letter of Elder Galusha, of New York, to Dr. R. Fuller, of South Carolina by Thornton Stringfellow,” *Documenting the American South* from the Academic Affairs Library at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2000.

to whiteness. Whiteness becomes the embodiment of all that is good, true, and honorable, including the positive godly attribute of self-governance and the desire to spread this form of godliness to savages.”<sup>27</sup> Centuries of abuse were perpetuated at the hands of white Christian ministers and the legacy of this abuse is still expressed in liturgies today.

It is little wonder then, that there is a disconnect today between many white Protestant liturgies in the US and the lived experiences of people of color. Cole Arthur Riley writes about her experience on the Sunday after George Floyd’s murder when she logged into an online service at a white Episcopal church. As she watched from her bed with deep sadness, she shared the fact that some days it is hard to recite the prayers of a white man, “Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the Book of Common Prayer at a time when my ancestors were being abducted, alienated from one another, and enslaved would not be an anchor for me that day. He was incapable of speaking to my pain. Black grief, Black hope in a voice I could trust. I wanted more.”<sup>28</sup> White pastors are often unaware of this liturgical disconnect or unable to engage well with it.

Robert Louis Gates, Jr. notes the way resistance to white liturgies took shape inside of Black liturgies when owners allowed enslaved communities to worship on their own. Black liturgies became a source for survival. Where white liturgies sought to suppress, Black liturgies lived into God’s call to resist. Gates writes,

The miracle of African American survival can be traced directly to the miraculous ways that our ancestors – across a wide range of denominations and through the widest variety of worship – reinvented the religion that their “masters” thought would keep them subservient. Rather, that religion enabled them and their descendants to learn, to grow, to develop, to interpret and reinvent the world in which they were trapped ...<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Charles and Rah, *Unsettling Truths*, 85.

<sup>28</sup> Riley, *Black Liturgies*, xvi.

<sup>29</sup> Gates, Jr. *The Black Church*, xviii.

Gates asserts that accepting the fear and scarcity pressed upon them, slave communities curated their own songs, prayers, chants, and music to both keep alive God's promise of redemption as well as serve as vehicles to carry forward the work of resistance. The Exodus story that illustrated a fear of scarcity in some congregations helped hold enslaved communities together. Hidden messages of resistance could be found throughout many Black liturgies that went unnoticed even under the eye of white owners. The Jordan River might become the Mississippi or Ohio Rivers with cues to rebellion or the Underground Railroad. When Harriet Tubman sang of safe passage to Jordan and a speedy trip home, white slaveowners heard heaven. Tubman's song, meanwhile, was a spiritual of her own farewell and prayer for a very tangible quick passage to a free state.<sup>30</sup> Even as white liturgies worked to subdue and dominate enslaved people, Black liturgies offered a place for unity and resistance to bring freedom and hope. Gates also notes the work of confronting white supremacy during the Civil Rights movement, "Black churches confronted a burning restlessness in their members, a restlessness rooted in this world and not in the next, one bent on freeing Black people from the strictures of segregation and granting them full participation in the country that their ancestors had built with no remuneration, no gratitude, and no acknowledgement of their humanity."<sup>31</sup> As African Americans eventually began to move north during the Great Migration (1900-1970) they brought with them their faith and their liturgies that worked for dignity, voice, resistance, and an end to oppression, much of which is still present in Black church liturgies today.

In April of 2015, the day after Freddie Gray was killed in police custody I naively came to work as if it was an ordinary morning. My duties for the day included finalizing liturgy for the

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<sup>30</sup> Sarah Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*, (Lockwood & Son, 1886), 28.

<sup>31</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 110.

following Sunday. I regret that, a full decade ago, it had not occurred to me at that time to pair the loss of Freddie Gray to the upcoming liturgy beyond a moment of prayer for his family and to end violence. We would mark the moment with a brief statement, pray, and then move on. My African American colleague stopped me that morning and I am forever changed because of the way, through tears and gritted teeth, she boldly called out my privilege that allowed me to decide whether I wanted to see or feel this pain or carry on as usual. I followed her into her office where she shared her profound grief and what a loss like Freddie Gray's meant for her community. She told me frankly how coming to work at a mostly white church that day was excruciating for her because hardly anyone acknowledged the event let alone offered to share space around it. She struggled to find solidarity and support among our staff. As her white colleagues we did not intentionally avoid her pain, but we naively overlooked it. This naivete would have played out in our liturgy had she not challenged our thinking.

White Protestant worship overtly perpetuates narratives of injustice when liturgies allow those injustices to continue unnamed by overlooking or dismissing abuses of power, grief or loss. These liturgical missteps can simply slip past certain white worshippers while the refusal to acknowledge racial injustice is a clear and recognizable offense to others. Our staff listened and responded. We stopped our routines and called a special gathering to pray and listen. We then adjusted our liturgies for the weekend and created a service of lament that opened a space to share stories and process both the loss of Freddie Gray as well as ongoing police violence. The revised liturgy was met with mixed emotions. Many in our congregation and particularly people of color were grateful for the space to lament. They indicated that they felt seen and known and loved. At the same time, members of our congregation who serve in law enforcement were frustrated, they felt like we did not fully explore the complexity of what it means to serve in that

profession. Liturgies as they seek to comfort some can discomfort others. This is not always a bad thing. We took the tension from that liturgy and instead of avoiding it we put together a panel discussion for the following week where two African Americans engaged in dialogue with two white police officers. It was a profound moment of learning. The tension did not evaporate and to be honest did not ease up as much as we hoped. However, many of the people who experienced our liturgies and engaged at least began to see one another as beloved in Christ and as people called to relationship rather than as enemy. Liturgies can provide a remarkable catalyst to help draw people together, call out violence, confess, lament, and open space for dialogue, understanding, and they can also make others angry and alienated.

Another example of liturgies that oppress is found in the Native American boarding school system that was part of the American political and social agenda throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The role that white Protestant churches played, specifically as they interacted with the socio-political pressure at that time, illustrates another shocking way that the gospel narrative can be appropriated. The Civilization Fund Act of 1819 created the forced assimilation of Native children through boarding schools that were run by the US government as well Protestant and Catholic Missionaries. Policymakers held the nightmarish belief that Native communities must be Americanized by forcibly removing Native children from their families and placing them in boarding schools. In total, the federal government ran 408 boarding schools in 37 states, it is estimated that roughly 50% of these were run by Roman Catholic or Protestant missionaries with the rest led by the federal government.<sup>32</sup> Religious boarding schools were run by trained clergy who were professionally shaped by the liturgies they then presided over.

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<sup>32</sup> Department of Indian Affairs, *Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report*, by Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Bryan Newland, May 2022.

Christian missionaries around the world employed liturgies that told a story condemning Native cultures as deficient demanding they submit to the authority of white Protestant and Roman Catholic religious leaders. Their story of God advocated for oppression and forced assimilation to such an extent that they could justify breaking up families and separating children from their parents.

Whether worship on plantations, in boarding schools, or in the secret places God's people gathered to survive, Christian liturgies were either weapons for division and hatred or a balm for the communities that needed their hope. Congregations must work within their liturgies to redeem them and bring them once again to love of God and other. When driven by fear and specifically, fear of scarcity, worship can dominate and injure, and it can extinguish the voices and stories of other. When infused with the narrative of God's abundance liturgies offer the alternative story of God to listen to one another, name tension, and work toward the story of redemption, hope, and justice. Of course, there are no liturgies that can ever fully achieve these ideals but in my twenty years of pastoral ministry I have seen how opening the planning process to consider adding a service of lament, making space for discussion, or stopping for prayer in the middle of a busy day can rehearse the Gospel story in the lives of God's people.

### **Messaging in Contemporary and Sacred Music**

Stories of individualism and scarcity as well as messages that offer a romanticized version of God or heaven are found in liturgies through song lyrics. Both contemporary and sacred worship music are guilty of agendized or navel gazing lyrics that rehearse an anemic version of God's story. In my Reformed tradition, we believe worship hymns and songs should ultimately rise to a focus on God's glory, the goal is music that leads a congregation toward this divine locus. Discussions about worship music today, both inside and outside my tradition, call



into question lyrics that perpetuate a narrative of scarcity as well as idealized images of God. Canadian Matt Maher's well-known worship song, *Lord, I Need You* is one modern example. Lyrically driven by *I* instead of *we*, worshippers sing together with a focus on grace, righteousness, and perseverance from an individual perspective:

**Lord, I come, I confess**

Bowing here, I find my rest  
Without You, I fall apart  
You're the one that guides my heart.

**Lord, I need You, oh, I need You**

Every hour, I need You  
My one defense, my righteousness  
Oh God, how I need You.

**Where sin runs deep, Your grace is more.**

Where grace is found is where You are  
And where You are, Lord, I am free  
Holiness is Christ in me

**Lord, I need You, oh, I need You**

Every hour, I need You  
My one defense, my righteousness  
Oh God, how I need You.

**So, teach my song to rise to You.**

When temptation comes my way  
And when I cannot stand, I'll fall on You  
Jesus, You're my hope and stay.

**Lord, I need You, oh, I need You**

Every hour, I need You  
My one defense, my righteousness  
Oh God, how I need You  
You're my one defense, my righteousness  
Oh God, how I need You.<sup>33</sup>

I loved this song when it arrived on the American worship scene. The music was easy to sing, the lyric was quick to catch. After singing it in our services for a year I finally stopped to wonder about the lyrics and if they were leading us to the place God's story wanted to take us. While a

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<sup>33</sup> Matt Maher and Audrey Assad, *Lord I Need You*, from *All the People Said Amen*, (Brentwood: Capitol CMG, 2013).

worshipper might sing this in a room filled with other voices, lyrically they are engaging the issues of life from a personal angle without praise to God. There is not a single strong declaration of God's character in this song, it points to God's character based on what God will do for us, but no declaration of God's goodness for God's sake. Temptation comes to the *I*, not *we* and Jesus is presented as the hope and stay for the individual worshipper rather than the whole community. Ultimately, *we* need to come before God together with confession, repentance and praise God for who God is. Human need, deficit, and desire are prominent themes without the companion of praise and gratitude for the Giver.

Fanny Crosby and Phoebe Palmer's beloved hymn, *Blessed Assurance*, is an example of a gospel hymn that holds a romanticized image of God. A much beloved tune from American church history as well as in my own congregation, when we plan worship from our Reformed perspective, we struggle with the lyrics. They focus on the theology of personal salvation and personal response to God instead of declaring God as the object of our worship. The call to "perfect submission and perfect delight" also sets up an idealized version of faith where a person who is in Jesus is supposed to feel happy and blessed or can praise one's savior all day long.<sup>34</sup> What happens when we follow Jesus but do not feel happy and blessed? If we are invited to praise our savior all day long, what does that look like? What do we say? Is this even possible?

Contemporary songs like *Young and Free – Best Friend* by Hillsong United, *Undignified* by David Crowder, and *Here I am to Worship* by Tim Hughes rose in popularity through the American Contemporary movement and are regularly sung by millions of Christians around the world. They are not inherently bad songs, and they point to some beautiful truths about God but where they land in a liturgy matters greatly. Their lyrics ask God to help with individual needs,

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<sup>34</sup> Fanny Crosby and Phoebe Palmer, *Blessed Assurance*, from *Gems of Praise* No. 1 by John R. Sweney, (1873).

individual worship, and at times, underscore a sense of personal inadequacy or lack. While there is a personal element and perspective in worship that is appropriate, Scripture offers a better example of how a personal experience can be offered in song for the sake of community. King David wrote many of his psalms from a place of individual need yet the result of David's worship music and its use in Israel's liturgical life was to draw the whole community together in worship of God. Psalm 22 opens with a personal lament, "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1) but leads to a call for all generations and people to bow down together in worship. "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations." (Ps 22:27-31) In this Psalm, David's personal experience was a catalyst for communal worship and praise to God. Worship music occupies significant space in most North American liturgies and worship planners must consider where their lyrics lead and which version of God's story they tell. Critique of worship music is an ongoing conversation in the Contemporary movement. A musical tradition birthed from a reaction against historical liturgies while flirting with American consumerism can create a liturgical tension that worship planners must navigate.<sup>35</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Elements within a liturgy can overlook or promote systems of injustice and perpetuate narratives of fear and scarcity. For centuries they were held as weapons in the hands of worship planners to establish and prop up systems that injured and harmed many people of color, women,

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<sup>35</sup> As a liturgist who planned contemporary liturgies for over a decade, I attended many conferences and gatherings where this topic was discussed. From within the genre there is a well-known tension between orthodox lyrics and lyrics that are easy to sing and catch.

and marginalized communities. Prayers that tip toward Christian nationalism can be recited in liturgies. Processionals that include the American flag or prayers for national supremacy run the risk of putting nation over God. Prayers of confession that refuse to acknowledge the actions that led to injustice and violence prop up one people group over another. From navel gazing music to bold declarations like praying against others illustrate the ways that Christian liturgies, instead of offering an alternative story of hope hold the risk of rehearsing harmful narratives.

Every liturgy tells a story about God and about the people who worship together in that congregation. Liturgies can point us toward God's love and grace and lead us to acts of reconciliation and advocacy or, they can point us to stories of nationalism, power, and individualism fueled by fear. Many of the social and political agendas designed to diminish people of color were propped up by white European Protestant liturgies. White European liturgies were complicit in colonizing and abusing others. Following this exploration of the power for good and harm that exists within liturgies, I will now shift my focus to the weight three specific liturgical elements: the call to worship, benediction, and the sermon can carry as they tell the generous, redemptive, reconciling story of God. I will also offer practical examples to use these elements in worship as well as carry them as habits into life beyond corporate worship.

## Chapter 4

### Call to Worship, The Story of a Gathered People

Like chapters in a book, each liturgical element tells a unique part of God's story. For example, the call to worship speaks of a welcoming and gathering God, the assurance of pardon the story of a forgiving God, eucharist a communal and sustaining God. Opportunities for transformation can occur when connections are made between the story rehearsed in church and the story lived in everyday life. All of us get tangled up and can struggle to find the words to name our lived experiences. Pastors who teach their liturgy in worship as well as extend that teaching into ordinary moments provide an opportunity for ongoing formation and transformation. Liturgy is an anchor and when we teach it, we can help give words to the experiences that tether us to the Gospel and to one another. As Cole Arthur Riley writes about one of her liturgical experiences during the peak of her depression, "I could rise and sit and kneel and speak or not speak in this sacred theater that others had written the script for. I could let others hold a sacred imagination for me."<sup>1</sup> Each liturgical element creates this sacred space in different ways. In this chapter I will explore the call to worship and how it rehearses the story of the God who gathers.

#### Ears to Hear

One afternoon I stood on the front porch and watched as our school bus screeched to a halt. The doors squawked open, and teenagers tumbled onto the sidewalk with my sixteen-year-old among them. They giggled and elbowed one another all making their way home, everyone wearing ear buds. At the same time, bells from the church just a few blocks away started to peal

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<sup>1</sup> Riley, *Black Liturgies*, xv.

out a hymn. My mind raced to place the melody just as my son opened the front door. “Hey buddy, do you recognize that song?” Self-conscious he assumed my question was critical, “Wait! You can hear the music in my ear buds!?” My litany of questions continued. “No, not *your* music, did you hear the bells? They were playing that hymn from church. Did you hear it? *How Great Thou Art?*” The earnestness I felt for him to recognize that song was layered, the urgency of history combined with a strange desperation for his generation hear something, anything holy ringing through the air.

There are few sounds that can stir a Christian soul like the deep reverberation of church bells, if you can hear them ring. Throughout the centuries when bells tolled some heard the chime and absorbed it as blessing while others heard the distant metal echo of grief and grave. Bells invite people to celebration and joy, or they can recall abuse or rejection suffered at the hands of a church. Bells summon, invoke, warn, and gather and in so doing, have long held an iconic place in Western music and literature. *The Bells*, by Edgar Allen Poe, famously captured the spectrum from tintinnabulation to throb as Poe wrote of the merriment and terror revealed in their ring. Longfellow’s joy at the bells on Christmas Day is met a century later in Don McLean’s grief as he sang *American Pie*, “But not a word was spoken, the church bells all were broken.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout centuries of Western Christianity cathedral bells perched atop hillsides and at the centers of town summoned people to encounter the presence of the Divine. In Victor Hugo’s classic, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* he writes about the marvelous experience of hearing those bells, “Say if you know anything in the world more rich, more joyful, more golden, more overwhelming than the tumult of bells, than that furnace of music, than those ten thousand

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<sup>2</sup> Don McLean, “American Pie,” October 24, track #1 on *American Pie*, United Artists Records, 1971, album.

voices of bronze singing all at once from flutes of stone three hundred feet high.”<sup>3</sup> Today, perhaps for the first time since cathedrals were built, a generation can walk through their local neighborhood and completely miss their grandiose ring. The bells that afternoon summoned a nearby Lutheran congregation for a special worship service, yet their notes floated past my son and his friends without notice. While they were not members of that church and would not have attended the service, the simple reminder that somewhere nearby people were gathering in the name of Jesus was lost on them. In an increasingly digital and secular age, gathering people for worship is an increasingly elusive task.

### **Why Christian Communities Gather**

Gathering simply means a moment when two or more people come together for a purpose. It can be the casual or social connection of friends and family, or it can be an organizational meeting or event with a formal or informal purpose. To gather is an act that transcends all human history. We are social creatures who need community and gathering keeps us healthy and connected. The challenges facing those in social isolation is well documented.<sup>4</sup>

Priya Parker is the founder of Thrive Labs and an internationally known research expert on the power of gathering. In her book, *The Art of Gathering*, she writes, “Gatherings consume our days and help determine the kind of world we live in, in both our intimate and public realms.

Gathering—the conscious bringing together of people for a reason—shapes the way we think,

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<sup>3</sup> Hugo, Victor, Walter J. Cobb, and Graham Robb. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Signet Classics, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. See also National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 2022. *Racial and Ethnic Differences in Social Determinants of Health and Health-Related Social Needs Among Adults*. Atlanta: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

feel, and make sense of our world.”<sup>5</sup> She goes on to note the inherent power that gathering holds, “In countries descending into authoritarianism, one of the first things to go is the right to assemble. Why? Because of what can happen when people come together, exchange information, inspire one another, test out new ways of being together.”<sup>6</sup> There is tremendous power socially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually when people gather.

Gathering for corporate worship to rehearse the story of God alongside others is the central act of Christianity. This gathering can happen in any space where two or more are come together to honor God (Mt 18:20). It can happen in prisons and shelters among the unhoused or undocumented as well as in trendy coffee shop churches in suburban settings. In worship Christians join with one another to honor their God, to understand God’s mission in the world, and to serve the needs of that world. While it is impossible for any liturgy to fully express the Gospel as liturgies always come to us through fallible human hands, if and when people gather as honestly as possible and work to submit their own personal agenda and ideologies to the good of the whole, corporate worship might just crack open a tiny glimpse into the divine community of God.

Corporate worship creates a space to pass along the shared history and rituals that take place within Christian worship. As I noted in the previous chapter, sometimes this history is marred by racism, colonialism, sexism, etc. But gathered worship by any people at any time is also an attempt to receive a communal experience of God that is possible only when the people of God together submit themselves both to God and to one another. The writer of Hebrews

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<sup>5</sup> Priya Parker is the founder of Thrive Labs, an organization that trains nonprofits, elected officials, activists, and corporate executives on how to create transformative gatherings. Parker worked for improving race relations on American college campuses and peace processes in the Arab world as well as in southern Africa and India. The daughter of a Buddhist mother and a conservative evangelical father, Parker’s work often refers to or includes research on religious gatherings including Christian churches.

<sup>6</sup> Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters* (Riverhead Books, 2020), x.



affirms this ideal when they state how this goodness might play out as Christians gather: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Heb 10:23-25)

When Christians gather, they can also experience a glimpse of the diverse worship of eternity. Revelation imagines an eternal gathering where every tongue and tribe and nation are united in one place: “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” (Rv 7:9) In corporate worship we receive a foretaste of this global, enduring adoration. Christian worship holds the potential to rehearse this sacred inclusivity. It holds the possibility to be the first place where every story is welcomed regardless of socio-economic status, sexual identity, race, age, ability, language, etc. In practice of course, Christian worship is often a place where human divisions are acutely expressed and even underscored. This is a sharp contrast from the work of reconciliation Paul wrote about in Ephesians, “His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” (Eph 2:15-16) The gathering of God’s people is meant to be an inclusive foretaste of eternal worship.

It is in the gathered assembly that congregations can learn to listen to others and for God in others. This listening has always been difficult, and humanity has long divided itself, but God reveals something of Godself in corporate worship that is not discernable outside of that togetherness. Worship holds the possibility of seeing God through our connection with others in a different way than when we are alone. When Christians gather, it is not simply for the sake of

camaraderie as friends might have at a dinner party. Christians gather in worship for a divine purpose, to rehearse the alternative Kingdom of God. Parker suggests that gatherings become meaningful when they create “a temporary alternative world” that happens only once.<sup>7</sup> What is it that only this collection of people can do on this one day at this one time?<sup>8</sup> However, for Christians, the alternative world they gather to serve is more than a one-time meeting. Every single time Christians meet in the gathered assembly their liturgy holds the possibility to offer a glimpse of the alternative world that is God’s Kingdom on earth. In Luke 2:41-52 we see Jesus enjoying this very fellowship as he stayed behind in the temple courts listening and learning from his community. Here we might imagine a young Jesus sitting among the people soaking up the ancient wisdom of those who came before him. Even as a child who was fully God, Jesus submitted himself to the power of the gathered assembly.

Throughout the New Testament, the word *ekklesia* is the most common Greek translation for the word church. Not originally a religious term, *ekklesia* simply meant an assembly of people, often for political purposes or gathered around a public figure presenting a speech.<sup>9</sup> In his essay on Christian worship, Phillip Kenneson defines *ekklesia* as, “any assembly gathered to engage in important business.” Kenneson’s use of *ekklesia* is significant in that he defines it as a gathering in which, “the disciples of Jesus Christ learn the skills, convictions, and dispositions that animate its life in the world. It is within this communal form of life that it learns how to make the prudential judgments necessary for living out the *ekklesia*’s mission in the world: to be an embodied sign and foretaste of God’s continuing work of reconciliation and healing in the

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<sup>7</sup> Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Mounce *Greek Dictionary*, “ekklesia,” accessed July 6, 2024, <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/ekklesia>.

world.”<sup>10</sup> In Acts *ekklesia* identifies the coming together of the early church some twenty-three times. In Matthew, Jesus famously tells Peter that, “On this rock, I will build my *ekklesia*, and the gates of hades will not overpower it.” (Mt 16:18) Jesus himself consistently gathered and invited people together around a meal or his teaching. In Luke 24, after leaving the Emmaus Road, it is gathered around the table late one evening when two travelers discover they had been walking with Jesus, “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” (Luke 24:30-31). Filled with joy over their encounter with the risen Lord, “They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” (Lk 24:33-34) Shortly after this moment Jesus himself joins their gathering and stands among them. In *ekklesia* Jesus reveals himself to his people.

At a time in church history without formal buildings or sanctuaries, the location for *ekklesia* was more fluid than perhaps it is in the United States today. It was more common to be in an assembly of believers in prison, in the hospitality of a stranger, or with extended families worshipping in a private home. British New Testament scholar James Dunn writes,

The focus of ‘church’ is given by its character as ‘assembly.’ This is probably the focus of Paul’s talk of believers “coming together in church.” For, obviously, Paul did not think of ‘in church’ as ‘in a building.’ He thought rather of Christians coming together to be church, as church. It was not as isolated individuals that believers functioned as ‘the church of God’ for Paul. Rather, it was only as a gathering, for worship and for mutual support, that they could function as ‘the assembly of God.’<sup>11</sup>

As Dunn suggests, the New Testament *ekklesia* happened whenever the people of God were together. “Going to church” today means typically involves going to a building, this

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<sup>10</sup> Hauerwas and Wells, *Christian Ethics*, 58-59.

<sup>11</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Eerdmans, 2006), 542.

was not what Paul had in mind when he wrote about *ekklesia*. For the church in Acts, it was both the being and doing of this community that gave it divine purpose and meaning regardless of physical sanctuaries, worship centers, altars, sacristies, naves, fonts, or any other structures and objects we might use today.

### **Gathering and Mission**

When Christians gather, God's mission in the world can be revealed in a unique way. Gordon Lathrop, ELCA Pastor and Professor for Liturgical Studies, tells a story of the bell that once perched atop his Lutheran church in Luck, Wisconsin. Destroyed by fire in 1985, the inscription on the bell was of particular interest and delight for Lathrop. Of all the statements that could be placed upon this bell, the congregation at Luck believed the invitation to gather was most important. They wrote and etched into it a poem calling the people together,

To the bath and the table,  
To the prayer and the word,  
I call every seeing soul.<sup>12</sup>

Convinced that Christian worship is active not passive Lathrop wrote about this poem, "I call every seeking soul" to gather in that place. To assemble to sing, to celebrate, to do penance, to eat the holy meal, to pray. To *do* things. To meet to do the central things of the Church. Not passively to watch actions, but to join in doing them. These actions are called the liturgy, and we do them still today."<sup>13</sup> There is a work of the people, a doing, that can only be offered to God when people are drawn together into holy community. This is, in part, what makes Christian worship distinctly different from any other gathering and in fact, the sort of gathering that in turn

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<sup>12</sup> Lange and Vogel, *Ordo*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> Lange and Vogel, *Ordo*, 59.

can shape others. In Luke 14, Jesus offers a lesson on how the way people gather in worship can shape other moments in life:

Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.' (Lk 14:12-14)

Jesus' example models the inclusive, invitational posture Christians should strive to hold toward others; a posture they can learn to practice every week in worship. To Lathrop's point, Christians are called into worship to *do* the things of God and then to do those things in the world for the sake of others. They are to actively participate in both inviting and serving the world through their gathering. Christian worship should immediately include others and should also inspire a posture of service. Of course, as discussed in the previous chapter, church history is littered with examples of congregations that got this wrong but the ideal remains. Christian liturgy should work to gather and include in the name of the God who does the same.

Today, like Lathrop's bell, thousands like it ring across communities to call the seeking souls of our time to gather for the worship and glory of God yet like my son's classmates, these gathering chimes go increasingly unheard. Among the struggles facing the church today is a simple lack of awareness that churches anywhere are gathering to do anything. The bells may still echo but their sound is lost in an American culture filled with competing noise and confusion. What does this group of Christians believe? Are they a political cult? Does their God exist or even matter to my life? As Kaemingk and Willson note, during the Middle Ages the marketplace was regularly interrupted by church bells to invite workers to take a pause and reorient themselves to God. Throughout much of church history, the liturgical calendar was the resource around which life happened. Today, "modern workers speed up or slow down, relax or

toil according to the liturgical calendar of their industry – not the church.”<sup>14</sup> Today, the invitations to worship that call people to gather are increasingly unheard, unknown, or ignored.

### **The Call to Worship**

Before the people of God can do the corporate worship and work of God, they must be both gather and choose to engage together in what will happen next, which is a near impossible task. Getting people to show up to church is arduous and once they arrive, few can manage focus for any length of time. Understandably, the realities of life have us all distracted. As bells or any other summons pull people into their respective congregations it is the call to worship that attempts to carry this herculean weight of shifting the focus of God’s people toward communal praise and adoration. The call to worship indicates a change is taking place. In some liturgies this element includes the lighting of a candle on the altar, or a musical processional led by a liturgist or choir. In other traditions a cross enters the sanctuary first followed by the Gospel. In many charismatic traditions, this moment can fill a sanctuary with shouts of joy and expressions that include dancing, flag waving, and spontaneous words of praise offered across the room by congregants.

In our early 20’s my husband and I worshipped together at the church where he was raised. His childhood church was one of several charismatic congregations with roots in an Italian Pentecostal tradition known as the *Christian Congregation in the United States*. Comprised of many first-generation Italian immigrants this congregation worshipped together with whoops and hollers of joy and arms raised high. The call to worship took place when the first note on the piano was played and everyone immediately rose to their feet shouting or

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Kaemingk and Cory B. Willson, *Work and Worship: Reconnecting our Labor and Liturgy*, (Baker Academic, 2020), 44.

muttering words of gratitude and adoration. They immediately lifted their arms and voices in praise, most praising and speaking in Italian as they hugged and kissed anyone who was late arriving to their pew. I experienced here a tradition that was loud, expressive, vibrant, and that included multiple languages and generations. Their call to worship was less solemn and more exuberant than the Reformed liturgies within which I had spent significant time. Regardless of the grandiosity or processional, in most Reformed American churches, the call to worship centers on the recitation of Scripture in song or spoken word. Casual pleasantries and greetings are, in theory, diminished in favor of corporate focus on the holiness of God. As Hauerwas and Wells write about this liturgical element, “That God’s purposes and initiative, rather than their own, are the focal point of their gathering is underscored by the call to worship, which appropriately uses words from Scripture to remind those gathered that they do so in response to God’s call on their lives.”<sup>15</sup>

1 Peter 2:9-10 reminds us of our focus on the God who gathers, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” A call to worship can remind those gathered that the Christian story is of a God who made the first move toward humanity and called them into a people, those blessed to be a blessing. God extended to humanity the first invitation to gather, and our response is awe, joy, praise, reverence, and gratitude for the gift of God’s presence. The call to worship sets this tone for the remainder of the liturgy. Priya Parker writes, “We all carry with us the technical capacity to be anywhere, to check out of the present time and space. This means we always could be

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<sup>15</sup> Hauerwas and Wells, *Christian Ethics*, 61.

doing anything. So, the active choice to do ONE thing and to do it with a fixed set of people is significant.”<sup>16</sup>

The weight of what humanity gets to do when gathered for worship is often lost in a sea of rival affections. It can be hard to heed Peter’s urgency when people arrive late, are dragged to church by others, or understandably arrive preoccupied by the weight and complexity from any number of struggles; children get in trouble, bills need to be paid, workdays and long and tiring. It can be hard to focus let alone proclaim praises to God from a place of grief, loss, or worry. Beyond this reality is the fact that in some congregations, the liturgy can feel rote and uninteresting, it might be easy to forget why one is there in the first place. It is not uncommon to hear people quip that they don’t mind being late to church because it means they skip a bit of the routine. Annie Dillard once commented on this blasé approach to worship:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.<sup>17</sup>

As Dillard suggests, honest, gathered worship is dangerous. It requires us to enter the presence of a God who loves us and from that place of love, requires a response from us. A well-crafted, strong call to worship can help set this tone and as the first liturgical element it demands we best pay attention. It calls the gathered assembly to work at focusing and immediately sets about the work of honoring God. Whether in a tiny house church, shelter, or under the rafters of a sweeping cathedral, God is present, and the weighty task before the liturgist is to lead the work

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<sup>16</sup> Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (Harper, 2013), 58.



of bringing the gathered community, with all their differences, ideas, and rival affections into a time of praise of God.

### **The Call to Gather in Scripture**

As I stated earlier, Genesis 1 is a liturgy and as such, it contains a call to worship. In Genesis we find the Biblical retelling of creation with cadence, repetition, and poetry as well as a call for all of Creation to worship. God is praised for God's otherness and God's ways remain mysterious and holy. All of creation and human history are gathered into God's attention through this first call to worship, a statement of who God is and what God has done, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Gen 1) Calling God's people to worship continues throughout the Old Testament. In the Exodus narrative Moses repeatedly demands the release of God's people so that they can gather for worship, "Then say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.'" (Ex 7:16) The Israelites are eventually released and arrive at Mt. Sinai where they gather with fear and trembling to wait on the Lord through a mysterious and mighty display of God's power (Ex 19). They could not simply saunter into the presence of God whenever they felt like it. In fact, a boundary with the penalty of death was drawn for those who dared to enter God's presence without invitation or summons (Ex 19:12), their access to God had boundaries. Leviticus 16 begins with a note on the death of Aaron's two sons who dared to approach God uninvited (Ex 16:1). From there, the chapter unpacks the rituals that Aaron, the high priest, must undergo on the Day of Atonement simply to enter the presence of God. While the people of Israel were regularly invited to gather and honor God, to enter the presence of God was a daunting and life-threatening endeavor. A summons to worship God required ritual and sacrifice

and it instilled fear and awe. One must literally be “called into worship” before entering the holy presence.

2 Chronicles 5 tells the story of King Solomon who upon completion the temple gathered the Israelites while the Ark of the Covenant was brought up from Zion, “King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted.” (2 Chr 5:6) After the priests brought the ark to rest and consecrated themselves, the musicians took over with cymbals, harps, lyres and 120 trumpets as a chorus of voices sang, “He is good; his love endures forever.” (2 Chr 5:13) The people of God were summoned and invited to worship God. Here we see a liturgical history and tradition that includes grand processions, physical movement, and musical entrances.

Many of the Psalms are hailed for their ability to gather people for the worship of God. Psalms 8, 95, 100, and 150 praise God for God’s majesty, God’s dominion over all creation, God’s holiness and power. The Psalms of Ascent (Pss 120-134) provide a sort of traveling call to worship. As the Israelites made their festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Ex 23:14-17), they sang songs of preparation and gathering as they worked their way up the plateau into the City of David. The practice of reciting these psalms and attending festivals reconnected the gathered Israelites with their ancient stories of Moses and Abraham. About the Psalms of Ascent Eugene Peterson wrote, “There are no better ‘songs for the road’ for those who travel the way of faith in Christ, a way that has so many continuities with the way of Israel. Since many (not all) essential items in Christian discipleship are incorporated in these songs, they provide a way to remember who we are and where we are going.”<sup>18</sup> What a gift we receive as God’s people to carry these

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<sup>18</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, Commemorative Edition (Intervarsity Press, 2019), 13–14.

psalms with us as we travel this life and find our way through the full range of human experiences. While many different psalms can be used to call people to worship, the Psalms of Ascent are particularly powerful in their unique historical connection to the intersection of pilgrimage and gathering.

One oft cited passage about worship in the New Testament is Romans 12. In it, Paul invites believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God and defines this as a “true act of worship.” At times, this passage is used as an argument *against* gathered, public worship by some who are frustrated with the organized Church. The argument goes that if we are living sacrifices then we can worship God anywhere with any action of our own that brings God glory. While it is certainly true that humanity can engage in worship of God beyond the gathered assembly, this passage was not meant to advocate for worship as separate from community. Just a few verses later we see it is precisely because of what is learned in the gathered assembly that people know how to worship God when they find themselves away from that gathering. Paul was not advocating for individualized worship. In Romans 12:3-7, Paul builds on his opening verses with a reminder that all bring individual gifts to their gathering and that only when everyone is gathered in mutual submission to one another does a fuller picture of God emerge: “So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” (Rom 12:5) Paul later encourages Timothy to devote himself and maintain the public reading and teaching of Scripture until Paul himself arrives to be with the community. (1 Tm 4:13) And throughout the Book of Acts we learn of God’s movement among God’s people in its ongoing narrative of gathered worship.

## Elements for a Call to Worship

What are the foundations for a meaningful call to worship? How might corporate practice of this element inform moments in daily life beyond the gathered assembly? A good call to worship is inclusive, welcoming, and honest. Calls to worship are not accidental or casual moments that just happen at the top of the service hour, even if they take place within a liturgy that begins with greeting and praises as people come together. In some contemporary expressions it can be easy to accidentally overlook this element. A guitar player who begins with something along the lines of, “Good morning, are we fired up for Jesus today? Who’s with me?” Is offering a sort of call to worship but one that falls short of the possibilities this moment can hold as it is also looking for an emotive response to the leader. A call to worship in line with traditions found in Scripture can be casual yet the same time evoke awe, joy, and appreciation for the power of God. The call to worship can come from an emotive place but should not demand a reaction to the worship leader but instead a reaction to God. What follows are three essential elements that I argue make for a good call to worship.

**A good call to worship is inclusive.** Nicholas Wolterstorff writes that corporate worship not only gathers our souls but gathers our stories, “When the doors of the sanctuary open, worshippers enter carrying their stories with them from all over the city.”<sup>19</sup> Every week, as people gather, narratives from a myriad of experiences fill the pews. People from a wide range of vocational backgrounds or those struggling because they have recently lost their job enter the same space. Friends bring roommates and new residents to the neighborhood step in for the first time. Parents coax slow moving toddlers or salty teenagers into the building as others shuffle in alone. Some walk in bright with laughter, this is the high point of their week. Others walk in

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<sup>19</sup> Kaemingk and Willson, *Work and Worship*, 20.

wondering if the pastor will have anything relevant to say, they were forced to come. Into the sanctuary walk hearts saturated with grief, anxiety, and fear. Some can hardly focus; they have been waiting all weekend for Monday and the doctor to call with test results. In this emotional cacophony people scramble to find a cup of coffee or hang up a jacket and by the time they find their way to a pew, they are certainly gathered but often preoccupied. A strong call to worship is aware that it must speak into this mix of experiences. It does not offer flimsy promises or direct the affections of only the energized or most reverent in the room, instead it works to gather every experience into the presence of God. This can most easily happen through a simple, honest invitation that is offered as part of the call to worship like those that follow:

- As we come together this morning with our mix of burdens and praises, let us shift our attention now to the God who holds and unites all of us.
- God gathers us here from so many different neighborhoods and backgrounds to join as one this morning. As you look around at all the faces and stories God brought here today, let's give God our joyful praise and gratitude.
- When we bring our own messy lives and stories into this place, we get to unite with one another in worship and praise of our Lord.
- Good morning, as we prepare to sing, I know that we come here today from so many different experiences. Some of us feel heavy and others feel joy. Wherever you are on your journey, God sees you and welcomes you, now let's welcome God as we recite a Psalm together.

The call to worship helps set the tone for how a Christian gathering takes place. Liturgy decides who is visible, who is hidden, and who has the power to lead. As Lange and Vogel suggest, "Worship of God, which is regarded as the noblest of human activities, is like a double-

edged sword. It can rally Christians toward ‘becoming one’ or it can divide them into splinter groups.”<sup>20</sup> While some elements of a liturgy might be reserved for ordained clergy, whenever possible the call to worship is an element where leadership and liturgical power can be shared. Inclusive leadership reminds people that God’s story extends to all. A responsive call to worship that invites participation from those in the pews can also provide a moment for shared leadership. Teams that craft liturgy make an important statement about the inclusive heart of God when they assign presiding liturgists to represent different genders, generations, skin color, and ethnic backgrounds.

In our congregation we have invited high school students to share their youthful, excited call to worship after a summer camp or mission trip. We welcomed congregants to offer a call to worship in their first language when it was not English. We have been blessed when our African American brothers and sisters call us to worship with the unique energy, they bring from their own Black church tradition and at other times, they bravely called us together during seasons of lament and loss. Calls to worship can be offered in multiple languages or with gestures and motions that display invitation and welcome from various cultures. The disability director at our church recently challenged us to think about the gestures and movements of worshippers whose bodies work differently. How can our friends with disabilities call people to worship with their bodies? A diverse representation of leadership in a call to worship can provide a moment that tells the story of an inclusive God.

**A good call to worship welcomes.** A good call to worship first welcomes God to the gathered assembly, we are welcoming God to God’s own space. Yet at the same time the call to worship should extend welcome and embrace to everyone who is present regardless of their

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<sup>20</sup> Lange and Vogel, *Ordo*, 244.

ability to understand or focus on what is happening in this moment. This is a tough tension to hold as liturgies often struggle to manage it well. Prompts to stand, join voices in song, or respond corporately in a reading are all acts of welcome when helpful instruction is provided. A nervous new congregant once told me that it helped her greatly when our liturgists told them very clearly what was expected, if they were to stand or sit, sing, or pray with eyes closed. Coming from a Roman Catholic background she thought her pew was broken because there was no kneeler. Given the decreasing exposure to Christian faith and liturgical practices, liturgists must assume that every time they gather, among them are those who find themselves in a pew for the first time. Instructions on how to engage or notes on what they are about to experience are helpful. A good call to worship will both remind people of the significant act in which they are about to engage and provide them with welcoming instruction on what that participation looks like.

Historically, the preparation for worship and by default, an extended call to worship, could happen days or even weeks in advance of a worship service. My congregation has roots in the Dutch Reformed Tradition where an example is found in the liturgy of pastor Martin Micronius. In 1554, Micronius recorded the ordinances of his tradition. In his notes on preparation to receive the Lord's Supper he explains that pastors should provide a fourteen-day advance notice for a service of the Lord's Supper: "Before supper is held, the minister announces it from the pulpit to the whole congregation fourteen days beforehand on a Sunday and he mentions the day when it will be observed, and then he also exhorts the whole congregation about the following matters." Micronius goes on to list an examination of oneself and true knowledge of God as necessary preparations for holy communion.<sup>21</sup> Preparation for worship helps create a welcoming space.

Priya Parker argues, “Asking guests to contribute to a gathering ahead of time changes their perception of it.”<sup>22</sup>

We no longer live in an era where extensive instruction on preparation for worship or the reception of sacraments like baptism is the norm. In some modern congregations today, you can hop up out of your seat and head down the aisle to be baptized with no preparation whatsoever. This is a good and fruitful practice in many traditions however, the more prepared people are for worship, especially the sacraments, the better they can engage with and understand what they are experiencing and ultimately, with God. Our congregation provides website information about what to expect in worship, how people typically dress, where to park and where to enter. These notes can help a newcomer feel more at ease and by the time they enter the sanctuary we hope to have removed a few barriers to encountering the Gospel. The call to worship is uniquely positioned to offer notes on preparation and instruction that help congregants feel welcomed and safe. While not specifically the reason for the call to worship, adding simple verbiage can help worshippers know what they will experience throughout the next hour.

- As we prepare to sing and our hearts to honor God, let us rise to our feet and recite together the words of the Psalmist.
- Friends, good morning. As we get ready to sing out loud together, please stand up and close your eyes as I start us off with a short prayer of welcome.
- As we come together on this day to share in sacrament and celebration, we prepare our hearts to receive communion by first praising God in song then praying together.

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, eds., *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present*, (New Growth Press, 2018), 529.

<sup>22</sup> Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 153.



- God extends welcome and grace to every single one of us here today. As the God of the universe welcomes each of us, let us now take our turn and sing this song aloud with one another followed by an opening prayer.

**Finally, a call to worship is honest.** Worship can be a place where the people of God honestly ask God to directly engage with the issues and needs of their world. Culturally in the United States, worship leaders are often faced with the temptation to elevate feel-good moments. I recall a congregant who approached me after a service that included elements of lament around a recent tragedy. She quipped, “I didn’t come here to be sad. I came here to feel good. You guys dragged me down.” True as her statement may be, to overlook the tragedy would have been dishonest and would have ignored those directly impacted by it. In the gathered assembly God gives people power and presence to wrestle with the realities of life. Just as trauma informed practices serve professional fields like education and medicine, liturgies must also incorporate trauma informed work into their expressions. To do this means that liturgies flex and shift to accommodate the experiences of those who gather and that they work to avoid words, phrases, or experiences that might trigger those in their community. For example, on the morning of a national, global, or local tragedy, the call to worship can reflect an invitation to presence that honors the disoriented space within which many people find themselves. Or, when members of a community suddenly lose housing, prayers around the shelter and comfort of God might create a tense or tone-deaf moment unless the liturgist acknowledges this seemingly odd disconnect. The worship planning team on which I served for many years called this our moment of stating the obvious. Sometimes in worship the best thing a leader can do is simply stop and state the obvious tension or strangeness of a moment.

In the United States, as in other places around the world, where political and ideological divisions are acute, the call to worship can also reflect honesty about these divisions and help people understand they have a sacred opportunity to transcend difference. This never as easy as it appears. As a welcome and invitation, the call to worship should resist the temptation to make sweeping statements about the people gathered or about divisive positions. A friend once shared with me the call to worship she heard in a congregation she visited. It invited God's presence to be with them amid, "this world run by evil Democrats." As with any liturgical element, the call to worship is not an opportunity to divide people along party lines. Calls to worship that are honest might take the following shape:

- As we gather this morning stunned by this week's tragedy, we invite the presence of our God who is no stranger to lament and loss.
- Today we gather as people who hold different ideas, dreams, and passions. In this moment we submit our personal desires to you and ask that you would unite as we sing together.
- God of heaven we come before you today to praise and give you glory as we, your broken and divide people, come to you in worship.
- Friends, we gather this morning from different communities and ways of life, we look and act and live in many ways, but Scripture tells us we are untied together in Christ. Grateful for the unity you create in difference we sing together now.

### **Calls to Worship in Daily Life**

It would be odd to invite friends over for a dinner party and ask them all to rise to their feet and sing praises to God before participating in the meal. There would certainly be power in a moment like this but obviously this is more than the average social gathering could or should

sustain yet worshippers who participate in a weekly call to worship do know something of God and God's presence that translates to gatherings beyond their sanctuary. I once coached a congregant filled with anxiety over the drama that would likely play out at an upcoming holiday gathering. She was the host and some of her angst came from a desire to truly welcome to her guests yet to also be honest in front of her children who knew this visit caused distress. I asked if she had ever thought much about the call to worship and what we do in that moment every week. As expected, she had not thought in this direction but what followed was a conversation on how this liturgical element could provide a helpful template. One of her concerns was respectful honesty as her guests arrived. "It is so wonderful to see you," was not a true sentiment for her. We talked about the effort at honesty we make in worship each week and how when we welcome God sometimes, we ourselves do not exactly feel like worshipping. We can come to church angry, hurt, upset, and doubting God and we can also be honest about it. She was searching for the right words to welcome her family and eventually planned out her welcome in a way that respectfully reflected both honesty and gratitude. Whenever we welcome people into our homes or presence, we must be respectfully honest with them just as in worship we work to approach God with respect and honestly. Some who gather with us cause pain and heartache that we are not eager to receive and at times, we are the source of pain or frustration for others. Welcoming should be respectful in its attempt to honor these realities.

Just as in worship, our ordinary gatherings can carry with them God's presence and peace even if we do not directly name it. Again, people rarely think in this direction when friends or family come together but there is a beautiful space that is created in a safe gathering that reflects the Gospel heart of God. To honor this reality is to honor the God who created gatherings in the first place, even if those gathered are far from God. Simple words of welcome can make all the

difference for those who arrive in our circles new, anxious, or self-conscious. We might simply say, “So glad you came, I know we don’t know one another yet but having you join us adds so much.” Small intentional statements like this make a difference as our dominant culture is increasingly mobile and people find themselves in new spaces more often than they did in decades past. Extending a warm, respectful welcome regardless of the way a person arrives is also significant albeit difficult at times. A respectful welcome for those we find challenging can also create space for conversation and learning. This is vanishing and important work in our divisive dominant culture that often encourages rejection of other.

### **Conclusion**

At a time in American history when health experts report a pandemic of loneliness alongside a slow emergence from the isolation of the Covid-19, how we gather people matters. Christians who practice a weekly liturgy hold a template for gathering rooted in history and tradition through the call to worship. The call to worship gathers God’s people in a myriad of ways from solemn processions to joy filled moments with spontaneous shouts for joy, prayers, and conversations. Regardless of the method or formality, the call to worship shifts a community’s focus on the character of God. Human beings are easily distracted. Understandably we come to worship with a wide range of experiences from grief and anger to hope and expectation. Some have never been to a Christian worship service before and come uncertain or with predisposed fear or prejudice around what they are about to experience. The call to worship is an attempt to honor all that is human and bring it forward to lay it at the feet of the God who gathers, includes, invites, honors, and sees.

## Chapter 5

### Benediction, The Story of a Sent People

The benediction tells the story of a sending God. Just as God gathers people God also sends them out from the gathered assembly into the world. In her article on Leave Taking, social anthropologist at Oxford University Lucy Baehren writes, “As widely recurrent features of the human ritual repertoire, greeting and leave-taking have been considered “bookends of human interaction.”<sup>1</sup> Baehren notes the different purpose each holds with greeting setting the stage for what is to come next and leave taking acting as an attempt to maintain the relationship after separation. In worship we exist between these same bookends, we are gathered, and we are sent. In sending we ready ourselves for whatever comes next. What happens after church? What do the people of God do after they leave the sanctuary or auditorium? What does a leader say to the people of God as they exit? What reminders about the gathering do they keep with them? Themes of sending and blessing are abundant in Scripture and throughout liturgical history. In this chapter I will explore the sending nature of God and the power of benedictions in everyday life.

### La Bendición

My friend, Margo is an author and psychotherapist who was raised in New Mexico after her family arrived in the United States from Mexico. As she and her siblings grew up her family was diligent in keeping a strong connection to their Mexican culture. Throughout her entire childhood and into her adult life today, Margo practiced the ritual of giving and receiving a

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Baehren, “Saying ‘Goodbye’ to the Conundrum of Leave-Taking: A Cross Disciplinary Review,” *Nature Journal*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-022-01061-3#citeas>.

blessing, *La Bendición*, as it is called in Spanish.<sup>2</sup> This practice is found throughout Latinx cultures and practiced prominently in Puerto Rico. In this tradition a child or younger person asks for a blessing from a parent or member of the community who holds a position of respected authority over them, like an extended family member, teacher, or mentor. It can be offered as a form of greeting or as a deeper moment of affection when a loved one is leaving. To engage in *La Bendición*, one person asks for the blessing to which the other will respond, *Dios te Bendiga* (God bless you). For Margo, to receive *La Bendición* is to receive affirmation that she is seen and loved. *La Bendición* is a ritual that transcends religious boundaries but finds roots in Christian liturgy. While it can be a casual greeting it almost always carries a sacred weight and brings a sense of awe and honor to a conversation. To ask for or to give a *La Bendición* is to ask a person if you see them and are for them. It is to see the way their story informs yours and ask if they notice and honor this intersection. Margo explains it as a sacred moment of connection that is rooted in her Christian faith. Her experience of *La Bendición* is a powerful example of how one liturgical element can lead to practices that inform everyday life.

Defined as “the utterance or bestowing of a blessing, especially at the end of a religious service,” benedictions are employed in worship throughout Scripture.<sup>3</sup> From the Latin *bene* (well) and *diction* (to speak) the literal translation of benediction is, “to speak well of.” To benedict is to speak words of goodness and blessing over an individual or a gathered people. Because a benediction can give a blessing the two words are often used interchangeably however, benedictions can contain an element of sending as well. Benedictions offer both

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<sup>2</sup> Margo Tirado, MA LCPC, is of Mexican descent. As a young girl she moved from Mexico to the US and grew up in New Mexico. As a friend, she shared her story of *La Bendición* with me to tell me more about her culture and her faith. For more information about Margo and her work see also <https://www.margotirado.com/margo-tirado-ma-lcpc/>.

<sup>3</sup> W. P G Glare, “Benediction,” in *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1982).

blessing and challenge. At times they simply affirm God’s love and speak well of those gathered, reminding them of their belovedness but they can also send people out with a charge and call to action on God’s behalf. When offered at the end of worship a benediction both blesses and sends into life beyond a sanctuary. Benedictions remind God’s people that God is present with them and that they are part of a sacred story calling them to go forth with God and to act in love.

As the “final word” of a worship service the benediction holds incredible power to shape a congregation. In my church, when congregants rise to receive the benediction, I am often overwhelmed by both the mix of vulnerability and power that exist in that moment. Some worshippers bow their heads in a posture of humility, some close their eyes and hold open their hands while still others stare expectant and wide-eyed, waiting for something from God. James K.A. Smith writes, “The sending at the end of the worship service is a replay of the original commissioning of humanity as God’s image bearers because in Christ – and in the practices of Christian worship – we can finally be the humans we were made to be. So, we are sent out to inhabit the sanctuary of God’s creation as living, breathing, “images” of God.”<sup>4</sup> Dr. Dirk Lange, Professor of Worship at Luther Seminary writes, “The sending is the dissemination of the bread into the world, the scattering of the body, the scattering of our memories, our feelings, our spiritualities as many pieces of bread given for the world.”<sup>5</sup> To be sent is powerful. It is to take all that has been gathered and rehearsed and then encourage the people of God to consider the impossible yet hope-filled task of living out what they just rehearsed together.

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, *You are What You Love*, 98.

<sup>5</sup> Lange and Vogel, *Ordo*, 119.

## Sending as Sacred

To be sent from a place is different than simply leaving. For example, a young adult moving away from home for the first time might find themselves in a sea of boxes while an anxious parent looks on. Often, that parent refuses to let them simply leave by walking out the door with a casual wave. This type of departure demands more than a high five or a quick hug. The parent might whisper a familiar family mantra in their ear, pray over them, cry with them, or simply embrace them in silence for a few minutes. To be sent is to mark a sacred transition with a gesture that meets the moment. Sendings often signal the crossing of a threshold when what once was will no longer be. An architectural threshold is the bottom of a door frame marking where one room ends and another begins. In physics or chemistry, it is the level or limit where something shifts once a certain speed, heat, or weight is reached. When a threshold is crossed or met, things change. Once you cross the threshold, you enter a new space.

Irish poet John O'Donahue writes that at times, we do not even realize a threshold is there as we cross it yet something inside of us shifts that will never shift back.<sup>6</sup> We crossed into a new space and the old one is gone. Sometimes we are sent purposefully and beautifully into that new space and other times life shoves us there. When my sister received a cancer diagnosis she lamented, "Never again will I live a life without this word hanging over my story." Once a person travels to a new location, they now know something of the world they will always know. Once you encounter a tragedy you will always know its disorienting contours. Experiencing a particular milestone like baptism, birth, marriage, or divorce moves people forever into a new place. Regardless of how we arrived the door to what came before closed. The limit has been reached. Throughout the Gospels, the people who encountered Jesus crossed a threshold upon

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<sup>6</sup> John O'Donohue, *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings* (Transworld Digital, 2009), 64-66.



meeting him and they walk away changed. Some left with the gift of physical sight or in the case of Paul, blinded yet with renewed spiritual vision. Others leave Jesus' presence angry or baffled like the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19. To him a threshold was revealed but it demanded more than he was willing to give at that time.

Benedictions mark the moment where a threshold in worship takes place. Once a gathered people work the liturgy and engage with God's story there is a defining moment that can occur and send people out to live the story with which they just engaged. They literally and metaphorically cross a threshold as they leave church. After the story of God was rehearsed in liturgy through song, poetry, prayer, sermon, communion, etc., the benediction marks a liturgical shift. Once the people of God have rehearsed the story of God, they must go forth and live what they storied together. Theologians Matthew Kaemingk and Cory Willison, whose research serves the intersection of worship and work, offer Isaiah 55 as an illustration of the way God gathered Israel to worship then sent them out just as we do in our liturgies today.<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 55:1 says, "Come, all you who are thirsty; come to the waters." Israel is gathered to worship. Isaiah 55:12 reads, "You will go out with joy and be led forth in peace." Israel is sent out from worship, and they are sent in a way that recognizes that God's sending can be daunting. They leave with a blessing for peace and joy as they head into a world that is anything but peaceful and joy filled. This passage illustrates how a benediction marks this ebb and flow of worship. All have been gathered, all have feasted and remembered together, now all will go forth. Repeat.

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<sup>7</sup> Kaemingk and Willison, *Work and Worship*, 68.

## Sending in Scripture

People of faith are both sent ones and senders. Sendings appear in Scripture within letters and narratives when God's people move in an intentional way. The Hebrew word for sent, *shâlach* is used 848 times throughout the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> Not every sending is a benediction but many illuminate moments that hold echoes of a benediction or complete benedictions. In Genesis 1-3, God gathers the dust of the earth and breathes life into humanity then sends Adam and Eve into the Garden to do the holy work of stewarding creation. Genesis 12:1-3 speaks the well-known sending of Abram and Sarai, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. 'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" This sending was not for their sake alone but ultimately, for welcoming, serving, then blessing others. They did more than just up and leave, they were sent by God with purpose and provision. Moses is later sent to Egypt on behalf of God's people (Ex 3:10-15). God sends judges and prophets to speak God's name and bring God's messages of warning. To be sent can be complicated and demanding. Not all who were sent were received. This is part of the ache we might feel in sending off those we love during sacred moments. We gather them and bless them and send them and then hold our breath for any number of reasons. Will they be rejected by those we prayed would embrace? Will they be received on the other end? Will they detour across another threshold from which they cannot cross back? How long will they be gone from our metaphorical or literal presence?

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, "shâlach," in *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Associated Publishers and Authors, 1981).

The incarnation is the story of God's rejected sending. Jesus is sent from God's presence to redeem and reconcile the world (Jn 3:16-17). Later he was rejected by those he came to save, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (Jn 1:11) Part of the heartache I see pastorally when people send their beloved into unknown places is the wonder on whether they will be received. The pain of watching someone we love suffer rejection is acute. Jesus gathers and then sends his disciples out on mission (Lk 9:1-2; 10:1-3). In Luke 9:2 he sends them but knows that sending is vulnerable and opens them to rejection: "If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." (Lk 9:5) In Luke 24 as well as John 14 and 20, Jesus repeatedly dismisses his followers with peace, "peace be with you," and promises his presence, "to the very end of the age." (Mt 28:20)

This habit of blessing and sending is repeated throughout the epistles in their openings and conclusions. Romans begins and ends with a blessing (1:7 and 16:20) that offers a reminder of God's love, the command to honor God as the object of our love, and the corresponding commandment to love one another. Many sending passages contain verbiage later formalized in church liturgies (Gn 31:49; Jgs 5:31; Ru 2:12; 1 Sam 1:17; 17:37; Pss 67:1; 134:3) with perhaps the best-known Old Testament benediction, Aaron's blessing from Numbers 6:24-26. Paul's letters are filled with language of sending to the early churches. Perhaps the most historically known and used is his Apostolic Benediction from 2 Corinthians 13:14, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." This passage, hailed as a hallmark of trinitarian theology in Paul, also carries an echo of Jesus' sending in the Great Commission, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Mt 28:19)

The Roman Catholic Church eventually codified Paul's 2 Corinthians 13 benediction as part of their liturgical tradition. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a version of this benediction, known as the Apostolic Blessing, was reserved only for rare worship occasions like Maundy Thursday, Easter, or on solemn occasions when a faithful one neared death. The Apostolic Benediction was a practice later employed to forgive sin and pardon transgressions to which other rites and indulgences were eventually added. According to the *Code of Canon Law*, "From the earliest ages of the Church, bishops were invited, from time to time, to give their blessing to the dying, and when given by the popes, or those especially delegated by them, it was, no doubt very often accompanied by a plenary indulgence."<sup>9</sup> Beyond use in the Roman Catholic church, the Apostolic Benediction is still widely used today to conclude Protestant worship services.<sup>10</sup>

The final, closing moment in worship was also called the dismissal. This term came into consistent liturgical use during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, although it appeared occasionally in worship vernacular throughout the centuries prior. The terms *mission* and *dismiss* share the same Latin root, *mittere*, meaning to *send* or *to let go*. By the 1640's, the word *mission* was also used for religious efforts aimed at sending congregants and missionaries out from a gathering of the faithful into service and the work of evangelism.<sup>11</sup> In worship, the dismissal signaled the end of the formal service and marked the moment when one returned to their life outside the church. The dismissal was a type of benediction that carried with it an expectation for action in response to what was learned in worship. After working the liturgy together on a Sunday, the dismissal signaled that it was time to exit corporate worship but not leave behind the learning and call to

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<sup>9</sup> Code of Canon Law - Book II - The People of God - Liber II. De Populo Dei - Part II. (Cann. 460-572), accessed November 19, 2024, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic\\_lib2-cann460-572\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann460-572_en.html).

<sup>10</sup> *The Worship Sourcebook* (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> *Etymology online*, "Dismiss (v.)," s.v., accessed November 19, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/dismiss>.

service. Dismissals also signaled the sending of catechumenates out from an elaborate season of baptismal instruction into new life as transformed and baptized ones. Now that they were marked by this sacrament, they were sent to live into this new reality.<sup>12</sup> The benediction rehearses God's story of sending.

### **Sending as Mundane**

Sending is a mundane activity that often escapes our notice. On most days we casually send people off to routine errands or seemingly benign trips to work or school. Our daily sending often comes under the simple word *goodbye* which today is as common a phrase as most of us might utter. *Goodbye, see you later*. Yet even the word *goodbye* echoes with God's sending story. *Goodbye* came into prominent use in English vernacular during the 1500s as a phrase to bless people in the name of God as they left one another. *Goodbye* is a shortened version of the phrase, *God be with ye*. *God* likely became *good* over time in keeping with other greetings and sendings like, *good morning* or *good evening* until over time it lost an overt connection to the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, coming and going from most common moments does not require an official benediction or blessing but the reality of life is that unexpectedly, a once common moment can become an unwelcome threshold. Families anywhere a mass shooting took place sent their beloved off into what seemed like an unremarkable moment, to school, work, or to pick up a gallon of milk only never to return. A casual goodbye became their final sending. In the United States, people of color know the weight even an everyday goodbye can carry in a world of police brutality and violence. Black and Brown families have conversations around simple goodbyes that white families rarely have. My African American friend once told me she

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<sup>12</sup> Wainwright, *Oxford History of Worship*, 87.

<sup>13</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "goodbye," accessed April 25, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8704421071>.

gave her children, “the whitest names she could think of” so that if they were ever pulled over or threatened their names, “at least sounded white enough to get a chance.” Angie Thomas’ book, *The Hate U Give*, is required reading in many American public high schools. In it, Thomas, an African American author, tells the story of Starr Carter, a Black teenager at a predominately white high school. Starr discovers there that her family had very different lessons around sending and leaving than her white friends had.

When I was twelve, my parents had two talks with me. One was the usual birds and bees... The other talk was about what to do if a cop stopped me. Momma fussed and told Daddy I was too young for that. He argued that I wasn't too young to get arrested or shot. "Starr-Starr, you do whatever they tell you to do," he said. "Keep your hands visible. Don't make any sudden moves. Only speak when they speak to you." I knew it must've been serious. Daddy has the biggest mouth of anybody I know, and if he said to be quiet, I needed to be quiet.<sup>14</sup>

After her best friend is killed by police Starr laments, “Good-byes hurt the most when the other person’s already gone.”<sup>15</sup> Even a seemingly benign goodbye can carry tremendous weight and provides a space to speak God’s sending story into the vulnerable moments of life.

Many times, we sense the magnitude of a moment as we knowingly release family and friends into new places from a move across the country to a first apartment. We can send people we love to chaotic places like into a war zone or incarceration. During other moments we send our beloved into therapies and treatments. Eventually, we send those we love to pass from this life into the next. When we send people in part we are saying to them, remember that you are loved by God and by me. Remember the history and connection we share. Remember our story and go with love. When faced with a sacred sending people understandably struggle to find the words to fully engage the moment, even among Christians who regularly attend church. This makes sense because opportunities to rehearse this part of our story are diminishing. Worship

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<sup>14</sup> Angela Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (Balzer and Bray, 2017), 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 20-21.

traditions that skip benedictions or tack them on as an afterthought can leave us without an awareness of how to provide a sacred farewell. Worship architect Constance Cherry writes, “A blessing without a charge lacks connection to the service; a charge without a blessing lacks the sense of power needed for service.”<sup>16</sup> The benediction is the final word, the final moment in worship, the final opportunity to connect all the liturgical dots that invites us then to bring that awareness with us into everyday life.

Which words does one use then to send an adolescent off to eighteen months in a detention center or a recruit off to military service? How does a parent send a child scarred by abuse to speak in court? How does a person find their way through the texture of these farewells? What template do they have? After a tragedy how do we send people *back* into schools, stores, and errands bearing the wounds from that event? Christians who practice a liturgy every week can lean into centuries of history in search the words they need to send people off with purpose and love into their next moment.

Irish poet John O’Donahue writes, “The blessing ... has an eye to the outside in order to embrace and elevate whatever is happening to someone. It is direct address, driven by immediacy and care.”<sup>17</sup> Learning to benedict our friends and to send our people with presence into whatever they face is to stand in a powerful, ancient tradition. It is to bring the story of God from throughout the ages to bear on mundane moments. Justin Martyr’s first century Sunday instructions included a sending of people out from worship to serve God and others. After the amen, people were, “sent by the deacons” to bring the eucharist to those too sick to receive it in person. Martyr provided instructions for resourcing orphans, widows, and any who are in want.

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<sup>16</sup> Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Baker Academic, 2010), 115.

<sup>17</sup> O’Donahue, *Benedictus*, 16.

He goes on to instruct care, “for the strangers sojourning among us.”<sup>18</sup> In short, he sends the people of God out to be fully present to one another and to bring the care and comfort of worship to bear on the world. We stand in that same tradition today and endeavor to do the same work. In the precarious spaces we share this practice can offer stability. When we fumble for our own words to mark a sending moment, there is comfort in uttering the benedictions of Scripture or the early church to bring a sacred voice that can speak into our grief and loss.

### **The Benediction as Narrative Shaping**

Liturgists and worship planners hold an opportunity to craft the final words of God’s story for that week as they shape the benediction. Matthew Kaemingk and Cory B. Willson invite pastors to frame this moment correctly:

When pastors and worship leaders look out into the pews, they must see a people who – aware of it or not – are already on mission. The pastor’s liturgical task is not to give these people a mission. Nor is it to invite them into a church-centered mission. Instead, their liturgical task is to *awaken and remind* the people of their integral role within the mission of God *through their daily vocations*.<sup>19</sup>

Here Kaemingk and Willson note that a benediction should awaken in people a reminder of the role they play in the holy mission of God. They are called to live into a bigger story than acting out a denominational or personal agenda. They are invited to both rehearse and act out God’s story. Kaemingk and Willson’s research points to the power of liturgical understanding to help worshippers make sense of their place in the story. While congregants, “intellectually grasp the logical connection between faith and work, they don’t yet understand the liturgical connection. Put another way, they don’t see what difference all of these Sunday songs, prayers sacraments, and rituals make for their working lives.”<sup>20</sup> They go on to tell the story of a nurse, Deliah, who

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<sup>18</sup> Roberts, Donaldson, Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 186.

<sup>19</sup> Kaemingk Willson, *Work and Worship*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Kaemingk and Willson, *Work and Worship*, 41.



made the connection between the benediction and her everyday work of serving patients. A nurse stands at the intersection where patients cross any number of thresholds every day from a labor and delivery nurse who welcomes new life to an ICU nurse whose patient passes on before they ever leave that floor. A nurse who has been sent from worship with purpose and hope, who has received the benediction of their church can bring that same practice with them into their workplace. Reminding people that their place in God's story gets played out every day is a way to send them from worship with purpose and then invite them to do the same for others.

Ultimately, the benediction shapes the story of God in people as it calls them to live into their identity as God's beloved while at the same time calling them take their as role actors in that story. Often, in English speaking congregations, the benediction begins with the modal verb, *may*. *May* indicates possibility, not certainty. It can indicate hope but does not maintain a firm grip. *May* can indicate a desire but holds a posture that knows forces beyond lie in the statement that comes next. *May* can also indicate a calling forth. O'Donahue writes that *may* is a word of benediction, "It imagines and wills the fulfillment of desire."<sup>21</sup> He argues the Holy Spirit as the secret presence behind every blessing. While I agree that the Holy Spirit is present in benediction moments and benedictions release people into the care of the Spirit, benedictions are more complicated than this. Benedictions also release people into the trembling hands of other fallible human beings. A benediction offers courage and hope in the sending, yet it is also honest as it releases people into the unknown. Only the mind of God knows what will happen. As finite human beings all we can do is rehearse the story together and then release people into the mystery of God and the future as it unfolds.

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<sup>21</sup> O'Donahue, *Benedictus*, 17.

## Elements for a Benediction

Benedictions as both blessings and sendings for God's people take an identifiable form. There is no single universal form but there is a consistent language, tone, and content from Scripture and tradition that makes for a powerful and biblically faithful benediction. Stephen Chapman, in his analysis of Psalm 115, notes several elements that appear in this passage that illustrate the way blessings are formed. Since a benediction is both a blessing and a sending, the principles that apply to biblical blessings also apply to benedictions. In Chapman's reflections we find familiar language and tone that has already played a part in liturgies throughout history.

According to Chapman, blessings are locative in that they are typically material in their orientation:

Blessing pushes toward specificity and is characteristically more material in its orientation. When possible, blessing tends to single out 'this' loaf of bread, 'this' cup of wine, 'this' individual, and the people of God in "his place." To bless a particular item or group is therefore a means of affirming its position within God's creation and articulating how its well-being is intrinsic to and reliant upon the well-being of all creation and the God who made creation. Blessing is not just a matter of providing affirmation but providing the right type of affirmation.<sup>22</sup>

As Chapman suggests, blessings are specific and material but similarly, they also locate and orient us as actors in God's story. Blessings are also poetic in that like those from Scripture, they carry an historic rhythm and cadence that takes shape when one dares to speak on behalf of God for the good of another. Well-phrased benedictions are read with meter like poetry and music and as with many blessings from Scripture, like Psalm 115, they were sung during Israel's worship. Chapman also suggests that blessings are performative in that they both acknowledge God and extend the power of God toward others. They carry with them a conferral of goodness that is a performed affirmation of God's location and presence.<sup>23</sup> This can include the tone of voice that is

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen B. Chapman, "Psalm 115 and the Logic of Blessing," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 44, (2022): 55.

<sup>23</sup> Chapman, "Psalm 115," 55-60.

employed as well as the posture of the person offering the benediction from extending arms out over a congregation to resting hands on a recipient's head or shoulders. As a local church pastor who has offered hundreds of benedictions over my nearly two decades of ministry I would add two items to Chapman's list. Benedictions are honest and safe.

**Benedictions are honest.** Our dominant culture in the US often trends toward denial of hardship and an eagerly optimistic expectation for happiness and quick resolution to struggle. A blessing is honest. It states reality with an embrace that does not deny the possibilities for a bad outcome, noting again use of the word *may*. A benediction does not rush to make things right that may not ever be made right this side of heaven. Kate Bowler writes, "This is a country that heartily celebrates stories of self-made people whose every act of determination seems to bring them closer to greatness." She goes on to say that from this place, "We need a language of acknowledgement for the lives we *have*, not simply the lives we wish for. We need a spiritual account of time that is rich enough to name the breadth of our experience. Good. Bad. Difficult. Mundane."<sup>24</sup> A benediction, whether offered corporately or privately, is a statement of reality and our hope that God will work within that reality. It acknowledges that people regularly cross thresholds into hard places and that the Christian story is of a God who goes with people into those places. It is the story of a God who endures rather than escapes. God's mission is not to airlift people immediately out of hardship. As pastors, friends, and congregants offer benedictions to others, their phrasing should include an acknowledgement of reality.

**Benedictions are safe.** Another element of a good benediction is that it is safe. To bless or send someone from worship or from a private, shared space is to create or maintain for them a safe environment. Benedictions should not carry guilt or shame, nor should they carry a tone of

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<sup>24</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days* (Convergent Books, 2023), xvi.

disdain or anger. Pastors can inadvertently or intentionally leak their frustrations into a benediction over a congregation with whom they are frustrated or by whom they have been hurt. The same applies to parents sending and blessing a child. When a pastor or a spiritual friend or elder speaks words of blessing and sending, they do it on behalf of God who does not shame. Benedictions should not be agendized or employed as the final word in an argument. “May the Lord bless you and remind you that you are out of line with God’s will.” This is obviously a dramatic example of an unsafe benediction but people who attempt to bless others can carry these feelings with them on any number of issues. Using the benediction as a last word or chance to put a fine point on an agenda or argument is to injure or abuse this liturgical element.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately the benediction shapes the part of God’s story that reminds us we are sent ones and that a loving God goes with us into the world as we work to live out God’s invitations in this life. Benedictions tell the part of God’s story that sends and releases. Employed throughout Scripture, benedictions tell the story of the God who gathers and sends. As the final words of a liturgy, benedictions should remain strong and stand as their own liturgical element, resisting the urge to scatter them with announcements and notes for congregational life. Benedictions have historic forms, cadence, and rhythms to them that are still relevant and powerful today. Worship leaders can lean into this tradition and resist the urge to rush through them in traditional liturgies or jettison them altogether in Contemporary worship expressions. Benedictions also carry significant power in everyday life and provide sacred moments to send and release those we love into new and unknown spaces.

## Chapter 6

### Preaching, The Stories of a Proclaimed People

I attended church only two or three times in my life before a high school friend invited me to her youth group and later to a worship service. My parents did not follow any religious tradition nor did anyone else in my family other than my extremely devout Roman Catholic grandmother. Widowed at a young age, her spiritual fervor and desire for mass was brushed off by the rest of us as a curious byproduct of her grief. Church attendance was never on our family radar, we were religious nones. As a teenager, even after discovering God and worship I much preferred sleeping in to sitting in a pew. The few times I went to mass with my grandmother or attended a funeral or wedding the sermon stood out as the most vexing part of the whole endeavor. It felt long and irrelevant, a rambling treatise by a robed minister who looked tired and bored himself. The sermon was a liturgical moment to be endured rather than engaged. Preaching specifically seemed like an odd part of a religious profession for which I had no understanding or interest.

My experience as an American adolescent in the 1990s is now only amplified for adolescents today. As rising generations express ongoing interest in spirituality, they are more likely to explore different outlets for their faith than decide to attend a Christian church.<sup>1</sup> Pastors often look toward preaching as one possible option to reverse this trend. Perhaps a hip, savvy preacher will attract more people? Can creative proclamation from the pulpit convince them to come? For all the effort and energy pastors pour into preaching, research suggests that our modern sermons are not currently the first or best way to engage the religiously disaffiliated. In

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<sup>1</sup> “Spirituality Among Americans Who are Spiritual but not Religious,” Pew Research Center, December 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/who-are-spiritual-but-not-religious-americans/>.

fact, Ryan Burge proposes a much different approach to engage the religiously disaffiliated, church-based social events without any agenda or up front messaging whatsoever.<sup>2</sup> As a preacher himself, Burge jokes about the irony of this conclusion. He suggests that a focus on preaching alone is not an effective strategy to reach those outside of faith, much as many preachers might wish it were otherwise. In early 2024, the Southern Baptist Convention, a denomination known for their robust commitment to preaching conducted a study that revealed preaching may actually be a contributing factor in attendance decline.<sup>3</sup> And among those who do attend church, some find the sermon a prolonged or overplayed event to which they struggle to follow along or find a connection, especially as most worshippers now sit in their pew next to a silenced smart phone. Should I pay attention or take a try at today's Wordle?

Preaching still holds a powerful place in liturgies but like other elements, it must shift and evolve to meet the needs of people today. How should sermons communicate the story of God for modern congregations, what liturgical place does preaching occupy, and how should preaching meet the needs of those already in the pews as well as those on the outside? Homeliticians abound and many throughout history have endeavored to answer these questions. Thousands of ministries, academics, and organizations as well as tens of thousands of books and additional resources document the historical tradition and modern craft of preaching. At the time of this thesis, I typed “preaching” into the books search tool on Amazon. It returned 30,000 results. Millions of sermons exist online in a variety of platforms from YouTube and Facebook

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<sup>2</sup> Ryan Burge, “The Rise of the Nones and the Decline of Religion with Ryan Burge,” January 11, 2024, in *Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*, produced by Carey Nieuwhof, podcast, MP3, 1:08:03, <http://careynieuwhof.com/episode624>.

<sup>3</sup> Lifeway Research is under the SBC denominational umbrella and as such, takes a stronger conservative position on many issues than I personally hold. However, because their denomination places a strong emphasis on preaching, they have good research and statistics on its position in many modern, American congregations. Marissa Postell Sullivan, “Pastoral Hypocrisy and Bad Preaching are a Turnoff to Churchgoers,” *Lifeway Research*, March 22, 2024, <https://research.lifeway.com/2024/03/22/pastoral-hypocrisy-and-bad-preaching-are-a-turnoff-to-churchgoers/>.

feeds to online media libraries on church websites. Every single week thousands of new sermons are added to online archives around the world. Throughout church history, how to approach preaching has always played a significant role in liturgical conversations. To assume that this project can reflect properly on the fullness of these conversations in one chapter would be shortsighted at best. Instead, my goal is to focus here on the historical placement of sermons within American Protestant liturgies and offer insight for their ongoing use and efficacy for modern worshippers today.

### **Why Preaching Still Matters**

Despite various approaches to preaching and liturgy, sermons today are the most obvious liturgical element through which to verbally tell the story of God. The basic design of a sermon, regardless of the style or structure, make it the place where we try to explain theology, albeit at times incorrectly or unimaginatively. The sermon is the place Scripture is taught, and stories of faith and the community are told. In my own tradition and in Reformed liturgies, preaching is assumed in the Liturgy/Service of the Word. This section of worship often includes an Epistle, Psalm, or Gospel reading, recitation of creeds, and prayers of illumination or prayers of the people. While other liturgical elements tell the story of God, they do so metaphorically, through an action, or by shorter moments like a prayer for illumination or Gospel reading. For example, the eucharist tells the story of a God whose presence loves and sustains but does so through the words of institution and a tangible experience of the sacramental bread and wine. Passing of the peace is an act of unity that tells the story of a reconciling God through physically shaking hands with those seated nearby. The sermon, however, is an expanded opportunity to literally tell the stories of God and God's people. It is an opportunity to proclaim God's word, exegete it, and to wonder in community about its application for life. Preaching is not the only way to tell God's

story, but in North American Protestantism it is often the most concrete and tangible moment for storytelling that takes place in a liturgy.

Different traditions place varying liturgical weight on preaching. Roman Catholics employ shorter homilies in favor of emphasis on the eucharist while some Baptist and Evangelical traditions give the bulk of liturgical time to sermons that can last up to forty minutes or more. Many Black and charismatic congregations are hailed for their livelier forms of preaching where call and responses regularly accompany a message and can also include musical underscores or back up by the choir. Gary Teja, a pastor and ministry leader who served churches in Nicaragua and Costa Rica writes about his experiences throughout Latinx congregations in the United States. While there is no singular expression of Latinx churches, just as there is no one expression of Black churches, Teja's reflections speak to the palpable, vibrant energy extended in worship around Latinx preaching. Writing for *Reformed Worship* he claims narrative preaching resonates particularly well in Latinx congregations where the cultural expectation is for the pastor to tell their own story while building energy around the narratives of Scripture in a way that is practical and relational.<sup>4</sup> Margo Tirado whose story of *La Bendición* is noted in chapter five shared with me on multiple occasions her appreciation for preaching and worship from her Mexican culture. These sermons were energetic, colorful, and practical – a contrast to the more restrained preaching styles she encountered in white Reformed churches.

Regardless of the delivery style, liturgical history, or cultural context of a congregation, sermons should have in common that they preach the Gospel. Jared Alcántara, Professor of Preaching at Truett Seminary, writes that at the very least, the one thing every sermon should do

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Teja, "Worship as Fiesta: Hispanic Traditions Provide a Fresh Perspective," *Reformed Worship*, March 1997, <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1997/worship-fiesta-hispanic-traditions-provide-fresh-perspective>.



is proclaim the Gospel and while there are different ways to define what exactly the Gospel is, preaching it is a requirement regardless of worship expression or denomination.<sup>5</sup> Any liturgical element can point to the Gospel but most liturgies in the United States today place the expectation for an extended Gospel proclamation on the sermon. Preaching and receiving a Gospel message can create a necessary liturgical moment of comfort or discomfort, depending upon the place a listener or preacher finds themselves. Like Alcántara, well-known former Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador and advocate for justice Oscar Romero underscored the role of Gospel proclamation noting the discomfort that the Gospel message can bring. Romero warned preachers and congregants against side-stepping this discomfort, “A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed – what gospel is that?”<sup>6</sup> Sermons must proclaim the Gospel and dare to let it agitate God’s people when necessary while providing space for it to offer solace to others.

As with every liturgical element, sermons can create a necessary and divine distress, and they can provide hope and healing as they tell God’s story in a way that embraces. Sermons can also become places where anger and exclusion are played out. Sermons can be a capstone moment that expounds upon the anger, shame, or exclusion already existing in a liturgy or they can be a place to unpack a message of hope, healing, and redemption. It is difficult for a presiding liturgist to inject their own experiences into the recitation of a creed or into the Gospel reading but preaching is a subjective liturgical element that holds the communicator and congregation together in a vulnerable space. Preachers can divide or unite churches and

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<sup>5</sup> Jared E. Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation* (Baker Academic, 2019), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Oscar A. Romero, *The Violence of Love*, trans., James R. Brockman, S.J. (Orbis Books, 2004).

communities. The Apostle Paul noted this challenge in 1 Corinthians when he commented on the tension Corinthian affinities for Paul, Apollos, or Peter created in that community (1 Cor 1:10-17). Preaching still matters today because of the tremendous power that God ordains to it and because of the hope or harm that human beings who preach hold in their hands.

### **Preachers Are Ordinary People**

Of all liturgical elements, the sermon is the place where pastors spend their liturgical time. Even in traditions that do not place a strong emphasis on the sermon, the time it takes to deliver a sermon surpasses that of most other liturgical elements except for music or prayer, depending on tradition. Liturgists can be staff, volunteers, and children but preaching is typically reserved for trained, lay, or appointed clergy. Some Pentecostal and Quaker traditions do not assign a weekly preacher but in most North American Protestant churches the lead pastor, associate, solo pastor, trained volunteer pastor, or a preaching team delivers the weekly message. Because of both the number of times per year and the length of time preachers inhabit the pulpit, the complexities and nuances of a pastor's life often get played out in the sermon. Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Preachers cannot 'stay out of' their sermons any more than singers can stay out of their songs."<sup>7</sup> Which is to say that in the act of preaching pastors carry into the pulpit their own stories, wounds, and celebrations alongside disillusionment, prejudice, sadness, frustration, and joy. It is impossible to preach apart from our human condition yet at the same time, preachers must be acutely aware of which experiences are helpful for people and which should remain private matters.

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 84.

When preachers step up into the pulpit, they enter a space saturated with customs and expectation. They do not step up onto a blank slate but rather, into a robust history of voices who have gone before them. Lisa Thompson, Homiletics Professor at Union Theological Seminary writes, “Preaching is connected to a tradition across time and space. There is a wide tradition of preaching that intersects with the practice of preaching ... Every preacher and community stand in conversation—and often times in tension—with a tradition beyond herself and the community.”<sup>8</sup> Preaching tells the story of God, the preacher, and that of Christian tradition as well. It speaks the Gospel into a specific context but in so doing, also stands in the stream of every other Christian context that proclaimed the Gospel throughout history in that setting and beyond. The preacher is in conversation with their congregation as well as saints throughout the ages who dared to speak on behalf of God in their own time and location.

### **Preaching in Scripture and the Early Church**

The word sermon itself is not found in Scripture but a reference to preaching appears at least two-hundred times. Old Testament prophets and priests rehearsed the story of God in their liturgies as they interpreted and proclaimed God’s word to the Israelites. Figures like Moses and Ezra instructed God’s people and spoke of rebuke and rescue on behalf of God. Joel 2:15-17 serves as a glimpse into an ancient liturgy where the people are instructed to gather, the assembly is called to order, an invitation to lament and repent is offered, and the priests are instructed to speak to God’s people. In Isaiah 48, the prophet calls together the Israelites and speaks on behalf of God who urges them to listen, “Come together, all of you, and listen.” (Is 48:14) “Come near me and listen to this.” (Is 48:16) Isaiah 55 reads, “As the rain and the snow come down from

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<sup>8</sup> Lisa Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Abingdon Press, 2018), 23.

heaven, and do not return to without watering the earth, and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Is 55:10-11)

In Exodus 4 Moses wrestles with his own limitations after God sets him in a place of leadership to teach the people of Israel, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” (Ex 4:10) Eager for relief from the role he has been assigned Moses asks God for a way out of his assignment. Old Testament preaching and teaching also appears in Nehemiah 8, when the priest Ezra reads to the people from a wooden podium built for the event. Here Ezra reads the word of God aloud, “daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand.” (Neh 8:3) Then the Levites joined in leadership, “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.” (Neh 8:8) The worshipping life of ancient Israel included reading and proclamation of Scripture at their feasts, festivals, and significant moments.

In the New Testament before the birth of Jesus, Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55 is sermonically in its proclamation of what God will do for those on the margins. Early in his ministry Jesus explains that part of the mission on which God sent him was to preach, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.” (Lk 4:43-44). Of the many things Jesus came to do, proclaiming the Kingdom of God was a significant focus. Jesus’ five discourses from the Book of Matthew also exist in shorter form in both Mark and Luke. They

illustrate the style of and sense of urgency in Jesus' preaching and include topics ranging from Christian discipleship to Christian conduct to judgment. In Mark 15:16, Jesus reminds the eleven disciples still with him that the call to preach extends to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." They, too, are preachers sent to proclaim the Gospel.

In Acts 10:42, Peter explains that of the many things Jesus invited his followers to do, he *commanded* them to preach to the people. In Acts 20, we find perhaps the first mention of a lengthy and long-winded sermon when Paul's preaching put Eutychus to sleep. A close examination of this passage will observe that Paul's preaching takes place inside a liturgy, gathered on the first day of the week, book ended by the eucharist:

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted. (Acts 20:7-12)

Any who have endured a long sermon might identify with Eutychus' exhaustion at Paul's prolonged message. Long-winded preachers and exhausted listeners are not new to our time. Paul also declares preaching a gift from God to Timothy and encourages Timothy to steward this gift: "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you." (1 Tm 4:13-14) Paul also urges Timothy, in the face of Christ's eminent return to,

Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Tm 4:2-5)

Here Paul's instructions to Timothy offer a timely warning to modern preachers when Christian nationalism is on the rise in the United States, sanctifying racist, homophobic, and nationalistic lies. Paul's warning that people will huddle around false doctrine to hear what they want to hear is haunting. Preachers must strive to keep their head and endure as they remain faithful to the proclamation of the Gospel.

Women are also identified as preachers in the New Testament. After the death of Jesus, Scripture shows the voice of proclamation was placed upon a woman as Mary Magdalene who returned to the disciples with the first declaration of Jesus resurrection (Jn 20:18). Jesus' interaction with the Woman at the Well in John 4 frees her to proclaim the goodness and love of God. Her shame dissolved; she finds herself racing back into the community that shunned her: "Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?' They came out of the town and made their way toward him." (Jn 4:28-30) Her community heard her and because of her testimony about Jesus, they came themselves to meet him and learned from him.

As early church liturgies took shape, like other liturgical elements, examples from preaching found in Scripture carried over into first and second century sermons. We can locate preaching in an early liturgy by looking again at Justin Martyr's, *On the Day Called Sunday*. He writes that when the people of God gather, "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things."<sup>9</sup> Verbal instruction on Scripture played a role in early liturgies but because liturgies varied depending on context, preaching and time allotted to it also varied. Like our myriads of contexts today, some house

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<sup>9</sup> Roberts, Donaldson, Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 186.

churches focused on the proclamation of the Gospel while for others, the crescendo in the liturgy was the eucharist, baptism, or prayer. Liturgical reformer Dom Gregory Dix criticized Protestant churches that he believed diminish the value of the eucharist with their over-emphasis on preaching. According to Dix, this emphasis held congregants in their mind for too long and allowed their liturgies to become, “a mere focus for the subjective devotion of each separate worshipper in the isolation of his own mind.”<sup>10</sup> For Dix, a heavy liturgical focus on preaching risked an individualism that did not exist within early church liturgies where the sermonic emphasis seen in some traditions today had yet to fully take shape. When communities gathered during the first and second centuries, it was always around a meal where breaking bread together held as much liturgical significance as other elements of their house church worship like prayer, preaching, or extending care for those in need.

St. Augustine’s work on preaching, long hailed as a primer for Western preachers, offers a glimpse into the early proclamation of God’s word. An accomplished teacher and orator before his conversion at Milan, after he established a platform and presence within Christendom, Augustine eventually gathered his thoughts on preaching into one place. His book, *On Christian Teaching*, covers everything from commitment to a text to the preacher’s rhetorical style. He explains how to preach a difficult passage: “One should proceed to explore and analyze the obscure passages, by taking examples from the more obvious parts to illuminate obscure expressions and by using the evidence of indisputable passages to remove the uncertainty of ambiguous ones.”<sup>11</sup> Augustine unpacks an approach to texts that appear to carry multiple meanings as well as warnings about the temptation toward creativity for creativity’s sake: “There

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<sup>10</sup> Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy*, xv.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans., R.P.H. Green (Oxford University Press, 2008), 37.

is a danger of forgetting what one has to say while working out a clever way to say it.”<sup>12</sup> His work illustrates the long held commitment to Scripture and proclamation by preachers across the centuries while providing a glimpse into the rising liturgical importance of sermons by the fourth century.

Fourth century desert mother, Amma Syncletica, reflected on the weight of the sermon and the significant personal work required for a pastor’s preaching to succeed. She comments that the preacher must navigate well the nuances of everyday life, “It is dangerous for one to teach who has not been trained in the practical life. It is like someone who has an unsound house and receives guests; he will cause harm by the collapse of the dwelling. In the same way, those who have not first built themselves up destroy those who come to them. For they may summon them to salvation with their words, but by their evil conduct they injure even more those who follow them.”<sup>13</sup> Syncletica hints at the rich inner life a preacher must curate and the significant formation and reflection with which a preacher must engage to deliver meaningful messages. Preaching must come from one’s lived experience and that experience must include a commitment to spiritual formation and practice. Syncletica reflects the significant thought and personal preparation the Desert Mothers and Fathers urged early preachers to bring into their liturgies.

### **Physical and Ideological Location of Preaching**

In the traditional sanctuary at our church the pulpit is elevated higher than the pews and was designed so that the presiding liturgist sits next to the preaching pastor above where the congregation is seated. Fifty years ago, when the sanctuary was built this architecture reflected

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, *Worshipping with the Church Fathers*, 28.



the congregation's emphasis on preaching and the preacher as one set aside and above the people to deliver the word of God. As our congregation moved through these last five decades, we discovered this separation created an unhelpful distance between preacher and people. As the dominant US culture grew with distrust in pastors and in organizational power, an elevated pulpit was no longer received as positive, so we made a shift. Today, in the exact the same room, the preacher now stands down on the floor in front of the pews to deliver the message and the pulpit remains vacant during the sermon. When we designed a separate contemporary worship auditorium, our request of the architects was to create a space that felt small and inviting where the preacher was elevated only high enough as it took to be visible by the congregation seated on a flat floor. In that space the preacher sits in the front row among the congregation until it is time to deliver the sermon. Both were intentional moves to create connection between the preacher and the congregation and to remove the barrier that our architecture created between the preacher and congregation. Architecture plays a role in reducing barriers to worship. Ryan Burge argues that the secularization of America is irreversible, and people will continue to both leave churches or grow up without them entirely.<sup>14</sup> This data paired with increasing cultural suspicion of organizational power and religious institutions forces a reconsideration of the physical spaces where preaching takes place. For the disaffiliated and suspicious, walking into a room with a preacher looming large and powerful over the people can spark anxiety and fear of judgment instead of awe.

I have now spent two decades in my own congregation's venues and watched as thousands of people sort out what to do during a sermon. Some take notes and listen in earnest while others scroll their phones or count the slats of wood that frame our steeple. On occasion

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<sup>14</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 1176.

people stand up in the middle of a sermon, visibly upset, and storm out of the room. Preaching is an odd endeavor; it is an ancient art that carries personal, historical, social, ideological, and theological expectations that no one communicator can ever meet. Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

Watching a preacher climb into the pulpit is a lot like watching a tightrope walker climb onto the platform as the drum roll begins ... No other modern speaker does what the preacher tries to do ... All the preacher has are words. Climbing into the pulpit without props or sound effects, the preacher speaks – for ten or twenty or thirty minutes – to people who are used to being communicated with in very different ways. Most of the messages in our culture are sent and received in thirty seconds or less, and no image on a television screen lasts more than twenty, yet a sermon requires sustained and focused attention. If the topic is not appealing, there are no other channels to be tried. If a phrase is missed, there is no replay button to be pressed. The sermon counts on listeners who will stay tuned to a message that takes time to introduce, develop, and bring to a conclusion. Listeners, for their part, count on a sermon that will not waste the time they give to it.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, as Taylor suggests, no modern speaker does what a preacher tries to do, returning week after week to the same group, proclaiming the Gospel to a collective who half pays attention or fires off an email in protest if the message conflicts with their own ideas. In our divisive culture today, personal preferences and political ideologies prompt quick reaction to sermons. Listeners expect Gospel proclamation to line up with their own agenda and when they clash, the result is often quick criticism of the preacher instead of self-reflection by the listener. To be clear, quick feedback is essential when preachers wound or exclude others, but feedback can also be a direct response to divine discomfort. Congregants might need to sit just a bit longer with what God is asking them to do and consider if their discomfort is truly due to bad preaching or perhaps, good preaching that jangled a few things loose that God wants sorted out.

Worshippers often choose to attend church on a particular Sunday based on who is preaching. In our world today multiple worship options exist on every smart phone or digital device. Don't like that church or preacher? Just log in and find another. We can switch churches or flip flop between sermons without ever leaving home. Our staff preaching team consists of

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life: Living Out Your Vocation* (Canterbury Press, 2013), 81-82.

multiple voices and we used to post the preacher for each week on our website. Over time attendance patterns shifted based on who was preaching. To curb this pattern, we removed preacher names from our website. Shortly thereafter our front desk phone rang every week with questions about who was preaching. Rarely is an attendance decision made over the presiding liturgist or worship leader, but people make it over the preacher.

Burge's research concludes that while there are many possible reasons for religious disaffiliation, "What can be observed as clear and unmistakable disaffiliation is directly related to political ideology."<sup>16</sup> Preachers are too conservative or liberal, too agenda focused or not agenda focused enough. In 2016, fourteen percent of people left their churches in the aftermath of Donald Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton citing the fact that they felt like their churches were more conservative than they were. Burge notes that often, these political departures occur in more conservative congregations, "A liberal is nearly twice as likely as a moderate and almost five times more likely than a political conservative to be unaffiliated." He goes on to comment that while it is fair to say that liberals have always been more disaffiliated, the disparity today has never as significant as it is today: "A stunning reality is coming into sharper focus: political concerns are driving religious behavior more than theological beliefs are guiding political principles."<sup>17</sup> Congregants now demand preachers align with their ideologies while others leave church in search of a more generous orthodoxy. Sermons can either be a unifying opportunity in a liturgy or the reason people leave. Their place in modern liturgies is tenuous as the more divided our culture in the US becomes, the more worshippers look to the sermon as an affirmation of their beliefs rather than an exploration of the Gospel.

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<sup>16</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 52.

<sup>17</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 52-53.

## **Pushback Against Preachers**

Every Sunday preachers thread a tiny needle; how far do you push people toward God before they push back? Many preachers, including myself, are afraid of that moment when people do push back and while pastors know affirmation is not the goal of their work, simply put, it is easier to be liked and this feels better, too. Pastoral work would be simpler if everyone agreed on everything. Universal likability is not possible or biblical but the temptation to go easy by side-stepping complex topics remains. Preaching on difficult issues can create a cascade of hurt and sever relationships. All the liturgical work to gather and send can be undone in the middle of worship with the sermon. Proclamation of the Gospel can create tension when the Gospel intersects with our lives and convicts us. The preacher is often the purveyor of discomfort for others and for themselves. A Gospel message that preaches hope, comfort, and revolutionary change for the disenfranchised is a message that can disturb and convict those in places of established social, economic, and institutional power.

Biblical interpretation can also create a point of tension between preacher and congregation. Passages preached and received without properly considering the original context perpetuated injustice throughout church history. Lack of contextual understanding can promote biblical ideologies that run against the heart of God. For example, Paul's instructions to women in 1 Timothy 2:12, when removed from the original context, were held as examples to marginalize women for centuries. Textual interpretations that enslaved African Americans or advocated for the erasure of Indigenous cultures were stripped of their original context and presented as God-ordained and authoritative. A preacher might also approach a text as allegory when the congregational tradition expects to hear it literally. Worshippers who expect an inerrant approach to the Bible will often balk at an inspired or infallible approach. Lisa Thompson writes,

“When we preach, we are in a constant negotiation with the value a community places on Scripture.”<sup>18</sup> Few preachers intentionally misuse a text, and most believe that the angle they are preaching is the God-ordained way to interpret it. But Scripture, when presented as a divine, unquestionable authority in the hands of fallible, questionable human beings, will always risk interpretations that exclude or inflict pain on others. Preachers hold a tenable space where Biblical authority, inspiration, and interpretation are played out in the hands of fallible communicators who hold tremendous power.

While every liturgical element carries with it theological meaning, the expectation that the sermon will carry the space for theological reflection is significant. Preaching can provide a helpful pause in the liturgy both physically and mentally. After the sitting, standing, kneeling, and the lifting of voices in recitation of creeds and prayers, one can finally sit during the sermon and reflect for a moment. It is no surprise then, that across Protestant North American traditions, while the sermon varies in length, it is among the longest of all liturgical elements. A Pew Research analysis of 50,000 sermons in four major Christian traditions reveals that:

The average sermon across all four traditions lasts 37 minutes. Sermons at black Protestant churches run more than three times longer, at 54 minutes, than the average Roman Catholic homily of 14 minutes. Evangelical sermons average 39 minutes, while those at mainline Protestant churches typically run 25 minutes ... Historically black Protestant sermons are roughly as long as evangelical Protestant sermons when measured by word count, but 38 percent longer when measured by duration. ‘This suggests,’ the report says, ‘that there may be more time in sermons delivered at historically black Protestant congregations during which the preacher is not speaking, such as musical interludes, pauses between sentences, or call and response with people in the pews.’<sup>19</sup>

The sheer length of time sermons receive makes them a major focal point in North American worship. Throughout church history, some of the most quoted works are sermons from Scripture whether Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount or Paul’s message at Mars Hill. Today, in faith circles and

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<sup>18</sup> Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> David O’Reilly, “In the Beginning Was the Word,” Pew Trust Magazine, June 10, 2020, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/spring-2020/in-the-beginning-was-the-word>.

beyond, historians and advocates for justice will reference sermons by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jarena Lee, Phoebe Palmer, Howard Thurman, Sojourner Truth, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The words of a sermon can linger long after they are preached. Whether the sermon should be the longest element or focal point of a liturgy is debatable but in practice, most North American Protestant churches give significant liturgical and pastoral time to sermons.

Episcopalian and church historian, Samuel Torvend, reminds liturgists about importance of elements beyond the sermon and challenges the sermonic focus of many liturgies today. For Torvend, the sermon as God's story holds equal importance alongside the sacraments and the physical presence of the worshipping community. "It is in [the] assembly, then, that the needs of the body are present in ritual pattern, a series of read, flesh-and-blood things rooted in human experience but reinterpreted, transfigured, by the Spirit's breath: a *common story*, the *water of life*, and *food and drink*; that is, the proclamation of the gospel and the enactment of that gospel in baptism and the Eucharist."<sup>20</sup> For Torvend, it is through the complete liturgy as translated through human experience and the sacraments that God's narrative is expressed. The sermon certainly helps tell the story of God, but that story is expressed in its fullest through the experience of the entire liturgy.

In our digital age, preachers can collect a significant following on social media and other digital platforms which, is not inherently wrong but does open a preacher up to the dangers of pride in new ways. For example, the rampant spiritual abuse of Seattle based Evangelical pastor Mark Driscoll was propped up in part by the widespread dissemination of his sermons and the large following he amassed.<sup>21</sup> Sadly, at the time of this thesis he still has roughly two million

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<sup>20</sup> Lange and Vogel, *Ordo*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Driscoll was widely known in the evangelical world as a conservative, charismatic leader whose sermons endorsed misogyny and male-dominated households and marriages. He spoke provocatively and abusively about

followers on Instagram and Facebook. Thousands of people downloaded Driscoll's sermons who had no interaction whatsoever with the people in his congregation, many of whom were suffering from his abuse. Before its collapse in 2014, Mars Hill had fifteen different locations in the United States with almost 7,000 weekly attenders and thousands more who downloaded their sermons each week.<sup>22</sup> Interviews with Driscoll's former staff reveal the significant energy he put into elevating his personal brand through digital media and widespread dissemination of his sermons. These interviews also tell the story of a pastor who used his positional authority to abuse his staff and preach his brand of misogyny and spiritual abuse through his sermons. Our digital world is a gift in that it provides access to sermons and messages beyond the pews yet at the same time it creates a tenuous space where preachers can build a significant platform separate from their liturgies and congregations.

### **The Holy Spirit and Preaching**

Homiletics professor Will Willimon argues that preaching is truth telling, "Preachers are uniquely equipped to lead; preaching tells the truth about God."<sup>23</sup> This truth-telling is an arduous and difficult task, and the sermon is the element within a liturgy where prolonged truth-telling is expected to take place. Who decides what is true about God? The preacher dangles themselves out there, speaking with conviction, proclaiming the story of God but whether that story is heard is not always up to the preacher. Willimon continues, "Delivery of a sermon is the preacher's job; fostering receptivity to a sermon is the self-assigned task of the Holy Spirit."<sup>24</sup> While it is true

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what he believed was the essential role women should play in marriages and in sexually satisfying men, even if it meant staying in abusive marriages. His staff who later made allegations against him for violent outbursts, anger, and bullying. Driscoll was also accused by multiple sources for plagiarism.

<sup>22</sup> Mike Cospoer, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* (episodes 1-20), Produced by Erik Petrik, podcast, Christianity Today, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/id1569401963>.

<sup>23</sup> Will Willimon, *Leading with the Sermon: Preaching as Leadership* (Fortress Press, 2020), 33.

<sup>24</sup> Willimon, *Leading with the Sermon*, 52.

that the Gospel goes forth under the power of the Holy Spirit, human agency is always in play. If people turn away from the word of God this does not mean the Spirit failed but that the preacher's words, created by a fallible human being fell on other fallible human hearts and minds. The listener can decide not to respond to the call of God, or the preacher can present God's story in a way that injures, harms, or excludes. The Spirit is not always responsible in these moments, preachers and listeners play an active role in how the truth-telling of the Gospel happens.

A preacher can pray, prepare, and deliver a word inspired by God that might fall on the ears of an anxious, lonely, sad, or grieving people. Perhaps they are navigating a significant loss or struggling to make sense of their current circumstances and unable to focus due to the pressures of their situation. The reverse is also true in that a preacher can do good, God-honoring work but their words settle into a space that may or may not be able to receive them. My friend Matthew is chaplain with the Federal Bureau of Prisons where he has served for twenty years. Matthew knows that every time he preaches the chapel is filled with men facing serious charges and legal battles, many have suffered abuse, others have lost connection to their families and are missing significant moments they will never get back. Matthew's sermons land in this intricate space. Some of his men hear the Gospel message as the hope-filled gift they need while others, understandably, cannot receive the message because of the anxiety and anger they carry.

Preachers can pray all they want for their words to be of use, but the reality is that congregations are filled with people struggling to get through today and they might not hear the sermon the way the preacher intended yet at the same time, the sermon might be exactly what they need. Preachers also live stories that include messy divorces, addiction, and kids who get into trouble. For some, preaching is a volunteer role, or they are bi-vocational and work multiple



jobs that carry intense pressures at the same time. When pastors preach from their own experiences, they can open a moment of connection where the Gospel story brings the hope of God to a weary people. However, the opposite is also true, life can be distracting and sometimes the pain and struggle of a preacher makes for a sermon that injures others. Preaching from a place of woundedness is powerful but if preachers are not careful, preaching from their wounds will wound others. Communicators must do the hard work of self-care and self-reflection that Syncretica referenced in the fourth century. They must reflect upon their own circumstances with an eye toward how their own suffering influences, for good or bad, the experience of their listeners. Additionally, pastoring is often a solo career demanding a wide range of gifts that cannot possibly reside in one human being. Some pastors are better care givers, shepherds, or evangelists than they are preachers which means a congregation may receive masterful pastoral care but not an artful sermon. Congregants show up every week to receive their teaching because they are a family of faith and showing up is what family does.

In 1910, author William Austin Smith commented on this unique intersection where proclamation, preacher, and people meet. Writing for *The Atlantic*, his article titled, “The Seven Worst Sermons,” stated:

The Preacher does not arrogantly abuse his advantage by keeping the nose of his congregation down to the grindstone of rapt attention, nor by hurling his listeners at once into the stimulating zone of expectancy, but he modestly lays his sermon-stuff from firstly to lastly just below the threshold of consciousness—to be carried over later, if we care to do so, among other valuable experiences in our subconscious treasury of wisdom.<sup>25</sup>

Smith’s “threshold of consciousness” can be the Holy Spirit. A preacher cannot force a congregation to respond in any specific way but instead leaves the work of proclamation on the

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<sup>25</sup> William Austin Smith, “The Seven Worst Sermons,” *The Atlantic*, November 1910, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1910/11/the-seven-worst-sermons/644532/>.

table and then steps aside as people decide how and if to hold the sermon alongside every other experience of their lives.

### **Preaching and Marginalization**

The history of the American church reveals the diverse role preaching played in liturgies. During First Great Awakening in the United States (1730-1770) camp meetings drew thousands of colonial Protestants together around communicators like George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards. Wainwright and Tucker explain that at camp meetings, “An emphasis on the ‘religion of the heart’ encouraged fervent and emotional preaching.”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, distinctive expressions like the Shaker movement focused on shorter homilies in favor of simplicity and ecstatic worship that included dancing as well as a focus on piety and emotion.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, Protestant Rationalism, influenced preaching that leaned on human intellect to achieve a life of faith, “From a rationalist perspective, worship’s task was to instruct and edify ... Preaching was the main task of worship, inviting hearers to a moral life, and to meet that purpose, worship spaces were designed first and foremost to accommodate public preaching.”<sup>28</sup>

As these different expressions unfolded in white Protestant worship, beyond the eye of watchful owners enslaved people worked preaching into their liturgies in a variety of different ways. Publicly, gifted African American preachers received the opportunity to travel if they kept their sermons in line with white expectations providing an opportunity to manipulate the system of white Protestantism that oppressed them.<sup>29</sup> By playing into these norms, enslaved preachers

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<sup>26</sup> Wainwright and Tucker, *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Worship*, 596.

<sup>27</sup> Wainwright and Tucker, *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Worship*, 596.

<sup>28</sup> Wainwright and Tucker, *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Worship*, 597.

<sup>29</sup> Louisiana Division of the Arts Louisiana Folklife Program. *Black Preaching Styles: Teaching, Exhorting, and Whooping* by Joyce Marie Jackson, Baton Rouge Traditions, 2017. [https://www.louisianafolklife.org/lt/articles\\_essays/brpreaching.html](https://www.louisianafolklife.org/lt/articles_essays/brpreaching.html).

could preach a verbal ascent to white power while at the same time disguising messages to their own people. Itinerant Black preachers could also carry with them and disseminate information among enslaved communities. Preaching became an avenue to propagate dissent. On plantations, preaching played a different role when enslaved people gathered for secret worship under what were called the hush arbors (also called hush harbors). Out of sight and hidden among the trees or fields, slaves created wooden, natural sanctuaries where they could express themselves more freely in worship of God. They cleared the ground of rocks and debris for comfort when kneeling in prayer as well as ensuring that the trees and foliage around them covered their secret meetings.

Elaine Richardson, professor of Literary Studies at Ohio State University calls hush arbors geographies of camouflage and resistance. She writes, “Hush Harbors were sites where slaves broke the prescription against unsupervised or unauthorized meetings by holding their services in secret, well-hidden areas. To be caught was to risk severe punishment because of the hidden transcripts circulating in the spaces. Meetings had to be held in secret.”<sup>30</sup> In the hush arbors enslaved people could preach and rehearse the story of God in ways that honored their shared history and struggle. In the hush arbors Christian faith also mixed with religious expressions carried over from Africa. In her book, *Joy Unspeakable*, activist and African American Studies scholar Barbara Holmes writes about the power of the hush arbors to unite slaves in contemplative worship as they lamented, cried, and celebrated alongside one another. Holmes describes the release of emotion that also took place in these gatherings, “When all were finally gathered in one accord, the pain and distress could no longer be suppressed — tears were not unusual. In the safety of the community, they began to pray about their situation in cries so

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<sup>30</sup> Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson II, *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 225.

heartfelt that heaven itself must have shuddered.”<sup>31</sup> She goes on to explain that despite the terror of slavery hope existed in the hush arbors and the liturgies that helped shape them.

Fredrick Douglass famously taught slaves how to read in his nearby hush arbor and both Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey are said to have launched their rebellions preaching from a hush arbor. These were places of both worship and social action that foreshadowed the Black church and black preaching as it exists in the United States today. In the hush arbors preaching was quiet as, eager to avoid notice, slaves would turn a large pot down in the center to hold the sounds of their voices.<sup>32</sup> As a space for worship that demanded secrecy, impassioned, preaching would have come forth through hushed stories. Through voices that told the story of God from Africa to the American soil they were forced to stand upon, preachers in the hush arbors proclaimed the Gospel in the way their context demanded. Here, stories of exodus and rescue were delivered with energy and honesty that could only be shared out of sight from white slaveowners.

Preaching also played a role in both oppressing women and providing a resource for them to rise up in resistance. Even as women were the majority in most congregations and played an essential role in advocacy and social reform, the liturgies they worshipped within would not allow them to preach. In the early 1800’s Jarena Lee, a free African American woman who converted to Christianity felt a call to preaching while listening to sermons by AME Bishop Richard Allen. Lee later requested his permission to preach but was denied. She would not be deterred and instead, used her voice within a liturgy that recognized her and gave her the space to preach. Eventually, after Allen heard her preach, the liturgy that gave her that space opened an opportunity and in 1819 Jarena Lee became the first widely recognized African American

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices for the Black Church* (Fortress Press, 2017), 60.

<sup>32</sup> Richardson and Jackson, *African American Rhetoric*, 226.

woman preacher. It took until 2016 for Lee to be posthumously ordained.<sup>33</sup> Like liturgies among enslaved people, liturgies both oppressed women and gave them room for resistance. Liturgies today deny still women the right to preach and use sermons to teach against women in spiritual leadership. Passages like 1 Timothy 2 and Ephesians 5 are preached out of context to support the submission of women to their husbands or to mute their voices in the pulpit. Colossians 3:18-25 is a passage that perpetuates multiple systems of oppression including slavery and misogyny.

Sermons can support a political or social agenda by encouraging either acts of engagement or resistance. This power is in part what led to the pairing of popular pastors/preachers like Billy Graham or Jeremiah Wright with US presidents. The connection between preaching and American politics also contributed to the rampant Christian nationalism fueling division in the United States today. Today, Christian nationalism crops up in worship and in sermons outside of worship at places like Trump rallies. McKay Coppins, writing for *The Atlantic*, replays the sermon preached by twenty-seven-year-old evangelist Joel Tenney just before presidential candidate Donald Trump took the stage at an event: “With a shiny coif of blonde hair and a quavering preacher’s cadence, [Tenney] preceded his prayer with a short sermon.” He then went on to lament what he believed to be a stolen election and the unfair attempt to imprison Donald Trump. He quoted from 2 Chronicles and Ephesians warning of eternal damnation for those who would stand in the way of Trump retaking the White House. “‘Be afraid,’ Tenney preached, ‘For rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. And when Donald Trump becomes the 47<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, there will be retribution against all those who have promoted

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<sup>33</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 50.

evil in this country.”<sup>34</sup> Sermons can become weapons within a Christian worship liturgy or act similarly when placed into a campaign rally or similar cultural events.

In theory, when considered a companion alongside other liturgical elements, preaching exists as one among many tools to tell God’s story to shape God’s people in the way of the Gospel. However, in our broken and fallible world, preaching will always risk distorting the Gospel. Often, the preaching pastor crafts the sermon and the liturgy that together, as in the example of Christian nationalism, can lead to arrogance and pride invoking the name of God to bless that agenda. Liturgy is rarely if ever the corrective it could be since preachers are flawed people who often miss when they take an issue or idea too far. But there is still hope. Every week is an opportunity to try again to rehearse the story of God with God’s people. As sermons continue to evolve and explore ideas to meet the needs of people today, there is opportunity within them to invite our spiritual ancestors to speak into our modern era. There can be found in church history a whisper of God that warns against bullying, egoism, and nationalism. It may seem quiet or unheard but every week there exists the possibility that in our broken and misguided lives and communities we might just honor God with the sermons we hold in our hands.

I believe that there are three approaches that can help preachers hold their sermons well. Rare is the person who changes their core beliefs about any topic or idea, including preachers. But if preachers have even the smallest shot at shifting the stubborn posture of people in our divided culture, they must work to do it. Preaching as storytelling, preaching as listening, and preaching that asks holy questions are three ways that modern sermons can engage and transform communities.

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<sup>34</sup> McKay Coppins, “The Most Revealing Moment of a Trump Rally,” *The Atlantic*, September 2024, 10.

## Preaching as Storytelling

Every preacher who has stepped up into the pulpit and honestly reflected on the task before them knows the magnitude and power of the story they are called to tell. The story of God absorbs lived experiences about love, hate, war, peace, joy, mercy, justice, terror, anger, fear, redemption, and resurrection from throughout human history. The Gospel is the narrative that holds all stories together. If preachers are called to proclaim God's grand, sweeping narrative inside a liturgy that does the same, why is it that so many people fall asleep in our pews every weekend?

Some preachers neglect the art of storytelling while others perhaps do not hold that gift. Busy pastors might simply overlook the craft of storytelling due to the harried nature of modern life and leadership. There are budgets to raise and meetings to run, they may not feel as though they have the time uncover every contextual detail or cultural nuance. Sunday morning can seem like a divinely inspired hurry to get to the end of a message with a congregation who will grumble if not dismissed in time for brunch or an NFL kick off. Preachers might forget or refuse to use accessible language and illustrations that capture the holy imagination of everyone from the casual visitor and those on the margins to the most devout. They may miss the fact that proclamation is "an evocative occasion," as Lisa Thompson calls it.<sup>35</sup> For Christians it becomes easy to forget there is a world where words like *grace*, *call*, *God's heart*, or *faith* need to be colored in and defined anew every single week. Yet there remains no greater resource to move people toward acts of love and faith than the creative telling of the Gospel story. The Bible itself is filled with stories; it is a story. Jesus himself was a master storyteller, inspiring attention to the

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<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 26.

craft of preaching as storytelling. The American Bible Society commented on the profound use of storytelling in antiquity and specifically in the Bible:

Scripture is filled with stories and is itself, the grand narrative of faith that tells the story of a loving God who, among many things, sent a storyteller to God's people to demonstrate God's love. Given the pervasiveness of storytelling in Greco-Roman culture generally and in Jewish culture specifically, it is not surprising that Jesus is portrayed as a storyteller and that our understanding of him rests largely on stories told about him. These stories about Jesus circulated in various forms and activities, but most especially in early proclamations about Jesus, generally called sermons. ... In Jewish culture ... their education centered on the stories of the Torah, from creation through the Exodus. When the prophet Nathan needed to challenge and condemn King David's actions, he did it with a story (2 Sam 12). And when Jewish people gathered in their annual rituals to confess their faith in God, they did not formulate abstract creeds and doctrines. They told stories.<sup>36</sup>

The Bible is a story that frames and holds every other story. Proclamations about Jesus came in the form of a story and through sermons that told the stories of God. If Jesus himself was a storyteller and the Bible is a collection of stories, preachers must practice and employ the skill of storytelling in their preaching. Which means that preachers need to discover the nuances in every story, they need to work a narrative arc and move through passages with rich color and texture that sparks imagination in the listener rather than just uploading lackluster reflections with a little bit of theology mixed in.

Columbia Seminary Professor of Preaching, Anna Carter Florence, is an excellent contemporary example of preacher as storyteller.<sup>37</sup> Carter retells biblical narratives with intricate detail, often identifying a fringe character or element that brings forth a provocative angle. She dabbles heavily in unique metaphors gleaned from her own and our shared modern life using vibrant imagery to help listeners imagine the alternative future of God's kingdom. In a world of cliché filled sermons that rush past particularities her intentionally slow and creative work is a

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<sup>36</sup> "Storytelling in Antiquity," American Bible Society, accessed July 6, 2024. <https://bibleresources.americanbible.org/resource/storytelling-in-antiquity>.

<sup>37</sup> I reviewed the following three sermons from Anna Carter Florence's significant body of work: "Girls in the Reeds" preached at the University of Notre Dame in 2017, and "Off the Book and into the Deep" preached at Duke Chapel in 2022, "What Now?" preached at Tomorrow River Lutheran Parish in 2022.



rare gift. She calls congregations to the holy task of imagining together what God is calling them to do. Echoing this work, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The church’s central task is an imaginative one ... one in which the human capacity to imagine – to form mental pictures of the self, the neighbor, the world, the future, to envision new realities – is both engaged and transformed.”<sup>38</sup> Both Taylor and Florence create sermons that model the careful curation required in preaching. Every sermon is a chance to tell the story of God with all its complexities, nuances, and mystery. Every single sermon is an exposition on a passage from a moment in time and a place in history. Even preachers who claim their work as exclusively prophetic, theological, expository, or any other category of preaching, is telling the story of God at that time in that place and translating it for the people of God today, in this time and place.

### **Preaching as Listening**

A good sermon also listens to the people before it speaks. A preacher will not be heard unless they have worked to understand something of the place and people to whom they preach. Jesus knew his audience. He was a Jewish rabbi who emerged from the people. As one who was fully God he knew the heart posture of every person. As one who was fully human, he knew the exhaustion of a long day’s work and a hungry belly, and he told stories from that very human place. Jesus spent thirty years immersed in the stories of his Jewish culture, listening and learning before he began publicly preaching. The Son of God spent thirty years listening before he began publicly preaching. A sermon must listen before it speaks. Who are these people? What do they already know or believe about God? What is important to them? What have they celebrated or suffered? What do they fear? This listening must occur every week even among

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<sup>38</sup> Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 41.

seasoned pastors serving a long tenure in one place. They must continue to listen. Who is new this month? How did the news cycle this week impact my congregation? What makes them upset and anxious? Who is sitting at the margins here but has yet to be fully embraced?

A preacher who knows their context well is a more effective communicator. This basic and introductory step of studying one's context is often missed when preachers step into the pulpit and demand the listener keep up. They often spend significant time researching the context of a Bible passage yet neglect the context into which it is preached. Pastors with a long tenure in one setting struggle here, too. Without ongoing work, they will understand best only one demographic within their congregation. They may not always listen for what worshippers of a different generation, vocation, educational background, or socioeconomic experience need. Will Willimon notes that preachers are finally waking up to focus on preaching as a listener-centered endeavor where, "Listeners now insist that they be put front and center."<sup>39</sup> The work of paying contextual attention, and then adjusting a message based on what the preacher hears, will give a sermon strength by proving to the congregation that they are seen by the preacher. In some settings this might mean abundant use anecdotes and personal stories aimed at the intersection of God's story and felt needs. In other settings, too many stories may be suspect and exegetical line-by-line dissection of a text might be preferred. The specific language, slang, or stories a preacher employs also demonstrates a listening ear toward a specific context. Sermon illustration and quotes from different genders, backgrounds, and life stages demonstrate that listening is taking place.

Beginning with the listener can seem counterintuitive at times. My own seminary preaching courses taught me to ask the ever-important question, what does this text say? A

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<sup>39</sup> Will Willimon, *Listeners Dare: Hearing God in the Sermon* (Abingdon Press, 2022), 52.

problem occurs when preachers stop there. A second question, or perhaps fuller question is, what does this text say to these people? Once the preacher answers that question more listening must take place as they listen on the fringes of the people to whom they preach. What does this text say to the marginalized among us? There is no one homogenous “people” when we ask what the text says to this group of people. What does this text say to the ones in this community who are new or who might be excluded or on the margins? What does this text say to the skeptics? What does this text say to those whom we have injured or overlooked? In his book, *Becoming Human: The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race*, Luke Powery notes that, “radicalized uniformity is the typical pattern of congregations in the United States.”<sup>40</sup> He goes on to explain that churches favor homogeneity that continues to promote the historic, racialized divides in the United States. As Dr. Martin Luther King once famously quipped, the most segregated hour is 11:00 AM on a Sunday morning. The reality in the United States is that most sermons are preached to homogenous congregations. Good preaching will listen for multiple contexts within its community and will tell the story of God so that those on the margins know they are seen, heard, and invited in. Those on the fringes are the ones to whom Jesus listened, preached, and cared for deeply.

Careful listening results in examples and explanations that invite as many people as possible into the sermon. No single story, example, or sermon will resonate with everyone, but they should certainly not exclude others whenever possible. Lisa Thompson sums it up well when she writes that preachers should be aware of and listen for a community’s sacred stories, but they must, “also make use of their own experiences and the experiences of those on the

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<sup>40</sup> Luke Powery, *Becoming Human: The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race* (Westminster John Knox, 2022), 77.

fringes of the community.”<sup>41</sup> Preaching intricately works to frame within the story of God every human story that is present. It weaves together, stories of the preacher, the whole congregation, and the individual people in the room in a way that all can rehearse and experience the Gospel.

### **Preaching Asks Holy Questions**

There are as many preaching styles as there are preachers. Some are drawn to verse-by-verse exposition of texts; others own a more prophetic voice while still others lean into topical preaching. Good preaching resists the urge to give listeners an answer to every question as if the sermon was a timed puzzle that must be solved at the end of the worship hour. Preaching certainly answers questions, but it should always raise them as well. Listening for the God of mystery raises more questions than it answers. If a preacher understands their context, they know that everyone in the room receives their sermon from a different place and that preacher can identify what those places might be. There is no one solution or three-point approach that can tie up the message for everyone, but a well-placed question can open space for everyone to wonder about God. A holy question, as I call it here, is a question that opens us to the marvel and mystery of God. Different from a casual inquiry seeking directives or firm solutions, a holy question it is an open-ended curiosity. It often leads to more questions because the deeper we go into the divine heart of God we discover that God’s story is forever unfolding in unexpected ways. Holy questions resist the urge to land people at easy conclusions drawn for them by the preacher and instead, leave the worshipper with their own work of discovering how God’s story is told in them.

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<sup>41</sup> Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 59.

Throughout Scripture Jesus asked more questions than he answered often responding to one with another question. In Matthew 16:15 Peter eventually declares that Jesus is the Messiah. Leading up to that moment we find Jesus asking his disciples open ended, holy questions so they can process what they have received and form their own response. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13) “But what about you? He asked. Who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16:15) Jesus asked questions of people he met. He listened to their lives, told stories (parables) and he facilitated dialogue that prompted their own thinking and action:

- If you only love those who love you, what reward do you have? (Mt 5:46)
- Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? (Mt 6:25)
- Why does this generation seek a sign? (Mk 8:12)
- Why do you call me good? (Mk 10:18)
- What are you discussing as you walk along? (Lk 24:17)

In my own preaching, I am often afraid that if I leave too many dangling strings, I will tangle everyone up and I struggle to trust that the story of God will guide my listeners along. I am eager for them to land at the conclusions I have drawn for them and often end my messages with a takeaway or a “to do.” By doing this I rob my congregation of the opportunity to sit with the questions a sermon provokes so God can lead them to their own conclusions. Lisa Thompson explains that in a sermon, listeners expect to hear how their beliefs connect to creation and to God but that multiple assumptions may be present at the same time in a sermon. She says, “Through preaching we often gain glimpses into a preacher’s operative understanding of faith instead of a fully thought-out, organized, or systemic understanding.”<sup>42</sup> Her observation stands in

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<sup>42</sup> Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 139.

contrast to the way many communicators approach a sermon. Because listeners come expectant, even if they are not certain of what, preachers often assume they must deliver certainty. They must provide clear, organized thinking after drawing definitive meaning from a text. However, like Thompson's caution, preachers are really offering a momentary snapshot into their own process and conclusions. When preachers embrace the fact that the sermon comes from a place of process this gives the sermon space to breathe and freely ask questions rather than assuming it knows and presents the answers people need. Preaching must trust the congregation enough to ask holy questions and believe that God will lead them to their own answers.

Preaching also asks holy questions in its attempt to offer hope. In our disorienting, violent, and confusing world, it makes sense that people search for certainty. In the throes of disaster and loss, understandably people grasp for anything that might provide a definitive moment of hope or an easy bridge across the chasms of grief that happen in life. This is, in part, why so many people returned to church in a moment of national crisis like the US experienced during 9/11. Perhaps the church can provide the certainty we need? Perhaps the preacher will answer my questions? Ritual and liturgy do provide a type of certainty but not the version that people often grab for or expect the church to offer during crisis.

David Farina Turnbloom, professor of Liturgical Theology at Portland University, writes about this intersection of hope and certainty through the lens of the sermon Friedrich Schleiermacher preached as he buried his youngest child, Nathanael, who died suddenly from scarlet fever at age nine. Turnbloom honors the desire we all have for certainty in moments of loss yet at the same time, reminds us that Christian hope does not equal certainty: "It is a common occurrence to hear hope juxtaposed to fear and uncertainty as poles in a zero-sum game. It is an unfortunate reality that many Christians have been taught that having hope is

synonymous with having certainty.”<sup>43</sup> Pastors are often in a hurry to ease suffering in moments of crisis and loss, they are expected to craft liturgies and sermons that carry these moments with the hope of the Gospel which is often expected to bring certainty.

An alternative approach to hope is found in the “Sermon at Nathanael’s Grave” where, from the foot of his son’s grave, Schleiermacher preaches that grief requires emotional honesty. It resists answering every question and instead opens his listeners up to more questions. He reflects on how honesty that does not minimize loss is free to honor the magnificence of what was. If, as Christians claim to believe, God’s creation is beautiful and good, then when that creation is interrupted by tragedy, the only honest approach to that loss is to state the significance of it. Schleiermacher held the tension of his loss by calling out as unhelpful the eschatological images his congregation quickly grabbed to console him. He addresses these images as unhelpful but resists the offer of a solution and simply names the tension leaving an obvious, holy question hanging. How do we move forward? Christian hope is honest and does not give easy answers when pressured to do so. Hope has power because it speaks directly into grief instead of avoiding it. Turnbloom urges preachers to avoid the temptation to, “generate consolation.” He says, “In preaching, it is tempting to appeal to images and narratives that might provide such solace precisely because they offer certainty.” He goes on to say that in this effort preachers not only attempt to protect their congregation but also protect God.<sup>44</sup> When we turn to God for certainty and God does not deliver, pastors often feel like they must also defend God. Schleiermacher’s sermon is ultimately reverent toward God because it does not demand an answer from God or provide an eschatological answer for the loss. Instead, it pursues the holy questions that no one

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<sup>43</sup> David Farina Turnbloom, “Preaching Hope: Lessons from Friedrich Schleiermacher,” *Liturgy*, 2022 p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Turnbloom, “Preaching Hope,” 2-3.

can fully answer in this life. It makes space for anguish that asks God *why* without offering an answer.

### **Sacred Story Telling in Everyday Life**

While full blown sermons are not part of our everyday routines, like other liturgical elements, lessons from good preaching can teach us something of how to engage in the conversations around faith and spirituality that we regularly encounter. If we really believe that God is loving and good and that the story of God matters not only for us but for the world, we will inevitably find ourselves engaged in discussion around our faith as well as the faith traditions of others. In our wonderfully diverse yet increasingly polarized world every day we work and live alongside people with whom we disagree on any number of issues. Some we study, work, or commute alongside and some live in our homes and are part of our families. Storytelling and listening skills from preaching offer valuable lessons on how to engage complicated spaces with the honest hope of the Gospel. Just as preaching requires the art storytelling, listening, and asking holy questions, living well in a pluralistic society requires the same of us.

If we want to further the common good, be generous neighbors, and engage well in the public square then we must learn first to listen to the stories of others. Who are they? What do they believe and why? What unhelpful postures do I bring to our conversation? It can be difficult for Christian traditions that press heavily into evangelism and conversion to resist the desire for conversations to end with action. At times, the best way to truly listen is to do just that, listen actively and well then end the time together. Learn what you can about another person and then hold their sacred story for what it is. Do not try to fix it, evangelize it, or convert it. Just let it



breathe. If more was meant to come of the connection, the Spirit of God can lead. The listener's first work is simply to listen well.

After listening well, if asked, learn to tell the story of your life in an honest, non-threatening or judgmental way. As Christians we believe our stories are held in God's story. 1 Peter 3:15 reads, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." The word "answer" translates from the Greek word, *apologia*, which means defense and is the word from which we get the term "apologetics."<sup>45</sup> Some Christian traditions, particularly Evangelicals, lean hard into the defense part of this term. True, there is a need for rational dialogue on what Christians believe and why it is part of a logical and viable belief system. However, the penchant of some Evangelicals to argue and defend their faith with facts, figures, and airtight arguments does not often result in friendship. The "reason" for the faith comes most easily through relationship and the sharing of stories. Why do I believe what I do? What experiences in my life led me to the conclusions I have about God? What moments of pain and joy did my faith help me navigate? What are the beautiful, sacred, tangible experiences of God I have had? What are the questions about God that I am still asking? A conversation is far more likely to end in a deeper or new friendship when approached through story and listening than through diatribe and defense.

Finally, like a good sermon, we can learn to ask holy questions. While our daily conversations are not often couched in religious language, we experience holy moments every single day. One need not work in a faith-based profession or approach a conversation from an on

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<sup>45</sup> Bill Mounce *Greek Dictionary*, "apologia," accessed July 6, 2024, <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/ekklesia>.

over spiritualized posture to ask a holy question. We do not even need to proclaim knowledge of God or use a spiritual word to ask a holy question. At work, school, or in our homes we can ask those around us their thoughts on how to move the goodness of God forward without even naming God. How can the most people benefit from this project? How can we make this idea work for people who lack necessary resources? What do you believe about how we should live? What have you learned about loss? Who inspires you? How can I support you? We must learn to ask the questions that help people locate their own place in God's story.

### **Conclusion**

Preaching holds a place in Christian liturgies as a beautiful and daunting invitation from God to proclaim the Gospel story. Like other elements of our liturgies, preaching can be a salve that brings hope and healing to beleaguered hearts. It is also weaponized against others when agendas that exclude and attack get played out as is the case with Christian nationalism or diatribes that preach racism, homophobia, and sexism. As preachers work to sort out their own lives and stories, they must consider how their experiences intersect with the craft of preaching. What hurts and habits do they bring into the pulpit with them? What does the congregation carry? How does it all get played out in the sermon? The art of good storytelling, good listening, and learning to ask holy questions can help position the sermon well inside of a liturgy as well as offer ideas for important conversations that occur in everyday life.

## Conclusion

My first chapter considered the power of storytelling and argued that in corporate Christian worship, liturgies provide the structure through which the story of God is told. Even in our digital era with unlimited access to Christian resources, it is through attending church and working a liturgy that the greatest number of people rehearse together the story of God. Liturgies draw people into the Gospel narrative of love and the redemption of humanity. They work to inspire awe and reverence, creative acts of love, justice, and compassion, and they both comfort and discomfort God's people. Ultimately, liturgies invite communities to practice the story of God together as well as carry moments from that rehearsal with them into everyday life.

Storytelling holds significant cultural power as the dominant medium through which to sell products, advocate for ideas, and call people action. The Christian narrative floats in a sea of competing narratives found throughout our dominant culture. From the NFL to corporate marketing strategies and election cycles, stories from our dominant culture are also framed with expected patterns of behavior and response. Some narratives from our culture are benign while others work to order our love and affection around systems and ideas that run against the heart of God. Christian liturgies hold this same power and act as sources for healthy formation, or they can perpetuate systems of abuse and injustice in God's very name. Throughout church history, liturgies healed, comforted, and resourced congregations during times of crisis. Christian liturgies also propped up and established systems of abuse that were complicit in creating those crises by marginalizing some and perpetuating false narratives against others. In the US, Christian liturgies supported the institution of slavery, removed Indigenous children from their parents, subdued the voices of women, refused to help refugees and excluded marginalized

groups including many communities of color and the LGBTQ+ community. Historic white Protestant liturgies established whiteness as normative, overlooked significant need, and refused to advocate for those in crisis. Today they are experienced by many as quick to pass judgment and slow to offer care and support. Liturgies can offer a source for hope and healing, or they can affirm prejudice and hate.

Throughout Scripture liturgy frames the worship and sacramental life of ancient Israel and later, the New Testament church. Genesis chapter one begins with a liturgy and a liturgical thread runs throughout Scripture into Revelation culminating with an image of eternal worship. As early church worship expanded throughout the ANE, liturgical expressions shifted based on their local context. While in the first and second centuries there was no unified *ordo* for Christian worship, this changed in the third century as Christianity was sanctified and nationalized through various governing bodies. As Christianity expanded beyond borders, colonialism pushed Christian worship onto Indigenous populations and forced assimilation through assumptions by church leaders that white European Protestantism was uniquely ordained by God as the ultimate, divine telling of God's story. The colonizing aspects of liturgy remain today as white Protestant worship culture is exported across the world.

In reaction to the injustice perpetuated in liturgies, worship also became an act of resistance by oppressed people. In coded music, prayer, and secret meetings, marginalized people created their own liturgical expressions that retold the story of rescue, exodus, and freedom. Today, traditions found in historic communities like Black churches in the US tell alternative narratives of justice and activism that push against the oppression and injustice still found in white Protestant liturgies. Worship is often agendized and politicized and while Jesus himself was political and agendized, our own personal preferences, desires, needs, and longings

must submit themselves to the greater Gospel story. Leaning into biblical and historic liturgical elements helps to do this when liturgies expand the Gospel story rather than restrict it for the sake of a privileged few. The three liturgical elements I explored—the call to worship, benediction, and preaching—are examples of liturgical elements that draw from liturgical history while holding beautiful opportunities for modern contextualization. Worship leaders and liturgists should ask the following questions around these, as well as other, liturgical elements.

Through the call to worship, liturgies gather the beloved of God with purpose. Liturgy that gathers must consider unique contextual dynamics and how they intersect with the Gospel. What must a worship leader and planner know about God’s people in their space? What are people experiencing nationally, locally, or personally? How does the liturgy bring them all together at this unique time and place? Do those on the margins feel safe entering? If not, what part of the way we tell God’s story makes worship feel unsafe? How might liturgy ease that discomfort? Does the telling of God’s story comfort some while discomforting others? The story of a loving God who gathers and embraces all must be told. What that embrace looks like and how we gather with others changes over time and liturgies must adapt.

After God’s people are gathered, they are sent. Benedictions hold a sacred power as people leave worship. Into what world are they being sent? What fears do they carry? What local, national, or global chaos do they share? What needs are God’s people sent out to meet? Through the benediction, liturgists remind the gathered assembly that they carry the Gospel with them as they leave. How people move from place to place, what is expected of them at home and work, what they worry about for their friends and family shifts over time and benedictions must shift as well. Today, people are sent out into a dominant culture that holds more digital distractions than ever before. How likely is it that the first-time visitors we just sent out will

etern? What are the competing narratives vying for their attention? Benedictions must engage with modernity and the burdens of our time.

Finally, in the middle of liturgical gathering and sending is the space where preaching and proclamation occur. We now live in an era where the average adult attention span hovers around eight to nine seconds. A person in a pew with an attention span less than ten seconds and an iPhone in their hand are easily distracted. Sermons must adapt and preachers must ask important questions as they craft their messages. What does the word of God say to the people of God in this moment? Does my sermon include ideas and stories that include or exclude? Does my sermon mimic the anger and vitriol of news feeds and media cycles? Does the sermon listen to and consider the stories that surround it? Sermons should offer a space for reflection on how to live out God's story in our complicated world.

In many ways, every approach to liturgy is idealized. As a pastor and liturgist, when I am in a circle of people planning a liturgy, we show up expectant. We lean into history as we seek creative new angles, but we are all fallible human beings trying to discern together what God would have us do. Our own fears show up in our liturgies and the prejudices we carry can unintentionally thread their way into worship. The pressure of a congregation to deliver on their demands sits front of mind of for many pastors and fear of cancel culture can haunt good planning. Yet at the same time, liturgical planning holds a creative, expectant hope. The hope that somewhere in the complex space of our lives, God will reveal God's mysteries to us and the Gospel news will fall on ears that need to hear and hold it. This hope trusts that through our liturgical efforts we will fold in those who are lost, isolated, and alone as we create space to lament and celebrate together. And as we leave worship, we trust that through our efforts, God will use liturgy to continue to shape the lives of our people throughout their week.

This thesis argues that liturgy holds tremendous power for Christian formation and therefore, liturgical planning demands a deliberate and careful approach. In closing I offer three practical ideas that will help worship planners honor the liturgies they lead. First, worship planners must acknowledge the weight and privilege of crafting liturgy. Regardless of the formality, expression, or denominational tradition, every worship service follows a liturgy. Understanding the flow of that liturgy, its history, the story to which it points, and the craft of shaping it is a baseline requirement for every worship planner. In our distracted culture that praises busyness it can be easy for the tyranny of the urgent to distract ministry leaders from this work. Liturgy is a tool for Christian formation and as such, it deserves careful study, understanding, and attention. Worship planners must study their liturgies, understand their histories, and protect the creative space necessary to craft them well.

Second, liturgy planners must hold an acute awareness of their context. They must understand who they are personally and what shaped them as well as the primary drivers within the cultures around them. Leaders must also look for and stand with those on the margins of their communities. How was this congregation created? Who are the dominant voices and why? Who is unseen and unheard and why? What role does the wider church history in the United States play in this setting? What brings joy and what brings pain? Understanding context is slow, intentional work. Leaders must be open to the necessary adjustments in their own lives that honest reflection reveals to them. They must be willing to shift their approach, language, posture, and how they hold their power so that their liturgies reflect God's wide care and concern for all people.

Finally, liturgy planning must take place in community. Even where pastors serve in solo or volunteer positions, liturgical planning best embraces the community of God when it comes

from community. To the best of their ability, worship planners should include wisdom from different genders, races, generations, educational, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. If the worship planner does share proximity with diverse voices, they can consult spaces where various alternative voices speak like conferences, books, podcasts, etc. Diverse groups who gather to plan worship provide space to learn from one another. They offer a redemptive place to correct misuses and abuses of power and can give voice to those on the fringes. Planning in community is cumbersome but necessary work. It ensures the fullest extent of the context is represented and disperses power and leadership among God's people.

In conclusion, every effort put forth to plan liturgy holds the potential to form and shape the people of God beyond the gathered assembly. A young mom in our congregation once shared an unexpected moment she had with her nine-year-old daughter. As their family prayed around the table for an evening meal, at the end of their prayer, the daughter kept the prayer going. She said, "and now we join our voices together in the words that Jesus taught us to pray saying, Our Father who art in heaven." After she led her family in the Lord's prayer the mom commented on how the prayer was unexpected because she had not personally taught it to which the daughter replied: "It's okay mom, I learned it from being in big church." Liturgy shapes us, it seeps into us and creates habits in us. Liturgy forms us. Liturgy expands and shifts and moves us. Liturgy reaches across time and into history and rehearses the story of God with us and for us and with the saints throughout the ages. Receive now with this benediction for those who plan liturgy and worship:

May the words of your mouths and the meditations of your hearts be pleasing to God.  
May you feel the fullness of history and the Gospel tradition in all that you do.  
May you imagine new ways forward shaping safe, creative spaces for all who enter.  
And may you forever know the power of God, the story of faith, and the hope of the Gospel to shape you and those you are called to love now and forevermore. Amen.



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## **Biography**

Tracey Bianchi lives in the Chicagoland area where she serves as the Pastor for Adult Ministries and Group Life at Christ Church in Oak Brook. Her twenty years of pastoral experience include preaching, leading worship and creative arts teams, planning weekly liturgies for traditional and contemporary expressions as well as leading in student, family, and women's ministries. She earned her BA in US History and Political Science from the University of Iowa and her Master of Divinity degree from Denver Seminary where she now serves on their Board of Trustees. She serves as an adjunct faculty at a Chicago area seminary where she teaches worship and preaching courses. Tracey is also a freelance writer and speaker who leads at local retreats and events throughout the Midwest. She and her husband have three high school and college age children.