

SINGING THE PSALMS: OLD WORDS, NEW LIFE

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"...be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making music to the Lord in your hearts...." (Ephesians 5:19)

Many of us already include psalm singing as a regular component of our worship services. But you would be surprised at the number of congregations in which the psalm is simply read, or in which the psalm virtually never materializes at all.

As musicians of the church we must use all the resources at our disposal to articulate why we cannot live without the psalms, and why singing them reaches more deeply into the identity of these incomparable prayers than does speaking them, *and* why singing serves immeasurably to enhance their communicative power.

Here are a few things to keep in mind.

- The psalms are indispensable to our worship (and devotional) life because these are the prayers Jesus himself prayed. As well, their spiritual reach stretches across all of scripture: Martin Luther considered that the Psalter "might as well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible."¹ And Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together* that the Psalter is at the same time God's Word and the prayer of all humankind.
- Praying the psalms connects us directly and immediately to all Christian souls across the ages who have used these very same words in their own situations to be renewed in the assurance of God's love, mercy and compassionate care.
- It is widely acknowledged that the psalms were originally intended to be sung. Aside from the historical value, though, psalm singing as applied to weekly worship enables us to seek, or create, musical means by which the deep emotion and spiritual yearning inherent in these texts may be conveyed, *and* by which a lively interest in the Psalter as a whole may be encouraged within our congregations.
- In terms of its liturgical purpose, the psalm is much more than just another reading. It provides us with a communal response to and meditation on the Old Testament reading, and it positions us to take the Gospel reading deep into our hearts. Kathleen Harmon, co-author of the annual resource [Living Liturgy](#), has this to say: "The psalm is a response to the entire liturgy of the Word – to all the readings (for a given day). The psalm pulls it all together." And, she adds, "it interprets the other readings AND it interprets us. It is doing something to us."

¹ Luther's Works, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Concordia Publishing House, 1955: 35:254.

With this in mind: What do you, and how?

- For those who have never sung the psalm: Start with the basics. The best beginner's resource is the Evangelical Lutheran Worship edition of Augsburg Fortress' three-volume [Psalter for Worship](#), containing simple refrains and harmonized tones for all Sundays, the week of Holy Week, and festivals and lesser occasions. Or, use these refrains and go back to the old set of tones in the Lutheran Book of Worship, many of which are easier for beginners to navigate than those in ELW.
- Even better, try writing your own refrains based on the appointed verse. You can locate this verses in the Psalter for Worship and in the texts for each day on [sundaysandseasons.com](#). Or, decide for yourself, based on the constellation of readings for the day, which is the key verse that should constitute the refrain. In writing refrains, here are a few things to consider:
 - Before you start, spend time with the psalm and all the readings for the day. What is the heart of the prayer which the psalm lifts to God? Let the music that you write flow out of that deep understanding.
 - Work from the incomparably beautiful, poetic translations in ELW rather than those in NRSV.
 - Make sure your refrain is not only singable but memorable. This is the great gift of music as employed in worship: The melody enables us to remember the words at the drop of a hat. Music is invaluable in the teaching of scripture.
 - Generally, keep it simple. Simple does not have to mean dull! Pile on too much harmonic or melodic complexity, or too many instruments, and the effect will distract from the text rather than enhance it.
 - Make sure you or your cantor or choir sing the verses, and the refrain, with great expression. While the purpose of the psalm in worship is meditation and not proclamation, we can still bring dynamic and other coloristic shadings to our singing that convey the impassioned prayer that resides within these words.
 - Work carefully through how you plan to get from the psalm tone back into the refrain. The congregation must know with absolute certainty when it is time to sing. Almost always some kind of thoughtful transition is required. Augsburg's *Psalter for Worship* does not provide for this, so conscientious musicians must work these out as well when that printed resource is used.
- Those who are more advanced in their practice of psalmody, and who have good choral forces at their disposal, will surely want to immerse themselves in Augsburg Fortress' two-volume [Psalm Settings for the Church Year](#). Let the creativity of these settings ignite your own imagination about ways in which you may enlighten, inspire and encourage those in your congregations in the infinitely rewarding practice of singing the psalms.

God be with you in all your endeavors as you serve the Lord with gladness and come into God's presence with a song!

More resources: The ELCA web site has a [page](#) devoted to the history and purpose of psalm singing.

Why do we sing the Psalms?

While the Book of Psalms looks like just another book of the Bible, it is quite a different book from the rest. The book of Psalms is a collection of songs that were sung by the Jewish people throughout their long history. Christians inherited these Psalms as songs to sing when we were grafted into that great tree of Israel's history through the death and resurrection of Jesus. These songs of praise and lament, of corporate ceremony and personal devotion, of holy history and individual confession are a gift to the Church. As Church, we are invited to sing these prayers back to God and treasure them as the gifts they are.

We sing Psalms in our liturgies in a variety of places. For each Sunday and festival of the Church Year, a Psalm is appointed to follow the first reading in the Word portion of the liturgy. That Psalm serves as the sung response to the first reading, turning the themes of that reading into a prayer, and often creating relationships to the other readings for the day. Another sung response follows the second reading on Sundays and festivals, often called the Verse or the Gospel Acclamation. What is established in this Word part of the liturgy is the pattern of hearing followed by a sung response. This is a natural pattern – listening, singing, listening, singing, and listening – a pattern we receive from Jewish Temple and synagogue worship, and a pattern we inherit in the Christian liturgy from its earliest times. The Psalm on Sunday mornings is not a fourth reading for the day. It functions as a biblical way to sing our thanks or petition to God in the spirit of the first reading.

We sing Psalms on Sundays in other places in the liturgy. Some congregations sing, "What shall I render to the Lord..." as the collection is gathered and the table prepared for the holy Meal. This portion of Psalm 116 helps to interpret the actions of the liturgy at the time. The Psalm reminds us that what we can give in response to the goodness of God is "a sacrifice of thanksgiving." So we "lift the cup of salvation" in the great prayer of thanksgiving at the table, having been reminded by the Psalm of the response God desires.

The church's received pattern of daily prayer includes the regular use of Psalms. In fact, those who sang daily prayer in the monasteries of the Dark Ages made it a point to sing through all 150 Psalms in a week! Lutherans have made particularly good use of the daily prayer offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, in which Psalms are an important part. At Evening Prayer, we sing Psalm 141 to give voice to the idea of letting "my prayer rise before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." At Morning Prayer, some sing Psalm 95 to invite all people to "come...sing to the Lord; let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation." And later, as Morning Prayer continues with the reading of scripture, Psalm 95 urges us to "not harden our hearts as our ancestors did at Massah and Meribah, but today, to listen to God's voice." In addition, the daily prayer offices call for the regular use of additional Psalms after these particular Psalms of evening and morning.

The structure of the Psalms makes them correspond to the natural flow of music. Often, Psalms employ parallelism, a device in which one part of the verse makes a statement then the next part of the verse says the same thing in a corresponding or parallel way. For instance:

The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice;
The voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor. (Psalm 29:4)

This parallel structure works well with music, particularly as musical phrases often have melodies that answer each other.

The methods for singing Psalms are various. The Psalms in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* are pointed for singing to simple tones printed on pages 337 and 338. Other tones with these same structures could also be used. Psalms included in various worship bulletins and aids are often pointed in this manner as well. These tones have their origins in the great Psalms tones that were part of the music known as Gregorian chant or plainsong. These tones

were later harmonized and used by Anglicans, known as Anglican chant. Psalms can be chanted between two groups within the assembly, such as the choir and congregation, or a cantor and the full assembly, alternating between the two groups by full verse. Alternation by half verse is less successful.

Sometimes Psalms might be sung with a refrain used at the beginning and end of the Psalm and perhaps at various places throughout the body of the Psalm itself. The refrain is often a key verse from the Psalm, lifting up the main idea of the song. Then a cantor or a choir, inviting the assembly to reflect upon the sung text, sings the body of the Psalm.

Many hymns are paraphrases of the Psalms. Poets from both the Calvinist and Lutheran reformations of the Church created complete sets of metrical paraphrases of the Psalms. "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" (ELW 632) is Isaac Watts' Psalm 90. "All People That on Earth Do Dwell" (ELW 883) is William Kethe's Psalm 100. Many hymnwriters today continue that legacy of poetic paraphrases of Psalms. The Psalms have been, and continue to be, the core hymnbook of both Jews and Christians.

Finally, the reason why we sing the Psalms is in essence no different than why we sing in the liturgy at all. We sing because in singing we join together in common breath and melody in a manner that no other medium can duplicate. Public corporate reading simply cannot match what occurs when people sing together. And when we sing, our song is joined to the saints and angels of all times and places. We become an assembly unified in purpose and thought. And by our singing, we hear God's Word for us, and the world hears it loud and clear.

Resources

- [*Psalter for Worship*](#). Augsburg Fortress Publishers. Comes in three volumes: Year/Cycle A (Item No. 0806635746); Year/Cycle B (Item No. 0806635754); and Year/Cycle C (Item No. 0806635762). These volumes include refrains, accompaniments, tones, instrumental parts, and vocal descants for the Psalms printed on the Celebrate and Jubilate bulletin inserts.
- *The Psalter: Psalms and Canticles for Singing*. Westminster/John Knox Press. This large volume contains all the Psalms used in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) in responsorial forms. Many of the settings in this volume include translations with attention to inclusive language. Other biblical canticles are also included. ISBN: 0-664-25445-4.
- *The Psalter for the Christian People*. The Liturgical Press. *The Book of Common Prayer Psalter* emended for inclusive language. Also includes a larger essay on psalm pointing and psalm singing methods. ISBN: 0-8146-6134-3.
- Additional psalm tones in the same format as the tones in Lutheran Book of Worship can be found in both *Lutheran Worship*, the hymnal of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (Concordia Publishing House) and *This Far By Faith*, Augsburg Fortress (also with refrains by Leon C. Roberts and Rawn Harbor).
- [*Psalm Song*](#). Augsburg Fortress. Three volumes: Vol. 1 (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany; Item No. 0800657705); Vol. 2 (Lent, Holy Week, Easter; Item No. 0800657713); Vol. 3 (Ordinary Time; Item No. 0800657721). The collection contains 79 Psalms with responsorial refrains with piano based accompaniments by a variety of composers.