

SUNDAYS AND SEASONS

YEAR B 2018





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Introduction

Welcome to the 2018 edition

Maybe you have been relying on *Sundays and Seasons* since its inception twenty-three years ago. Perhaps you are encountering it for the first time. You are welcome here! As it has from the beginning, the Sundays and Seasons family of resources continues to support week-by-week planning for Lutherans with content and ideas shaped by the Revised Common Lectionary, the church year, and the assembly gathered around word and sacrament. Or, to say it the way its first editor, Samuel Torvend, said it, “*Sundays and Seasons* points us to that merciful place of encounter where God comes to abide among us in the holy gospel and the sacraments of grace: the worshiping assembly.”

Sundays and Seasons has expanded beyond a single print volume into a family of resources that includes a robust online planning tool, sundaysandseasons.com (see a list of the whole family on page 2 of this volume). In 2014, we introduced *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*, an annual print resource that encourages and provides help for lectionary preaching, taking into account all the readings for the day, in addition to the rest of the service and the day itself in the church year. For each day, someone writing from the perspective of a scholar addresses the question, “What would I want my pastor to know about these readings, this day, in approaching the sermon-writing task?” And a practicing preacher—a different one for each day—provides ideas for ways to craft a sermon that compellingly confronts the worshiping assembly with law and gospel in the vital Lutheran tradition.

With the whole church

This resource would not exist without the creative talents of many people across the church. Those who create content for *Sundays and Seasons* are people just like you. They are pastors, musicians, associates in ministry, members of worship committees and altar guilds, seminary professors, visual artists, and deacons. They work full time, part time, or are volunteers in their churches. They serve large and small congregations and campus ministries in rural areas, small towns, cities, and suburbs in the United States, Canada, and abroad. They come from various cultural contexts, and with different approaches to worship in word and sacrament. Over the past two decades literally hundreds of people have contributed to *Sundays and Seasons*. Here's this year's group.

Visual art

Christina Saj (cover art) has had a longtime fascination with spiritual objects and universal symbols. Using their formal and structural elements as a departure point, she creates paintings in which the symbols can be recognized and reinvented so they may reflect the character of the time in which they were created. Christina lives and works in Cedar Grove, New Jersey. www.christinasaj.com. **Gertrud Mueller Nelson** (interior art) grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is an illustrator, author, speaker, and designer. Montessori, the domestic church, and Jung's psychology are often subjects of her lectures and writing. She has written and/or illustrated thirteen books including the best seller *To Dance with God* (Paulist Press, 1986). Best of all, she is the Oma of three grandchildren. Gertrud lives in San Diego.

Annual and seasonal materials

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge (introduction to Mark and John) is the dean and president and professor of New Testament at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. She is the co-editor of the Fortress Commentary on the New Testament and author of *A Lot of the Way Trees Were Walking: Poems from the Gospel of Mark* (Wipf & Stock, 2015). **Gail Ramshaw** (new old prayers of the day), a Lutheran laywoman, studies and crafts liturgical language from her home outside of Washington, D.C. **Julie B. Sevig** (preparing for Advent, preparing for Autumn, preparing for November), communications specialist at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, credits her congregation, Holy Trinity Lutheran in Chicago, for shaping her appreciation for liturgy and the liturgical year. **Hilary Ritchie** (Advent service of lament and hope) studied at Bethel University and Princeton Theological Seminary. She is a Minnesota native and a nature, theology, and graphic design enthusiast. You might find her playing violin or guitar on a Sunday morning. **Erik Christensen** (preparing for Christmas, preparing for the time after Epiphany) is the pastor with St. Luke's Lutheran of Logan Square, which recently moved from a neo-Gothic sanctuary to a loft-style storefront in Chicago. **Richard Bruxvoort Colligan** (Christmas calls to worship) is a freelance psalmist bringing adventurous songs to the wider church. He's part of the body at Emanuel Lutheran in Strawberry Point, Iowa. **Michael Coffey** (preparing for Lent) is

pastor of First English Lutheran in Austin, Texas, and author of *Mystery without Rhyme or Reason: Poetic Reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary* (Wipf & Stock, 2015). **Jon Niketh** (preparing for the Three Days, preparing for Easter) serves as pastor of First Lutheran in Lynn, Massachusetts on Boston's north shore, and chairs the New England Synod's worship team. **John Roberts** (scripts for the Vigil of Easter and Day of Pentecost) is pastor of Holy Family Lutheran in Chicago. **Katya Ouchakof** (preparing for Summer) serves as co-pastor of Lake Edge Lutheran in Madison, Wisconsin. She enjoys canoeing, knitting, Star Wars, the Bible, and her family.

Prayers of intercession

Kyle Schiefelbein earned his PhD in liturgical studies from Graduate Theological Union and is a member of St. Mark's Lutheran in San Francisco. **Jennifer Manis** serves at Lutheran Campus Ministry in Raleigh, North Carolina. She encounters God's peace in the swimming pool and eating with friends. Pastor **Julie Kanarr** serves Christ Lutheran in Bel-air, Washington. In addition to writing, she enjoys bicycling, camping, and sea kayaking. **Kevin Shock** gladly commits most of his time to God and dogs. He and his spouse, Lisa, live in Howard, Pennsylvania. **Melissa Bills** is associate pastor of First Lutheran in Decorah, Iowa. **Jennifer Agee** is a freelance editor and writer who holds an M.A. from Wartburg Theological Seminary. Pastor **Lydia Posselt** serves Family of God Lutheran in Buckingham, Pennsylvania. In her free time, she enjoys writing, traveling, reading novels, spoiling her two cats, and watching too much Netflix. **Jared R. Stahler** is associate pastor of Saint Peter's Church, mission partner with Iglesia de Sion, in New York City. Both are Lutheran ministries shaping life through the arts, music, ecumenical and interfaith relationships, and immigration accompaniment and advocacy. **Michael Tassler** is pastor of Grace Lutheran in Colorado Springs, where, if you don't like the weather—can't imagine why—just wait 15 minutes! **Jason DeRose** is a member of St. Paul's Lutheran in Santa Monica, California, where he serves on the church council. He is also NPR's Western Bureau Chief and senior editor for religion and LGBT issues.

Ideas for the day

Melody Eastman pastors at Grace Lutheran in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and serves on the board of directors of Lutheran Services in America and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. **Rebecca Liberty** has served in congregations and campus ministries in the western United States and is now pastor of Redeemer Lutheran in Bangor, Maine. **Anne Edison-Albright** is a pastor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Pastor **Will Storm** serves Memorial Drive Lutheran in Houston, Texas. In his free time, he enjoys the Sunday crossword with his wife, Erin, and walks with his dog, Moe. **Clint A. Schnekloth** is lead pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran in Fayetteville,

Arkansas. He is author of *Mediating Faith: Faith Formation in a Trans-media Era* (Fortress, 2014). Rev. **Tuhina Verma Rasche** is the Networker for and an (un)intended disruptor with #decolonizeLutheranism. She is an Indian-American living life in the hyphen and has a complicated relationship with Jesus. **Tom Lyberg** is senior pastor of St. John Lutheran in Winter Park, Florida. After serving in northwest Ohio, he is not missing snow and is enjoying all the benefits of a Disney World annual pass. **Tim Brown** is the senior pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran in Raleigh. He loves beer, writing, his wife and two boys, and brevity. **Heidi Heimgartner** is a parish pastor in Blooming Prairie, Minnesota. She and her spouse parent two elementary-aged sons who give great sermon feedback. The Rev. Dr. **Keith Spencer** serves Trinity Lutheran in Pembroke Pines, Florida as pastor, bread baker, and butterfly gardener. He is married to Piper and father to Christian, Thomas, and Luke. Photography is his passion. **Marissa Sotos** is pastor/mission developer at Tree of Life Lutheran in Minneapolis' North Loop neighborhood. She lives in Chaska, Minnesota with her wonderful wife Maggie and their terrible dog Luchi. After 15 years as a professor of religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, **Karla Suomala** moved to the Bay Area and is a visiting scholar at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. **Joel Nau** is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran in Winterset, Iowa. **Paul Walters** is pastor of Lutheran Church of the Master in Troy, Michigan. Paul is Brandy's husband (20 years and counting), father to three wonderful boys, and a Knight of Sufferlandria. **Michael Coffey** (see seasonal materials) also contributed ideas for the day to this volume.

Other weekly materials

Sharolyn Browning (let the children come) is the pastor with Holy Cross in Austin, Texas, and is also a Godly Play Trainer. She pinches herself daily to make sure this wonderful life is real. **Gail Ramshaw** (images in the readings; connections with the liturgy), a Lutheran laywoman, is the author of *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*, *Christian Worship: 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals*, and *What Is Christianity?* (Fortress Press, 2002, 2009, 2013).

Music suggestions

Daniel Schwandt (hymns) is the cantor of Immanuel Lutheran in Chicago and is pursuing a Master of Sacred Music degree at the University of Notre Dame. **Cheryl Dieter** (psalmody) is business manager for the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. **Lorraine S. Brugh** (global) is professor of music and director of chapel music at Valparaiso University. She serves as executive director of the University's Institute of Liturgical Studies, which annually brings church leaders across the country together to study and reflect upon worship practices. **Justin Rimbo** (praise/contemporary) serves Sobremesa, a new ELCA community in Columbia, South

Carolina. He truly believes that Lutherans can use contemporary worship music and not sell out their theology. **Omaldo Perez** (choral) has served Lutheran congregations in New Jersey, Arizona, Washington, and now Ohio, where he is the music director and organist at Zoar Lutheran in Perrysburg. **Andrea Baxter** (children's choir) serves as the associate director for music at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran in Lansdale, Pennsylvania where she directs a graded children and youth music program. **Shari Shull** (keyboard/instrumental), deacon, serves Agnus Dei Lutheran in Gig Harbor, Washington, as minister of music. **Jane Irvine** (handbell) is a veteran music teacher and serves as organist/handbell director at St. Luke's Lutheran in Marietta, Ohio. She has conducted several area handbell festivals and has been a clinician for Augsburg's summer music conference.

You make it happen

Sundays and Seasons continues to be a collaborative endeavor each year. In our editorial conversations here at Augsburg Fortress we regularly evaluate the scope, format, and quality of the content provided in these pages. Your feedback, collected from you firsthand at events around this church, from postings in various forms of social media, from phone calls and emails to our sales and service representatives, and from surveys, helps us make decisions about how to adjust content so it is even more helpful, or, frankly, to leave it alone because it is doing its job. You, dear partners in ministry, make this resource happen. I welcome your ideas for future content, your suggestions for potential contributors (maybe you!), and your constructive feedback. Thank you for the trust you place in the changing roster of contributors who offer their time and talent to the whole church through *Sundays and Seasons*. Even more, thank you for the many and various ways in which you care for the Sunday assembly and its worship of the triune God.

Suzanne K. Burke, general editor



December 3, 2017

First Sunday of Advent

Stir up your power, and come! The psalmist's plea in Psalm 80:2 has become familiar to us in the Advent prayers. Isaiah wants God to rip the heavens open. Both cry out for an apparently distant, angry God to show up, to save, to restore. When we hear Jesus describing the coming of the Son of Man with stars falling from heaven, it can sound dire and horrible, not like anything we would ever hope for. But when we really look at the suffering of people God loves, we can share the hope that God would tear open the heavens and come.

Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection awaken us to the threatening dangers of our sins, and keep us blameless until the coming of your new day, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia. Show us your steadfast ¹love, O LORD,* and grant us ¹your salvation. *Alleluia.* (Ps. 85:7)

Readings and Psalm

Isaiah 64:1-9

This lament comes from a people who have had their hopes shattered. The visions of a rebuilt Jerusalem and a renewed people of God, spoken of in Isaiah 40–55, have not been realized. Instead, the people experience ruin, conflict, and famine. This lament calls God to account—to be the God who has brought deliverance in the past.

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved. (Ps. 80:7)

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

As the Christians in Corinth await the advent of Jesus, Paul reminds them how the Lord has already enriched them through spiritual gifts and will continue to strengthen them until the coming day of the Lord.

Mark 13:24-37

In today's reading, Jesus encourages his followers to look forward to the day when he returns in power and glory to end all suffering.

Preface Advent

Color Blue

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Guided by the light of Christ, let us pray for the coming dawn of joy, healing, and comfort for all God's people.

A brief silence.

Give light to your people, Lord. As the darkness grows and we await the return of daylight, give new life to your church. Shape our communities to be faithful vessels of the gospel for the sake of the world. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Restore your creation, Lord. You give the earth opportunities for both sleep and awakening. Thank you for the gift of restful seasons so new life may grow according to your appointed time. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Bring peace to the nations, Lord. Keep us alert to injustice and oppression, give us courage to cry out for what is right, and guide world leaders toward fairness and peace for all. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Stir up compassion in us for all who wait for you. Be near to those whose lives are shaken, those who are experiencing loss, those who long for healing and wholeness, those who live with HIV and AIDS, and those who are in any kind of need (*especially*). Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray for child care workers, teachers, Sunday school leaders, and all who nurture and educate children. We give you thanks for their diligence and devotion. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

From ages past, your faithfulness has never failed. Shine your face upon us and bring us into the company of all your saints in light (*especially the missionary Frances Xavier*). Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We raise our prayers to you, O God, in the name of the one who is, who was, and who is to come, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Images in the Readings

The four gospels repeatedly refer to the Jewish apocalyptic figure called the **Son of Man**, a mysterious humanlike judge who as part of the cosmic upset at the end of time will appear in the sky to represent God to the people and the people to God. The term does not mean that Jesus was the human son of Mary. Today's several readings describe the end of the world with the arrival of the Son of Man in both frightening and comforting language. As Mark says it, the sun will be darkened, yet summer buds promise new life.

There are many biblical references to the **fig tree**. An image in ancient myth and literature for male fertility, the fig tree provided both food and shade for the Israelites, and even clothing in the story of the fall. Thus in Mark 13 the fig tree is a positive image for the arrival of God. What is now in bud will see its fruition.

God is like a **potter**, shaping us who are made of clay. Not only did God create the universe, but God also forms us daily in the grace given us in Christ Jesus.

God will assemble us from **the ends of the earth**. The author imagines earth as a flat four-cornered plain edged with mountains. The evangelist, only three decades after the ministry of Jesus, anticipates that the elect will come from all corners of the earth.

Ideas for the Day

- Worship in Advent helps our assemblies develop a deeper spiritual context for the celebration of Christmas by giving voice to our world's longing for salvation. Yet in some places Advent's unique gifts as a season of preparation can disappear behind a countdown to Christmas. As you plan for this season and perhaps return to familiar traditions in your context, consider ways to call your assembly into a deeper experience of preparation to celebrate the birth of Christ. Share ways for your assembly to bring Advent into their homes by distributing Advent wreath kits with a simple home lighting service. An example is included in the seasonal rites for Advent (pp. 23–24). Invite people to a range of spiritual disciplines, such as service, prayer, or fasting. Check out Advent Conspiracy's simple strategy for escaping our culture's tendency toward greed and consumerism in this time (adventconspiracy.org).
- For some, this week's apocalyptic scriptures may evoke Hollywood blockbusters about the end of the world, such as *Independence Day* (1996) or *Armageddon* (1998). Jesus' words about the coming of the Son of Man come right after he has predicted the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. While we often resist the loss of old ways and institutions, we meet a God in the scriptures who often uses such moments to create something new. In his short story "The Destructors" (widely available for free online), Graham Greene explores the idea that destruction can be a form

of creation. Where is your community experiencing such losses? What possibilities is God opening through them?

- Our texts are filled with images from the natural world, calling to mind other places in scripture where creation is shown groaning and celebrating. In Advent, such passages remind us that we long for a savior to come into this physical reality in the flesh. Ponder ways to engage the underutilized sense of touch in worship. Borrow the image of God as potter and distribute small pieces of clay. Invite people to form the clay from a misshapen blob into something else during confession and forgiveness as you draw upon language from Isaiah about how God reforms us daily.

Connections with the Liturgy

The sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer is thinking of the threats and dangers of the eschatological end of time: thus the 1975 translation, "save us from the time of trial." We beg God that when met by such trials, we will be saved by Christ. Most biblical translators no longer render the Greek as referring to "temptation," as did the old translation of the Lord's Prayer.

Let the Children Come

Let us begin the year with the words of the prophet Isaiah, "We are the clay, and you are our potter." God is the one who forms faith. When we work with children, in our frenzy to find the best way for faith formation, we can forget the main actor in the story. God is the potter, and the whole church gathers around the font and promises to nurture the faith that God will continue to mold and shape throughout this lifetime. How is fresh, new faith stirring and whirling through your assembly this Advent?

Assembly Song Gathering

Fling wide the door ELW 259, LBW 32

Creator of the stars of night ELW 245, LBW 323

Light one candle to watch for Messiah ELW 240, WOV 630, st. 1

Psalmody and Acclamations

Callahan, Mary David. "Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19" from PWB.

Jenkins, Stephen. "An Advent Psalm." SATB, assembly, org, opt U or cant. MSM 80-003.

Wold, Wayne L. "Psalm 80," Refrain 1, from PSCY. (GA) ELW 170 with proper verse for Advent 1.

Hymn of the Day

Lo! He comes with clouds descending ELW 435, LBW 27

HELMSLEY

My Lord, what a morning ELW 438, TFF 40, WOV 627

BURLEIGH

If God my Lord be for me ELW 788, LBW 454 *IST GOTT FÜR MICH*

Offering

Lord our God, with praise we come ELW 730, LBW 244
 Let all mortal flesh keep silence ELW 490, LBW 198, sts. 1-3

Communion

Come now, O Prince of peace/*Ososõ, ososõ* ELW 247
 Each winter as the year grows older ELW 252, WOV 628
 The King shall come ELW 260, LBW 33

Sending

Rejoice, rejoice, believers ELW 244, LBW 25
 Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding! ELW 246, LBW 37

Additional Assembly Songs

- O Savior, rend the heavens wide LBW 38
- Lift up your heads, O gates WOV 631
- Many will come MSB2 S544
- ☉ Lupembe tune/arr. Austin C. Lovelace. “In Zion” from *Set Free: A Collection of African Hymns*. SATB. AFP 9780806600451. Out of print.
- ☉ Mugisha, Cranmer. “Come and Let Us Worship God” from *One Is the Body: Songs of Unity and Diversity*. SATB. GIA G-5790.
- ☉ Assad, Audrey/Matt Maher/Michael Gungor/Paul Moak. “Love Comes Down” from CCLI.
- ☉ Houge, Nate. “I Always Thank My God” from *Becoming Liturgy*. natehouge.com.
- ☉ Jenkins, Chase/Dan Hamilton/Robbie Seay/Ryan Owens/Taylor Johnson. “Shine Your Light on Us” from CCLI.
- ☉ Ligertwood, Brooke. “Hosanna” from CCLI.
- ☉ Rundman, Jonathan. “Wide Awake” from *Sound Theology*. jonathanrundman.bandcamp.com.
- ☉ Smith, Martin. “Did You Feel the Mountains Tremble?” from CCLI.

Music for the Day

Choral

- P Bisbee, B. Wayne. “Come, Thou Bright and Morning Star.” SATB, kybd. AFP 9781506413853.
- Fedak, Alfred V. “Come, Jesus, Come.” SATB, kybd or str, opt fl or C inst. SEL 405-210.
- ♫ Hobby, Robert A. “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending.” SAB, org, assembly. CPH 98-3562.
- Schalk, Carl. “Stir Up Your Power, O Lord, and Come.” SAB, org. MSM 50-0205.

Children’s Choir

- P Horman, John D. “Psalm 80” from *ChildrenSing Psalms*. U, assembly, kybd, opt tamb. AFP 9780800663872.
- P Kadidlo, Phil. “He Came Down with God Is So Good” from *ChildrenSing Around the World*. U/2 pt, pno, perc. AFP 9781451485998.
- McRae, Shirley W. “A Litany for Advent.” U/2 pt, pno, fl. CG CGA570.

Keyboard / Instrumental

- ♫ Benson, Robert A. “My Lord, What a Morning” from *Organ Plus Anthology: Settings for Organ and Instrument, vol. 2: Advent/Christmas*. Org, C or B flat inst. AFP 9781506413761.
- P ♫ Organ, Anne Krentz. “My Lord, What a Morning” from *Piano Reflections on Advent Tunes*. Pno. AFP 9781451462647.
- P Organ, Anne Krentz. “Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers” from *Piano Plus: Hymns for Piano and Treble Instrument: Advent/Christmas*. Pno, inst. AFP 9780800638542.
- P ♫ Osterland, Karl. “Helmsley” from *Augsburg Organ Library: Advent*. Org. AFP 9780800658953.

Handbell

- Krug, Jason. “Veni.” 3-6 oct hb, opt 3-5 hc, L3-. LOR 20/1906L.
- ♫ Smith, Vicki. “My Lord, What a Morning.” 3-5 oct, L2. CG CGB426.
- ♫ Tucker, Sondra. “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending.” 3-5 oct hb, opt 3 oct hc, tpt, L2. CPH 97-7676.

Sunday, December 3

Francis Xavier, missionary to Asia, died 1552

Francis Xavier (SAYV-yehr) was born in the Basque region of northern Spain. Francis’s native Basque language is unrelated to any other, and Francis admitted that learning languages was difficult for him. Despite this obstacle he became a missionary to India, Southeast Asia, Japan, and the Philippines. At each point he learned the local language and, like Martin Luther, wrote catechisms for the instruction of new converts. Another obstacle Francis overcame to accomplish his mission work was a propensity to seasickness. All his travels to the Far East were by boat. Together with Ignatius Loyola and five others, Francis formed the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Francis spoke out against the Spanish and Portuguese colonists when he discovered their oppression of the indigenous people to whom he was sent as a missionary.

Monday, December 4

John of Damascus, theologian and hymnwriter, died around 749

Born to a wealthy family in Damascus and well educated, John left a career in finance and government to become a monk in an abbey near Jerusalem. He wrote many hymns as well as theological works. Foremost among the latter is a work called *The Fount of Wisdom*, which touches on philosophy, heresy, and the orthodox faith. This summary of patristic theology remained influential for centuries.

Wednesday, December 6

Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, died around 342

Though Nicholas is one of the church's most beloved saints, little is known about his life. In the fourth century he was a bishop in what is now Turkey. Legends that surround Nicholas tell of his love for God and neighbor, especially the poor. One famous story tells of Nicholas secretly giving bags of gold to the three daughters of a father who was going to sell them into prostitution because he could not provide dowries for them. Nicholas has become a symbol of anonymous gift giving.

Thursday, December 7

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, died 397

Ambrose was a governor of northern Italy and a catechumen when he was elected bishop of Milan. He was baptized, ordained, and consecrated a bishop within one week's time. While bishop he gave away his wealth and lived in simplicity. He was a famous preacher and is largely responsible for the conversion of Augustine. He is also well known for writing hymns. On one occasion, Ambrose led people in a hymn he wrote while the church in which they were secluded was threatened by attack from Gothic soldiers. The soldiers turned away, unwilling to attack a congregation that was singing a hymn. Ambrose is credited with authorship of three hymns in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, including "Savior of the Nations, Come" (ELW 263).



Preparing for Easter

Lectionary

“And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples” (Isa. 25:7).

The Easter season is about seeing: Christ risen, Christ present among us in the breaking of the bread, Christ’s Spirit poured out on the church. In Lent we have turned inward, acknowledging the brokenness of the world and our own participation in systems that oppress. We have walked the wilderness journey of temptation and doubt. Like a groaning desert, our whole lives have cried out for baptismal waters to refresh us and set before us the promise of a new beginning. Perhaps we’ve wondered if such a beginning could ever come.

But at Easter every veil that has obscured the cosmic reality that Christ is alive, life is stronger than death, and love wins is lifted and discarded with Christ’s burial shroud, never to be needed again.

Acts

The readings in Easter give flesh to this newness by leading us through a different kind of birth narrative: the birth of the church, the risen body of Christ born by water and the Spirit, as recorded in the book of Acts.

The accounts of this nascent community of “the Way” still sound radical to our postmodern ears: a pooling of material resources so all in the community can have enough (Easter 2); the apostles continuing Jesus’ ministry of healing (Easter 4); the inclusion of the sexually stigmatized and of religious outsiders (Easter 5 and 6); a peaceful and civil transfer of authority (Easter 7); and perhaps most shocking of all, peoples and nations formerly suspicious and hostile to one another able to speak to and understand one another, and a Spirit of truth telling poured out on women and men alike (Pentecost).

We need to hear these stories more than ever as we work out our own anxiety around the relevance of the church today. We need to be reminded that the same Spirit who enlightened and empowered these first witnesses of the resurrection has also been given to us in baptism. We too have “power from on high” to live as a countercultural communion of faith, bound together not by social or ethnic bonds but by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

For congregations who nevertheless feel strongly about reading from the Old Testament in Easter, the solution is not

to set aside the Revised Common Lectionary but to follow an alternate pattern of first readings such as the one proposed by the English Language Liturgical Consultation (englishtexts.org/Current-Discussions/Alternative-Readings-for-the-Easter-Season).

Psalm

The psalms in Easter are full of joy and the reversal of shame, helping us to sing an even “more profound Alleluia” (ELW 851) as God’s redeemed people. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (Ps. 118:22); “How good and how pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (Ps. 133:1); “Many . . . say, ‘O that we might see some good! . . . You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound’” (Ps. 4:6-7); “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Ps. 23:5); and perhaps most wonderfully, the ending of Psalm 22 that we don’t hear on Good Friday: “The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD” (v. 26).

It is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Easter that the psalms are not a fourth lectionary reading that can easily be omitted. The psalm is a *congregational response* to the first reading—in Easter, a joyful song that God’s promises have been fulfilled, death has been undone, and the world has been reborn.

If your congregation does not sing the psalms, take a look at the wealth of resources listed on pages 327–328 of this volume. You will find, for example, simple chanting on a tone (*ELW Psalter for Worship*), lush choral settings (*Psalm Settings for the Church Year*), easy congregational settings (*The Lyric Psalter*), refrains based on popular hymn tunes (*The People’s Psalter*), metrical hymn settings (*Psalms for All Seasons*), and contemporary translations with edgy, evocative music (*The Emergent Psalter*).

Gospel

In Easter our year of readings from Mark is temporarily interrupted by accounts of Jesus’ postresurrection appearances from John and Luke, which capture not only the excitement but also the fear and confusion that tend to accompany news as world-shattering as this. It is crucial in proclaiming these texts not to minimize or discount these very real human emotions.

Many in our assemblies identify strongly with the experience of Thomas and others who do not at first believe, and long to know that their doubt is not a cause for shame or exclusion from the worshiping community. Instead of approaching these texts from a negative lens (i.e., “Those silly disciples, why couldn’t they see?”), they can become an invitation for “doubters” to experience Jesus’ presence for them in the meal of holy communion. Many of the postresurrection experiences in scripture occur in the context of a meal. Many of the ones that happen today still do.

“He ascended into heaven”

The alternate prayer of the day for Ascension of Our Lord proclaims that Christ “ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things,” yet nevertheless “abides with us on earth to the end of time.” Rather than get caught up in the cosmology of this paradox, we should delight in its implications for the church: Christ’s mission has been entrusted to us, and though we cannot see him as before, he continues to live among us in word and sacrament. Because Ascension Day is always a Thursday (forty days after Easter), many congregations do not gather to celebrate this important festival. While some churches transfer it to the following Sunday so the story is at least heard, Ascension Day is a perfect opportunity for several congregations to come together for a shared worship service.

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh”

The Day of Pentecost is not the beginning of a new season but the culmination of the fifty days of Easter. The same confusion and amazement that characterize the resurrection pervade the readings on this day. If your congregation uses this Sunday as an opportunity to worship in multiple languages, make sure that this is not done in a tokenistic way but in a way that equally challenges everyone in the assembly to listen and understand.

For instance, if your congregation worships in English and has a member of the congregation who speaks fluent Spanish, do not let this be the only day in the year when she is invited to read in her native tongue. If your congregation is primarily white but consists of a sizable immigrant community, do not let this be the only day you invite them to share a piece of music indigenous to their culture. Find ways for the multiple languages and cultures that make up your community to teach and enrich one another throughout the year, and let Pentecost be the day when they all come together as a sign of God’s reconciling Spirit.

Visual Environment

Just as all of creation awakens to new life at Easter, consider how your congregation’s worship environment can awaken all the senses. There are some elements that people will expect: lilies and tulips, white or gold paraments, banners that appear only once a year. But the resurrection should not be

predictable! Don’t discount the element of surprise in helping proclaim the mystery of faith.

If your congregation uses wafers for holy communion, bake a loaf of fresh bread and let the smell waft through the congregation like incense. Or use incense itself to tickle the noses of worshipers with an olfactory paradox: a burial perfume that will not stay buried but rises with our praises. Although “terror and amazement” may temporarily seize some people, hopefully none will actually flee once they come to appreciate the power of this thoroughly biblical image.

“See how its branches reach to us in welcome”

In terms of art: what if the wooden cross from Good Friday is transformed into a tree of life, adorned with beautiful leaves and flowers (and maybe even fruit!) and placed in the location where the assembly is welcomed. This could be especially powerful if your worship space displays an empty cross without a corpus. A tree of life could send the message that the cross is not simply negated by Easter—a thing of the past—but is utterly transformed into something new and life giving. No longer simply an instrument of death (or a logo of Christianity), the cross is where God meets us with mercy in our deepest need, beckoning us with the words “Give me your sickness, give me all your sorrow, I will give blessing” (ELW 342).

Alternatively, considering that Arbor Day falls in late April, try adopting the practice of planting a tree during the Easter season, particularly in an area starved for beauty or in a place where violence and death have desecrated the land. Gather around the tree and join all heaven in singing despite the world: “Thanks to Christ whose passion offers in mercy healing, strength, and pardon” (ELW 342).

Whatever visual elements are used to punctuate Easter Sunday should be carried throughout the season. We too often forget that these are the Sundays *of* Easter—fifty days, or a “week of weeks”—and not the Sundays *after* Easter. Like a kaleidoscope, each Sunday offers us another way of seeing and approaching the mystery. This may mean refreshing the flowers on the third or fourth Sunday of Easter, but it may also mean maintaining other festival liturgical practices used on Easter Sunday throughout the season.

Music

Each Sunday of Easter is an “Easter day.” Even better, each Sunday is *itself* an “Easter day!” Just as it is impossible to cram all the joy of the resurrection into one Sunday, it is impossible to cram all the hymnody of Easter into a single liturgical celebration. It is not wrong to sing “Jesus Christ is risen today” (ELW 365) on the fifth Sunday of Easter. For that matter, it is not wrong to sing “Awake, my heart, with gladness” (ELW 378) on the twentieth Sunday after Pentecost. While some hymns may be especially appropriate for certain days—for instance, “O sons and daughters, let us sing” (ELW 386) on Easter 2—and

using resources such as *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg Fortress, 2007) can help you choose songs that best capture the themes of each day, assemblies should not be shy about maintaining their Easter joy in song throughout all fifty days.

Music Sourcebook for Lent and the Three Days (Augsburg Fortress, 2010) also contains gospel acclamations and canticles that can be used in the Easter season. If your congregation always sings “Let the vineyards be fruitful” at the offering, consider using “The disciples knew the Lord Jesus” (S497), “Our Paschal Lamb, that sets us free” (S499), or even a general Easter hymn such as “This joyful Eastertide” (ELW 391).

Especially appropriate for Ascension Day are “Alleluia! Sing to Jesus” (ELW 392) and “A hymn of glory let us sing!” (ELW 393). For Pentecost, if your congregation has not yet sung Herman Stuempfle Jr.’s twenty-first-century composition “God of tempest, God of whirlwind” (ELW 400), set to the familiar and beloved tune CWM RHONDDA, give it a try this year. Its world-shaking imagery will certainly “shake [you] loose from lethargy!”

Seasonal Checklist

- Use “This is the feast” as the hymn of praise, and use the Nicene Creed.
- If your congregation doesn’t already use a full thanksgiving at the table, do so in Easter. Forms VII and X (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 67, 69) use fresh, poetic language that pulls together many of the images in the Easter readings. Form IV (pp. 111, 133) can be used from Ash Wednesday through the Day of Pentecost, creating an intentional unity through the whole Easter cycle. Form IX (p. 68) calls to mind the cosmic reach of the resurrection.
- Schedule an ecumenical Ascension Day service with other congregations in your area or, if geographically possible, between other Lutheran congregations in your conference/cluster. Rotate the host congregation each year.
- Light the paschal candle on each of the Sundays of Easter, including Pentecost. While there is a tradition of extinguishing the candle after the gospel reading on Ascension Day, Christ does not cease to be in our midst in word and sacrament at his ascension; quite the opposite!
- While it is one of the three principal festivals of the church year, Pentecost often does not carry the same import as Christmas and Easter for many people. Spend some time teaching the significance of this day. If your congregation has an Easter breakfast and sells Easter lilies, also schedule a Pentecost picnic and sell red flowers to adorn the worship space.
- Many congregations celebrate affirmation of baptism (confirmation) on Pentecost, which makes great liturgical sense. But consider whether moving this celebration to the fall, when school is beginning instead of ending, might change the perception that confirmation is a “graduation” from Christian formation.