

Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music*



Volume 52.2
Blessing and Charge



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Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music* (1971–2000) and *Reformed Liturgics* (1963–69), *Call to Worship* seeks to further the church's commitment to theological integrity, corporate worship, and excellence in music, preaching, and other liturgical art forms.

Editor: Kimberly Bracken Long

Theology, Formation, and Evangelism
Ray G. Jones III, Acting Director

Address editorial and advertising correspondence, materials for review, and unsolicited manuscripts to:
Kimberly Bracken Long
Editor, *Call to Worship*
1317 Broadview Drive
Cambridge, MD 21613
Phone: (404) 626-0481
E-mail: kim.long@pcusa.org

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Presbyterian Association of Musicians
PAM National Office
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202-1396
Phone: (502) 569-5288
Fax: (502) 569-8465
Web: presbymusic.org
Kelly Abraham, Executive Director
kelly.abraham@pcusa.org
Andrew Perkins, Communications Specialist
andrew.perkins@pcusa.org

PAM Executive Board 2018–19
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Introduction

Kimberly Bracken Long

The title of this issue is taken from a new ordering of elements in the 2018 *Book of Common Worship*. After generations of pronouncing a charge and a blessing, the new BCW proposes that the blessing be spoken first, followed by the charge.

I can imagine that some might respond with “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” Certainly, there is nothing “wrong” with speaking a charge and then a blessing! The new ordering, however, represents two shifts in Presbyterian worship: first, an emphasis on the missional nature of the church and second, a move toward shared liturgical leadership. In this new order, a minister proclaims God’s blessing with words that affirm God’s steadfast and everlasting care. Then, someone else in the church—the rubrics in the BCW indicate that this is an especially appropriate role for elders and deacons—gives the charge to the gathered assembly, sending them out to be Christ’s body in the world.

The articles and columns in this issue of *Call to Worship* examine various facets of blessing and sending. Edwin Chr. van Driel leads us through a careful and thoughtful exploration of what it means to bless people in the name of God and the implications of such a blessing. Marissa Galvan-Valle tells us what it has been like for her to adopt the new ordering of blessing and charge, and how it has opened up a new understanding of what it means to be blessed! Professor and pastoral musician Anthony Ruff offers his insights into how music helps to send us out to take part in what God is doing in the world, encouraging congregations to consider the ways this happens in their own contexts.

William Brown, a professor of Old Testament and expert in the Psalms, tackles the question of what it means to bless God in the Psalms and the

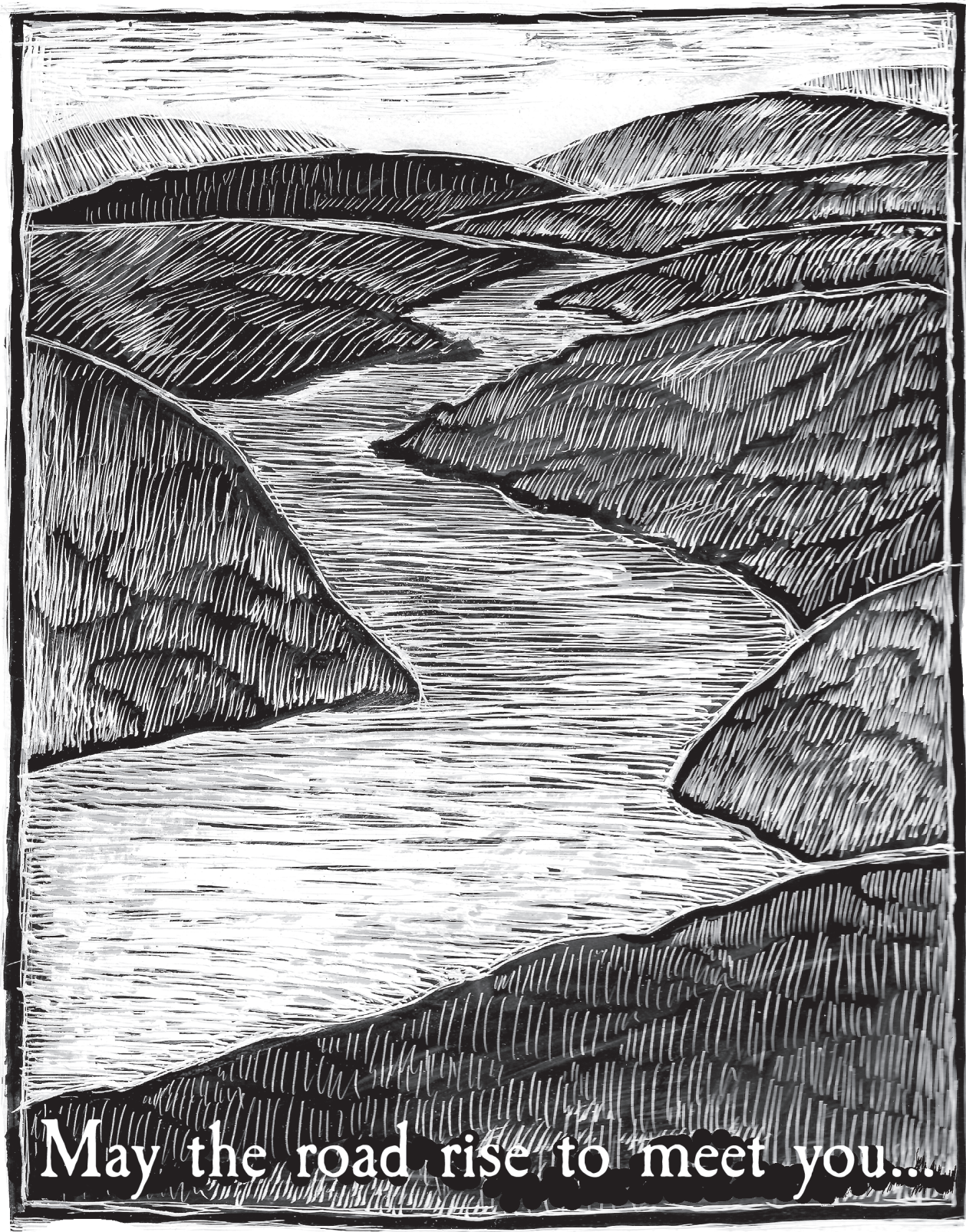
significance of such an act for the life of the world. Responding to new services in the 2018 BCW for Blessing of the Animals and House Blessing, Elizabeth McGregor Simmons and Catherine Neelly Burton help us understand what is going on in such liturgies while reflecting on their own rich pastoral experiences. Finally, Rebecca Davis speaks from her expertise as an educator about how worship can be a source of blessing for the children in our midst.

I am delighted that we continue to hear from outstanding columnists Mary Beth Anton, Peter Ncanywa, David Lower, and Sally Ann McKinsey Sisk. In this issue’s feature, *The Work of Our Hands*, Allison Wehrung shows us—in images and in words—her practice of making tangible prayers out of cast-off materials. This issue also brings the continuation of the Ideas section, in which you tell us about something you’ve created for worship, as well as the return of the Book Reviews section. If you would like to submit something for the Ideas section, or suggest a book for review that you think our readers would appreciate, please send a note to me at kim.long@pcusa.org. I’d love to hear from you.

I am grateful for the artwork of Amy E. Gray that enhances this issue. She is assistant professor of the arts & religion and associate director of the Luce Center for the Arts & Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC.

I pray that the words and images in this issue of *Call to Worship* are a source of blessing to you and provide inspiration for your ministry. To God be the glory!

Kimberly Bracken Long



Amy E. Gray

Feature Articles

What Are We Doing When We Bless?

Edwin Chr. van Driel

The rubrics to the liturgical material included in the 2013 hymnal *Glory to God* stipulate that while a deacon or elder may give the charge at the end of the service, the blessing is to be spoken by the minister.¹ The 2016 Directory for Worship followed this pattern, stating that “the Service for the Lord’s Day concludes with a blessing in the name of the triune God, such as the priestly blessing or apostolic benediction. Because this blessing is an expression of the gospel of God’s grace and an extension of the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, a teaching elder ordinarily speaks the blessing” (W.3.0502). This is the first time in several generations that official denominational material has explicitly stated that “blessing” is a specifically ordered act of the ordained minister. The earlier Directory for Worship specified that the dismissal which concludes the Service for the Lord’s Day “shall include words of blessing” (W-3.3702), but did not identify by whom these words ought to be spoken. The 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* did not offer much in terms of liturgical material, nor did the 1955 *Hymnbook*. The 1970 *Worshipbook* did, but never specified who gives the blessing. Nonetheless, the position taken in *Glory to God* and the 2016 Directory for Worship are not “new—they are rather an articulation of long-standing Reformed practice. For example, in the Scottish, Dutch, and Swiss Reformed traditions it is clear that only ordained ministers are to give the blessing.”²

Why is this? Why is it only the minister who is to bless? And what is it to bless in the first place? In this essay I offer a theological conceptual framework that helps us understand what it is to bless God’s people in God’s name. In the first section I open my exploration with some exegetical observations about the Aaronic blessing. In the second section

I draw on the notion of “deputized speech” to unpack theologically what it means to bless. In the third section I show how this notion also helps us conceptualize what happens in the other liturgical acts reserved for ordained ministers—declaring forgiveness, baptizing, and presiding at the Lord’s table. In the fourth and fifth section I suggest that reflecting on these acts offer a lens through which to look at the very nature of ordination to Word and Sacrament.

“So They Shall Put My Name on the Israelites”

In Protestant liturgies, the Aaronic blessing has traditionally been the preferred wording to bless God’s people.³

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,
The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.
So they shall put my name on the Israelites,
and I will bless them (Num. 6:22–27).

For our purposes, three features of this passage are important. First, the blessing speaks of the intimate involvement of God’s self. This is clear in the phrases chosen for the formulation of the blessing: it mentions the face-to-face presence of God, and the lifting of God’s countenance upon us. But God’s self-involvement comes out particularly in the threefold repetition of the name “LORD.” The English term stands for the covenantal name of God,

Edwin Chr. van Driel is Directors’ Bicentennial Associate Professor of Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

the personal name by which God had revealed God's self to Moses in the burning bush, a name not known to any other nation on earth other than to Israel (Ex. 3:13–22). The name spoke of the intimate relationship between God and God's people, and over time the phrase "the Name" became an instantiation for God's self. Where "the Name" rests, there God is present.⁴ And so it is with the blessing: when the priests bless God's people, "they put my name on the Israelites," says God. God's self becomes present among them.

This invoking of "the Name" points at a second aspect of the blessing. When the Creator God becomes for Israel "the LORD," when God engages Israel in a covenant, it is not simply to bless them and leave it at that. No, God chooses this people and gives them to know the Name, because God is taking them on a journey. Through this people all the nations of the world will be blessed, God promises to Israel (Gen. 12:1–3). God's election has an eschatological goal. And so it is with God's blessing. The idea of "blessing" was originally connoted with notions of "life," "fertility," and "well-being." A blessing was thought to affirm and bring out the potential embedded in creation. God blesses the weather, the herds, the harvest. But over time "blessing received an 'aspect of finality' that thrust itself toward eschatology."⁵ To be blessed is to have your feet put on the road.⁶ There is a reason why the very first interpretation of the priestly blessing comes in the form of a collection of psalms which speak about being on a journey, going upwards to Zion: twelve of the fifteen Songs of Ascents (Pss. 120–134) take direct inspiration from one or more strophes of the blessing's wording.⁷ Over the course of Israel's history this "blessed journeying" takes on a more eschatological color. The New Testament frequently describes the eschatological future in terms of an unfolding of God's ultimate blessing. "When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways," Peter tells the Jews gathered in Solomon's Portico, according to Acts (3:26). Christ's work on the cross leads to the blessing of Abraham coming to the Gentiles, writes Paul in the letter to the Galatians (3:13–14). "It is for this that you were called," says the first letter of Peter to its Gentile audience, "that you might inherit a blessing" (3:9). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," says the

author of Ephesians (1:3). In this context it is also quite telling that the resurrected Christ parts from his disciples and enters into his heavenly rule in an ongoing act of blessing, with a gesture reminiscent of the priestly act at the end of the worship service: "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:50–51). To receive God's blessing is for one's life to be incorporated in the transforming, eschatological work of God.⁸

The last thing to point out is that this incorporation of one's life into God's eschatological journey happens through the mediation of the priests. It is not that the priests have God's blessing in hand as a power they can invoke and manipulate whenever it seems right. The priests do not "own" the divine blessing. The formulation of the blessing is a *prayer*: the priests, in putting God's name upon the people, *invite* God to bless. But, at the same time, God promises that when the priests do this, God *will* bless: "They shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." That is, as surely as the people hear the words spoken over them, as surely they can know that God has become present to them and is folding their lives into God's grand, transformed future.

Blessing as Deputized Speech

How do we make theological sense of a ritual that commits God to an act of blessing without the one who enacts the ritual at the same time owning that power? How can God be the one who blesses, even while the priest speaks the words? To answer these questions, I suggest we draw on a phenomenon that philosopher of religion Nicholas P. Wolterstorff calls "deputized speech."⁹

Here's an everyday example of what deputized speech looks like. The French ambassador goes to the White House to speak with the American president. In the conversation, the ambassador issues a warning, or makes a promise, or expresses a concern. And let's say that in doing so, the ambassador speaks not as a private, informed citizen, but in her official capacity as ambassador of the French government. In that case, what the French ambassador says *counts* as the words of the French government. The ambassador utters the words, but what she does with these words—the warning she issues, the promise she makes, the concern she expresses—counts as an act of the one

who sent her and commits the one who sent her. This is what we can call “deputized speech.”

The concept of deputized speech is embedded in a distinction made in speech act theory between “locutions,” “illocutions,” and “perlocutions.”¹⁰ The locutionary aspect of the performance of a speech act is the uttering of a particular sentence. The illocution is the conventional aspect of the act one performs in saying something. For instance, in uttering a locution one can do things that can be recognized by one’s hearers as issuing a warning, making a promise, or expressing a concern. Finally, by performing these illocutions one can have a causal effect on one’s hearers. For instance, a warning may evoke the hearer to change a course of action. This is the perlocutionary aspect of a speech act.

Making these distinctions allows us to think of the locutionary and illocutionary aspects of a deputized speech act as distributed over two actors. In my example, the French ambassador makes a locution; she is the one who utters the words. But the illocution made in uttering these words count as the illocution of the French government: it is the government who is said to have issued a warning, made a promise, or expressed a concern.

Notice, by the way, that this form of deputized speech is more complicated than simply the conveying of a message. The phenomenon of “ambassadors” dates from before the time that we could have real-time conversation with anyone, anywhere. In fact, the phenomenon of ambassadors was developed exactly so as to deal with the physical absence of the one who had sent the ambassador. Let’s say that the scene of the French ambassador visiting the White House takes place in the beginning of the nineteenth century, long before the invention of electronic means of communications. In that case the ambassador may be called upon to formulate a position of the French government on a certain issue without being able first to consult with the home front. Therefore, the ambassador, on being commissioned in her position, would have received instructions about the government’s intentions, policies, and desires. The ambassador would be deputized to say things of a certain sort—but only if certain events take place, under certain conditions, and so on. Once instructed and authorized in this way, the words the ambassador speaks now count as the words of the one who sent her.

The notion of “ambassadorial work” is, of course, not foreign to theological speech. It is the image Paul uses to explain his ministerial work: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. . . . So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:18–20). And it is also in this way, I suggest, we could think about the act of blessing. The priest is authorized to bless. He is authorized to speak the words of blessing—under certain conditions, in certain circumstances, and with certain words. When he does so, what he says *counts* as the words of God. The priest utters the words, they are his locutions—but they count as the words of God’s self. He puts the Name of the LORD upon those whom he blesses, and the LORD himself will bless them.¹¹

Baptizing, Forgiving, Presiding, Blessing

The blessing is, however, only one of four liturgical acts that in our new hymnal and new directory are reserved for ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament. So are baptism, the declaration of pardon, and presiding over the Lord’s Table. These are also forms of deputized speech, and each one of these has the goal of incorporating the ones who are being addressed in God’s eschatological work.

In baptism the minister addresses the baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” That is, the address underscores that while the minister engages in a locutionary act, the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of the act count as the act of the triune God. When the minister makes a sign of the cross on the forehead of the baptized, she does not do so in her own name but in the name of Christ, as the accompanying liturgical formula expresses: “You . . . have been marked as Christ’s own forever.”¹² The pastor pours the water and makes the cross, but it is God who does the baptizing and the marking. In doing so, God incorporates the baptized into God’s eschatological future: “God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ,” as is promised to the baptized.¹³

As to the declaration of pardon, anecdotal evidence suggests that in many North American Presbyterian congregations the acts of confession and pardon are led by elders. But, as the new Directory for Worship states, “because of [the] associations

with the ministry of Word and Sacrament, it is fitting for a teaching elder to lead the call to confession and proclaim the good news of forgiveness in Jesus Christ” (W-3.0205).¹⁴ This is indeed the practice in other parts of the worldwide Presbyterian family.¹⁵ Here, again, the minister does not speak by her own authority, but she speaks in God’s name: “The mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting. I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.”¹⁶ In pronouncing absolution, the minister folds wayward sinners back into God’s eschatological community.

Finally, it is only the ordained minister who is authorized to preside at the table—which, of course, is not the minister’s table, but God’s table, and whereas it may be the minister who breaks the bread and pours the wine, it is God who feeds God’s people and provides them with sustenance in anticipation of the glorious eschatological messianic meal of which the Eucharist is a foretaste.

Baptizing, giving absolution, presiding at the table, and blessing . . . express the core of ordained ministry: to speak in the name of the Lord.

This essay is not the place to offer a full-fledged theology of ordination, but I want to suggest that these four ordered liturgical acts give us a lens through which to look at the specific calling of the Minister of Word and Sacrament. Baptizing, giving absolution, presiding at the table, and blessing are not some among many activities the minister engages in, but they express the core of ordained ministry: to speak in the name of the Lord. The role of the pastor is to speak God’s own promises into the lives of those who have been entrusted to her and, through acts of blessing and forgiveness, through the waters of baptism and the distribution of bread and wine, to incorporate people into the eschatological purposes of God. It is the role of the pastor to steward and dole out God’s mysteries in God’s name (1 Cor. 4:1). She is the ambassador of God, commissioned to deputized speech.

The analogy with the work of a secular ambassador is illuminating here. An ambassador does a multitude of work. She may advocate for and provide services to fellow countrymen and women, she may speak to the press and other

audiences about her country and its characteristics and policies, she may attend meetings and banquets and may host gatherings like that herself. But she can engage in all these activities exactly because of her core role: to represent and speak for the government that sent her. Her role as one commissioned for “deputized speech” is not one role among many, but it is the core of her identity that allows her to engage in everything else. So it is with the minister. All other ministerial work can be understood as extensions of this central calling. Pastoral conversations can be understood as the application of the pastor’s liturgical work of forgiving and blessing to people’s individual lives and circumstances. Her leading of Bible studies and discussion groups serve the further unpacking of what she has said and done in God’s name. Her participation in the governing of the church is an extension of her wielding of the keys.¹⁷

This in turn helps us to differentiate between the calling of ministers and elders.¹⁸ As one who comes to us as an ambassador, commissioned to speak to us a word from God, the pastor comes to us from beyond. She embodies the over-againstness that exists between God’s Word and us. Thus, the pastor does not come forth from the congregation, but is called to the congregation. Even in those circumstances where the pastor has been raised up by the local community (as will be more and more the case as the church once again engages in the work of church planting), the act of ordination consciously relocates the minister. At the moment of ordination, she loses her membership in the congregation and becomes a member of presbytery and is now entrusted to her congregation by the ordaining presbytery. Elders, on the other hand, are not being called *to* a congregation, but are lifted up *by* a congregation. They embody the response of the people to the word that has come to them, as communities are being formed and leaders are raised up.

Finally, the notion of the minister’s calling as the work of authorized incorporation of creatures into God’s eschatological future gives us a way to consider what can and what cannot be blessed. Deputized speech comes with restrictions. The one who is deputized is only authorized to say and do certain things, under certain conditions, in certain circumstances. If the minister’s work is in the service of folding creatures into God’s eschatological work, then only that can be blessed which will have a place in God’s eschatological future.¹⁹

“A Puny Person Pulled from the Dust”

The take on ordained ministry outlined in the previous section may strike many as “too high.” As contemporary mainline Protestants we don’t like to think of a pastor as “over against” us—we prefer a pastor who is among us, next to us, giving voice to what is going on in our lives and our world. Moreover, the account of ordained ministry as an embodiment of deputized speech sounds as if the minister takes on a mediatory role between God and God’s people, and is that not a Roman Catholic rather than a Protestant understanding of the work of the minister?

In response, I want to look at John Calvin, who surely was aware of Protestant sensibilities. While Calvin obviously could not yet apply the notion of deputized speech,—that’s a concept of twentieth-century philosophy of language—he regularly uses the concept of ambassador to describe the work of the minister. In fact, in his commentary on Numbers Calvin invokes this very concept to explain what happens in the act of blessing: “In these words, then, the priests were appointed ambassadors to reconcile God to the people.”²⁰ And as he comments on 2 Corinthians 5:18:

It is a singular dignity of ministers that they are sent to us by God with this commission, so as to be messengers, and in a manner sureties. . . . Ministers are furnished with this commission, that they may bring us intelligence of so great a benefit, nay more, may assure us of God’s fatherly love toward us. . . . When, therefore, a duly ordained minister proclaims in the gospel, that God has been made propitious to us, he is to be listened to just as an ambassador of God, and sustaining, as they speak, a public character, and furnished with rightful authority for assuring us of this.²¹

In his *Institutes* Calvin emphasizes that the ambassadorial role of the minister does not reflect any intrinsic dignity on the minister’s part. In fact, as Calvin says in a striking image, ministers are not more than “puny persons pulled from the dust.”²² But at the same time, Calvin continues, it is herein that “[God] provides for our weakness in that he prefers to address us in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to himself, rather than to thunder at us and drive us away.”²³

Unpacking this idea, Calvin comes very close to the notion of deputized speech:

[God] alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his Word alone. Nevertheless, because he does not dwell among us in visible presence, we have said that he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, *as a sort of delegated work*, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that *through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman uses a tool to do his work*” (emphasis mine).²⁴

In fact, says Calvin, reflecting on the comment in the Ephesians letter that Christ ascended on high “that he might fill all things” (Eph. 4:10): “This is the manner of fulfillment: through the ministers to whom he has entrusted this office and has conferred the grace to carry it out, he dispenses and distributes his gifts to the church; and he shows himself as though present by manifesting the power of his Spirit in this his institution, that it be not vain or idle.”²⁵

In other words: according to Calvin, God sends us ministers, ambassadors, people who come to us as from beyond, because in this way the gospel has a chance to land in our reality. God is not visibly and audibly present among us, but God wants to be visibly and audibly among us, because God knows that this is what we need. Therefore, God uses ministers as God’s mouthpiece, so that God’s own Word can come to us in a way we can comprehend. Rather than being an expression of authoritarianism, the pastor, as one who embodies deputized speech, embodies the good news of a God who is at work “to fill all things.”

It strikes me that Calvin is exactly right. Yes, we do need people who sit with us and help us to give voice to what we feel and experience. But what is most crucial, most liberating about the gospel is that it is a Word that does not arise from our own deliberations, our own thoughts and hopes and questions, but that it comes to us from outside of us, that it breaks through all the thoughts and questions and desires we may have, and speaks to us words of truth and grace we could never produce. “You are marked by the cross of Christ forever.” “In the

name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.” “The body and blood of Christ, given for you.” “The Lord bless you and keep you.” The deepest words that can be said about us, the words that define us and sustain us more than anything else, do not come up from our own reality but come to us from outside of us, come to us exactly from the other side. And it is the unique calling of the minister to give voice to those words.

“I’d Have Gone through Seminary and Ordination for That One Moment”

The narrator in Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead* is an elderly pastor named John Ames. Ames’s best friend, Robert Boughton, is a pastor in the same town. They have become so close that Boughton named his son after his friend: John Ames (Jack) Boughton. But the boy grew up to be a disappointment, a disgrace to his name. As his father is dying, the prodigal son comes home to visit. Things aren’t going so well, and the son decides, again, it is best to slip out of town. Pastor John, his namesake, meets up with him and walks him to the bus stop. They are standing there, surrounded by memories of lost hope and disappointment. Neither of them seems to know what to say. And then, while they are waiting, the aging pastor Ames turns to the young man and says, “I would like to bless you.” The young man, not quite knowing what it involves, nonetheless agrees, takes off his hat, bends one knee, and bows his head; and pastor Ames puts his hands on the man’s head:

And I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers, of course—“The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, or more sufficient for that matter. Then, when he didn’t open his eyes or lift up his head, I said, “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.” Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream.

Then, turning to his readers, John Ames reflects: “To him it might have seemed I had named everything I thought he no longer was, when that was absolutely the furthest thing from my meaning,

the exact opposite of my meaning. Well, anyway, I told him it was an honor to bless him. And that was also absolutely true. In fact I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment.”²⁶

For this we show up at maternity wards and at deathbeds, for this we bless new relationships and new homes, for this we bless our people every time they leave the worship service to return to the routine of their lives: to speak to them the promises of God, to fold their lives, in their grandeur and misère, into God’s eschatological purposes.

I’d have gone through seminary and ordination for that one moment. It strikes me that Pastor Ames’s observation is absolutely correct. There is an overwhelming amount of tasks that can appear every day on the pastor’s desk. They can range from the absolute mundane and boring to the exhilarating and deeply moving. But amidst all that, we went to seminary and were ordained so as to bless. For this we show up at maternity wards and at deathbeds, for this we bless new relationships and new homes, for this we bless our people every time they leave the worship service to return to the routine of their lives: to speak to them the promises of God, to fold their lives, in their grandeur and misère, into God’s eschatological purposes. The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD makes his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you, the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Notes

1. *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 13.
2. For the Scottish tradition, see George W. Sprott, *The Worship and Offices of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882), 44–45: “. . . the benediction is God’s answer to our worship, and its proper close. In it God’s ministers put his name upon the people, and he blesses them. That a blessing is thus imparted from on high, through the channel of an ordained ministry, to those whose hearts are open to receive it, is asserted in all the

- standards that have at any time been of authority in the church. This was so well understood formerly, and the blessing was so highly valued, that, in order to induce people to come twice to church, it was sometimes not given till the second service. . . . As the church declares that it belongs to the minister's office to bless the people under the gospel, as it did to the priests under the law, those who are unordained only pray for a blessing. Hence the practice, so long rigidly adhered to, of licentiates [candidates for ordination, EvD] saying 'us,' instead of 'you,' and of their not making use of the sign of blessing—viz., the lifting up of the hands." For the Dutch tradition, see G. van der Leeuw, *Liturgiek*, tweede druk (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1946), 195–196: "The blessing is no prayer, or even a wish. It is a gift of God, given to the congregation through human ministry. Who receives the blessing in faith, takes something home. This is why the minister lays the blessing upon the people—that is, he doesn't lift his arms and hands as in the orans, but he lifts his hands with his palms downward: he distributes the blessing. We have to take fully serious the ordinances given to us in ordination. That's why it is of course wrong to replace the words "be with you" by "be with us." That's a false modesty that doesn't dare to trust in God's promises. . . . Candidates for ordination do not give the blessing, but use a concluding sentence. The blessing can only be distributed by ministers of the Word" (translation mine). For the Swiss tradition, see J. J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 137–142. For contemporary American Presbyterian material that expresses the same tradition, see Peter C. Bower, ed., *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2003), 44, 71–2; David L. Stubbs, "Ending of Worship," in Leanna Van Dyk, ed., *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 148–153 [133–153]; Kimberly Bracken Long, *The Worshiping Body: The Art of Leading Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 62–67.
3. In fact, this blessing was not used in the liturgy before the Reformation. Luther introduced its use in 1523, and was followed by Zwingli in 1525. Bucer and Calvin followed suit. Since then it has become the dominant blessing in the Protestant world. For references see Klaus Seybold, *Der aaronitische Segen: Studien zu Numeri 6/22–27* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977), 11; and Marius van Leeuwen, "Wegzending en zegen," in Paul Oskamp en Niek Schuman, eds., *De weg van de liturgie* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1998), 259–61 [257–266].
 4. See e.g. Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005), 591–592, 594.
 5. Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 183 (cf. 179–183).
 6. "Frequently the word *derek*, 'way, path,' is connected with the verb *šāmar*, 'to guard,'" Baruch A. Levine observes in reference to the first line of the Aaronic blessing (*Numbers 1–20*, The Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 1993], 227). Cf. also Jeff. S. Anderson, *The Blessing and the Curse: Trajectories in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), 271: "In its narrative context, the blessing is intended to equip the community for the journey ahead."
 7. See L. J. Leibrich, "The Songs of Ascent and the Priestly Blessing," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955): 33–36; and Elmer Martens, "Intertext Messaging: Echoes of the Aaronic Blessing," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethern Forum* 38 (2009): 163–178.
 8. As he does in some of his other works, in his *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) Claus Westermann makes distinction between deliverance and blessing. They express two different ways of divine relating to God's people: "Deliverance is experienced in events that represent God's intervention. Blessing is a continuing activity of God that is either present or not present" (p. 4). The theological tradition tends to conflate these two, Westermann argues, as all being part of "salvation." But deliverance has to do with the need for God to set things aright, while blessing simply produces a condition of well-being (p. 3). It strikes me that Westermann's distinction is correct and important. However, it would be helpful to introduce a further distinction: between creational and eschatological blessings. Some of the Scripture's speaking about blessing concerns the former: "It is God's blessing that let the child grow into a man or woman, that bestows such manifold talents, and that provides physical and spiritual food from so many sources" (p. 5). But other blessings lift creation beyond its natural baseline, push history towards an eschatological *telos*. (Cf. similar comments by David Kelsey in his *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 182–186, 447–450). It is my contention that the act of blessing ought to be looked at through this eschatological lens. It will help us not only understand what it is to bless, but also what ought to be blessed—only that which has a future in God's reign.
 9. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38–51.

10. For an introduction of this aspect of speech act theory and an application to theological inquiry see Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 9–34.
11. Both Anthony C. Thiselton and Jeff S. Anderson evoke speech act theory in order to analyze how words, like the words of blessing, can have a causal effect on their recipients, but neither writer reflects on the dual agency involved in the actual engagement of the act of blessing (Anthony C. Thiselton, “The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 25.2 (October 1974): 293–296 [283–299]; Jeff S. Anderson, *The Blessing and the Curse: Trajectories in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 47–51).
12. *Glory to God*, 18.
13. *Glory to God*, 19.
14. Cf. also the rubric in *Glory to God*: “The minister leads the Call to Confession. . . . The minister may lift water from the font, declaring the good news of God’s grace” (pp. 3, 4).
15. See, for instance, the *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1994), 13, and the *Dienstboek voor de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (’s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1960), 8.
16. *Glory to God*, 4. The inclusive “we” probably reflect some of the ambivalence part of the Reformed tradition has always had about the mediatory nature of the ordered declaration of absolution. The magisterial Reformers did not have such problems. Martin Bucer’s Strassburg liturgy had the pastor say: “Thus, in [Christ’s] name, I declare unto you the forgiveness of all your sins, and declare you to be loosed of them on earth, that you be loosed of them in heaven, in eternity.” Likewise, John Calvin’s Strassburg liturgy read: “I declare that the absolution of sin is effected, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Cf. Daniel R. Hyde, “Lost Keys: The Absolution in Reformed Liturgy,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 46:1 (April 2011): 144, 146 [140–166]. The first half of this essay gives a quick overview of the liturgical development of the pronouncing of forgiveness of sin in Reformed worship. On the ambivalence in the later Reformed tradition see also Gerrit Immink, “Schuldbelijdenis en decaloog,” in Oskamp and Schuman, *De weg van de liturgie*, 185–191 [185–194].
17. Special reflection ought to be devoted to the minister’s calling to preach. This too could be understood as an expression of deputized speech, be it that it is a more complicated case than liturgical acts like absolution or blessing. The latter are clear-cut liturgical acts of deputized speech. Preaching is an act that presupposes much more self-involvement on the part of the preacher—which creates much more space for not just God’s voice to be heard, but also the preacher’s. See Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 126–145, and Wolterstorff’s essay on this theme in Edwin Chr. van Driel, ed., *What Is Jesus Doing? Divine Agency in the Life of the Church and the Work of the Minister*, forthcoming from IVP Academic (2019).
18. For a description and analysis of the complicated relationship between ministers and elders in the North American Presbyterian tradition, see the excellent study by James Frederick Holper, “Presbyterian Office and Ordination in American Presbyterianism: A Liturgical-Historical Study” (unpublished dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1988).
19. For further reflection on this take on ordained ministry in the context of God’s presence and work within the church, see Edwin Chr. van Driel, “What Is Jesus Doing? Fresh Perspectives for Tired Pastors and Struggling Denominations,” and “Re-thinking Church,” both in *What Is Jesus Doing?* (see note 17).
20. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, trans. Charles William Bingham, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 246. I’m ignoring here Calvin’s situating of the blessing in the context of God’s relating to us in reconciliation rather than in eschatological consummation, as I have argued above.
21. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 235–236.
22. John Calvin, *Institutiones* IV.iii.1; quoted according to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1054.
23. *Institutiones* IV.i.5; *Institutes*, 1018.
24. *Institutiones* IV.iii.1; *Institutes*, 1053.
25. *Institutiones* IV.iii.2; *Institutes*, 1055.
26. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead: A Novel* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 2004), 241–2. The story of John Ames blessing Jack Boughton was brought back into my memory by Lee Eclov, “The Neglected Power of Blessing,” *Leadership Journal* (Spring 2015): 52–54. After writing a first version of this essay I noticed the story is also recalled by Kimberly Bracken Long, *The Worshiping Body*, 66–67. Clearly, in her story Robinson has captured an essential expression of ministry that resonates with many clergy.

We Are Blessed to Be a Blessing

Marissa Galvan-Valle

Not long ago I saw a meme showing a mob with torches. The words on the meme said it all. This is what happens “when the pastor changes the order of the service.”

The meme touches on a notion that seems to be especially true for the Presbyterian way of approaching worship. A legend says that we don't like change. My experience, coming from a Latino background, is a little bit more flexible. I don't feel that we've broken an unwritten rule when worship goes beyond an hour, or when a sermon goes long . . . if it's good. But, I still remember having to work a pulpit into a play that we were presenting at a church because the session had approved that no one could move it from its place.

Therefore, it is not hard to imagine pastors and worship committees looking at the title of W-3.0502—“Blessing and Charge”—in the revised Directory for Worship that is part of the *Book of Order* and doing a double take. Wait a minute. Isn't that wrong? It should be “Charge and Blessing.” Who has changed the order around!? What!? Change!?

I remember the first time that I became aware of the change I could not wrap my head around it. I was listening to an introduction to the Directory of Worship as part of one of the consultations about the revision of the *Book of Common Worship* that engaged pastors, scholars, musicians, and other church leaders in conversations about worship. I questioned the change. As a pastor, I love to give the benediction. I love that it is the last thing that I do during the service. The raising of the arms and using words that are ancient and full of grace is the perfect way to end the worship experience.

I always started the charge with a reminder of the things that God had called us to do through the Word read and proclaimed, and then I gave an assurance: but we do not do this alone, or with our own strength, but with blessing: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor. 13:13).

Nevertheless, I was willing to give it a try. I love to use new things in worship, and the congregation where I work is very flexible. After all, we worship for more than an hour! The church is an intercultural mix of folks from different countries, different styles of worship, and different theological backgrounds. A perfect place to swap things around.

It was the perfect service to do it. The passage was about Jesus challenging the Pharisees who insisted on keeping everything in order while sacrificing justice. Still, when I got to the blessing, it felt clunky and unnatural. I almost messed it up!

I went back to the usual order of things. Did the charge and then the blessing, but I kept thinking about the change. Then, I went back to W-3.0502, and the words “We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others” caught my attention.

In addition to serving as pastor of a congregation I am an editor for children's curriculum and have been working for the past years on material called “Growing in Grace and Gratitude.” The title for the curriculum comes from the notion that grace and gratitude are intimately connected. Karl Barth explains it best: “The only answer to grace is gratitude. . . . Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like

Marissa Galvan-Valle is Spanish language editor for the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation and stated supply pastor at Beechmont Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning.”¹ One of the songs we use to explain this concept to a child states that we are blessed to be a blessing.

We are blessed to be a blessing. Suddenly, the charge made sense to me. We are blessed. The whole event of worship reminds us of God’s blessing. Through the call to worship, the call to listen, and the call to go out, our mind is invited to remember the good graces of God, to remember a love that goes beyond all understanding. God’s abundant life comes pouring in when we hear the word read and proclaimed. We worship, and we are blessed by our Creator. But it doesn’t end there. The last “amen” is an invitation to do more, to love and serve God and others.

Therefore, we are blessed to be a blessing. Gratitude. Charge. The charge reminds us that we are blessed, not to hold on to God’s blessing as if we were spiritual piggy banks worried about running out and being empty. Blessings are given to be gifted away through sharing the good news to the poor, through proclaiming freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,

through setting the oppressed free, and through proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:1–19). This is the great response and witness of gratitude for the grace we have received. Therefore, the charge is a challenge to live gratefully, to serve, to love as we have been loved, to give of ourselves as we have received. Blessing is to give and not to keep. Grace and gratitude. We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others.

A few Sundays after making this connection, I tried it one more time. I swapped the charge with the blessing in the bulletin. Made sure that I remembered to explain the change at the beginning of the service so that no one felt the need to get torches. I started with the words “We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others.” And then said, “We are blessed,” and did the blessing; and said, “to be a blessing,” and did the charge. This time around, it worked! It felt natural, as if it all belonged together like heaven and earth.

Note

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, Part 1 (London and New York: T & T Clark, 1956), 41.



Go Forth

Going Out with a Song: Music at the Sending

Anthony Ruff, O.S.B.

Send us forth in the power of your Spirit, to proclaim the peace of Christ and share your reconciling love,” reads a Prayer after Communion in the *Book of Common Worship*. “Go out into the world in peace . . . love and serve the Lord,” a familiar Charge states. How does the music at the end of the service help us do all that? What hymns, spirituals, canticles, or psalms and what instrumental music best send us out to love and serve?

I write from a Benedictine monastery, and my thinking about this issue is informed by my Roman Catholic tradition. No worries, dear readers! There is so much ecumenical consensus in our liturgical theologies, and so many commonalities in the structure of our various worship traditions, that we can truly approach this issue as fellow Christians laboring in the one vineyard of our Lord. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the eucharistic service in the *Book of Common Worship* is the Presbyterian edition of the Mass of Pope Paul VI as reformed after the Second Vatican Council, and the Vatican II reforms are the Protestant Reformation as implemented by Roman Catholics.

How to Approach the Issue?

To explore the possibilities for finding music that sends us forth, let us consider how one might approach the issue. What is the role of music in worship, and how do we judge and evaluate it?

One framework which has been found helpful in ecumenical contexts comes from the “three judgments” of *Music in Catholic Worship* of 1972.¹ These were refined and rearticulated as “The Three Judgments: One Evaluation” at nos. 127–134 of the 2007 document of the United States Conference of

Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*.² (I have presented the three judgments to Lutherans in Norway and Sweden to good effect.) The three judgments are, in their adjusted order of 2007: the liturgical, the pastoral, and the musical. I take it that they are listed in order of importance—with the proviso that the individual judgments are not to be considered in isolation or, worse, played off against one another, but are to be integrated into one comprehensive evaluation.

- The liturgical judgment: “Is this composition capable of meeting the structural and textual requirements set forth by the liturgical books for this particular rite?” (127)
- The pastoral judgment: “Does a musical composition promote the sanctification of the members of the liturgical assembly by drawing them closer to the holy mysteries being celebrated? Does it strengthen their formation in faith by opening their hearts to the mystery being celebrated on this occasion or in this season? Is it capable of expressing the faith that God has planted in their hearts and summoned them to celebrate?” (130)
- The musical judgment: “The musical judgment asks whether this composition has the necessary aesthetic qualities that can bear the weight of the mysteries celebrated in the Liturgy. It asks the question: Is this composition technically, aesthetically, and expressively worthy?” (134)

Let us reflect on each of the three judgments in turn, and explore how each judgment helps us think about principal aspects of the music of sending.

Father Anthony Ruff, O.S.B., is associate professor of theology at Saint John’s University and School of Theology-Seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota.

Applying the Three Judgments to the Music of Sending

The *liturgical judgment* would start with the structure and language of the rite. According to the *Book of Common Worship*, the Sending follows the Prayer after Communion. The first element of the Sending is a “hymn, psalm, or spiritual song.” Then, after the blessing and charge are spoken, the rubrics indicate that “instrumental music or congregational song may follow the charge.” This suggests that one would seek out psalms and hymns whose texts speak of going forth, being sent, being commissioned and empowered to service, claiming one’s call to love and serve, and the like. Hymns such as “We Will Go Out with Joy” and “Give Praise to the Lord”—numbers 539 to 550 in *Glory to God*—are made-to-order examples of the kinds of congregational song that appear in the Sending section of the hymnal.

Texts of praise can help worshipers
go forth to live their entire lives—
not just an hour on Sunday morning—
as a sacrifice of praise.

It could get rather pedantic to limit oneself to this thematic range, however. Worshipers probably know that they are being sent forth, and perhaps do not need texts that tell them this explicitly every week. Perhaps there are other textual themes that also do the work of sending which the rite calls for. Texts of thanksgiving—the very meaning of the word *Eucharist*—are surely appropriate as one moves from the eucharistic celebration to a life of gratitude. Texts of praise can help worshipers go forth to live their entire lives—not just an hour on Sunday morning—as a sacrifice of praise. Other appropriate themes could be named.

Liturgical tradition offers another avenue for thinking about appropriate textual themes in the music of sending. In the medieval Mass, the chant antiphons assigned to be sung during communion oftentimes are quotations from the Gospel reading of the day. In some liturgical traditions it is customary to sing a hymn or psalm *after* communion, and following the medieval precedent a piece that is thematically connected to the Gospel reading is selected. This ties Word and Sacrament together

and allows the Gospel to sound once more before the rite of Sending. It would be just a bit of a stretch to apply the same custom to the music of sending itself. The Lectionary Index in *Glory to God* would be employed to find hymns which tie in directly with the Gospel reading (or other readings, for that matter). Particularly if the Gospel reading and the sermon treat themes of mission and discipleship, a hymn that quotes and comments on the Gospel reading could help worshipers to recall and appropriate Gospel themes as they are sent forth to live the Gospel.

The *pastoral judgment* would take seriously the worshipers’ experience. Those of us who teach and study worship for a living, and those of us who regularly plan worship, are all too comfortable examining rites and texts. That’s not a bad thing, but it’s not the only or even the most important thing. We cannot be satisfied with simply consulting thematic and scriptural indices to find hymns that say the right things. This can become a rather artificial exercise—“The second line of the third stanza of the closing hymn quotes the end of the second reading, so it fits.” Sometimes we settle for textual thematic connections that are so obscure that they are probably noticed only by the planner and God. The pastoral judgment calls us to ask to be sensitive above all to what the music does for worshipers.

A closing hymn or song whose text says all the right things to summarize the main themes of the day’s service, and states—right there in the last stanza—that we’re sent forth to love and serve, is not a good choice if it is not singable for a given congregation, if it does not serve to unite their voices in communal worship, if it does not function for them as a fitting conclusion of worship which energizes them for the tasks ahead.

The pastoral judgment helps us to take into account the music as a whole, which is much more than just its text. It helps us ask: What does it “sound” like to be sent? What does it “feel” like? What genre and emotional register of music, and what combination of instrumentation, bring the service to a close in the right way? What do we want the communal experience to be? The text of “Spirit of the Living God” (GTG 288), for example, might lend itself to the sending, but the musical setting is restrained and invites contemplation, which may not be the right emotional and spiritual register. A beloved hymn such as “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (GTG 39)

or “How Great Thou Art” (GTG 625) might not have a text particularly tied to the Scripture readings of the service or to the theme of sending. But a hymn such as this, because of its power to draw people in, might be just the right hymn to draw the service to an impressive close and energize the congregation before it goes forth. (I am more comfortable selecting a closing hymn for its overall effect rather than its textual themes in cases where other hymns and music of the service do tie into those textual themes.)

The *musical judgment* is of course the most difficult to negotiate, because it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to assess musical quality objectively. It is problematic, to say the least, in our era of increasing multicultural sensitivity, to claim that western classical art music is intrinsically higher quality than music of other genres coming from other cultures. It would be simplistic to claim that traditional hymns are, as a rule, musically better than contemporary worship songs.

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expressive *for a given congregation*.

About the most that can be said about the musical judgment—and admittedly, here the musical judgment almost starts to become a subset of the pastoral judgment—is that it addresses whether the music is sufficiently weighty and aesthetically expressive *for a given congregation*. It reminds us not to use music which becomes a distraction because worshipers in a particular cultural context experience it as trivial or lightweight. For those who would advocate for higher standards in supposedly “quality” hymnody, the way forward is not to defend the alleged intrinsic superiority of specific hymns on the grounds of abstract principles of musical or aesthetic theory. It is to make it work in practice by showing that “high quality” music sounds a greater depth of expressiveness which resonates in the hearts of worshipers.

We are in deep waters philosophically. Some will want clarity and will ask, which is it? Are we to evaluate intrinsic musical quality according to supposedly *objective* standards of music theory such as the intervals used in good melodies, harmonic substance and interest, and proper voice leading? Or is the musical judgment more about the *subjective* emotional and spiritual response it evokes in people? It is both, actually, and the two exist in a paradoxical relationship that can never be defined satisfactorily. What are thought to be objective musical standards are in fact time-bound values of particular people in particular times and places. It is best to acknowledge and affirm them as such.

This paradoxical relationship was expressed well in the *Universa Laus Document* of 1980. (Universa Laus is a European organization for the study of music in worship founded by Joseph Gelineau and others shortly after Vatican II.) “Beliefs Held in Common” no. 40 says this: “There is a communal and constant demand for ‘beauty’ and ‘holiness’ with regard to liturgical forms. This has to do with the ‘values’ that each group considers as essential.”

This paradoxically time-bound aspect to supposedly objective standards was further explained in the “Points of Reference” of the *Universa Laus Document* at no. 9.2: “When people demand ‘beauty’ and ‘holiness’ of liturgical forms, it is not so much a question of aesthetic or moral norms. Rather, it is a question of the ‘values’ that a group of people are aiming at in their symbolic action and of the ‘anti-values’ that the group considers incompatible with the rites. Detecting these values and anti-values, and discovering the tangible expressions through which they are perceived, turn our attention to the group’s beliefs, spirituality, and faith, in addition to the social psychology and to the status of art and religion in society.” Evaluating musical quality, then, involves ever greater awareness to the cultural context in which this evaluation is made. It is about finding the right kind of musical quality—which is in the music itself, to be sure—that resonates with a given congregation in a given cultural context because it expresses their deepest values.

When it all comes together, the liturgical, pastoral, and musical judgments are aspects of one unified evaluation. Music performs its role of sending well because it fits the rite textually, draws worshipers of a particular congregation into the dynamic of the rite, and does so with music that the congregation finds to be aesthetically expressive.

What about the Postlude?

“Instrumental music or congregational song may follow the charge,” according to rubrics in the *Book of Common Worship*. In many places, this will mean the organ postlude. What do you suppose the liturgical purpose of the postlude is? Does it make sense for people to be blessed and sent . . . and then sit through an organ solo before going anywhere?

The answer to that question depends on how one understands and applies the three judgments. Should the rite’s language of sending and blessing be followed literally, or can it be applied a bit more flexibly? Do people experience the postlude as part of their joyful time together, as blessed delight in the gift of music? Or does it form people not to take the rite seriously, not to mean what they say and do what they mean? Would the effort to have people leave right after the blessing and during

the postlude build up the congregation or affect it adversely? Would the reform be a teaching moment and the occasion a good conversation about how rituals have the power to affect us for good or for ill?

There are no easy answers, about the postlude or about any of the sending music. Have the conversation. Trust the rite. Trust your people. Treasure the gift of music. The work is rewarding and the church is built up in our efforts to respond to God’s many and gracious blessings.

Notes

1. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, *Music in Catholic Worship*, 1972, https://archive.org/stream/musicincatholicw00cath/musicincatholicw00cath_djvu.txt.
2. *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2008).



What Does It Mean to Bless God?

William P. Brown

A few months ago, an older member of our church came up to me and said, “I’ve been wondering about this for a while now, and I still haven’t come up with an answer. But *you* should know because you teach this stuff, right? So here’s my question: What does it mean to bless God?” First, I should pause to provide some background information. I teach and live in the South, and the word “bless” is sometimes used euphemistically in a pointedly derogatory fashion, as in the sentence, “Well, bless his heart!”¹ Clearly, nothing negative is meant biblically in “blessing” God. And so I gave what I thought was the obvious (and easiest) answer: “Blessing God is just another way of giving thanks or praise to God.” But she wasn’t satisfied. “Yes, but if God blesses us with all sort of things, what does God get from us when we bless her?” (We are active in a fairly progressive church.) I admitted that gave me pause for thought. How can God, in other words, be both the source of blessing and the object of blessing? With a promise of “I’ll get back to you,” I began my exegetical journey into the complex terrain of blessing in the Bible.

The journey found its way to the book of Psalms, known for its exuberant praise and anguished laments. Although there are more laments than hymns in the Psalms, the Hebrew title for the Psalter is “Praises” (*tēhillim*), indicating the book’s overall goal, namely to render praise to God. Praise in the Psalms is expressed in a variety of ways, from the short command *ballelujab* (“Praise the LORD!”) to extended testimonies of deliverance. One form of praise that carries particular weight is the act of “blessing” God. Two psalms, set next to each other, open with the enthusiastic command to “bless”:

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me!
Bless his holy name! (103:1, NRSV
adapted).²

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
O LORD my God, you are very great!
You are clothed with honor and
majesty! (104:1, NRSV adapted).

But what does it mean to “bless” God? I first want to determine what it means for God to bless human beings before exploring the reverse, namely God being blessed by human beings.

God Blessing Others

Most often in the Psalms and elsewhere in the Bible God is the identified agent of blessing. Indeed, God blesses a wide range of recipients, from animals to nations. The first example of blessing appears in Genesis: “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Gen. 1:22). God’s blessing of human beings comes later (v. 28). In both cases, the blessing lies in the command, which imparts the power of procreation to advance various species, human and otherwise.

God’s blessings take many forms. God, for example, blesses Sarah with a son (Gen. 17:6), fields with fertility (Gen. 27:27), bread and water with abundance (Exod. 23:25; Ps. 132:15), the “work” of one’s “hands” with prosperity (Deut. 28:12), and the righteous with protection (Ps. 5:12 [Hebrew v. 13]).³ Human beings, moreover, can be agents of God’s blessings, most paradigmatically Abraham, along with Sarah, in whom “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). In Isaiah, Israel is blessed to be an agent of God’s salvation to the nations:

William P. Brown is the William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament
at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of
the earth (Isa. 49:6, NRSV).

God blesses for a purpose, ultimately for the
“salvation” of the world.

The most formally stated blessing or benediction
in all of the Hebrew Bible is the blessing prescribed
by God for Aaron to impart to God’s people:

YHWH spoke to Moses saying,
“Speak to Aaron and to his sons saying,
“Thus you shall bless the Israelites,
saying to them:
“May the LORD bless you and keep you.
May the LORD cause his face to shine
upon you and be gracious to you.
May the LORD lift up his face to you
and grant you *shalom*.”
Thus they shall place my name upon the
Israelites,
but I myself will bless them”
(Num. 6:22–27).

Aaron is instructed by Moses (who is instructed by
God) in the way of blessing through the repeated
invocation of God’s sacred name (YHWH), conferring
grace, protection, and well-being (*shalom*). While
the name is to be “placed” upon the Israelites,
whatever that means exactly, God makes very clear
at the end that God is the agent of blessing (“keep”),
not Aaron, not even God’s “name.”

People Blessing God

When God bestows a blessing, God gives something
salutary to the recipient, such as protection,
sustenance, well-being, prosperity, or deliverance.
Blessing, thus, is a transactional act, an act of
giving. But what does it mean for human beings
to “bless” God, the Source of blessing? What does
God receive as the object of human blessing? If
one expects some degree of reciprocity within the
human/divine interaction of blessing, the question
cannot be avoided: What does God gain from being
blessed? And with *what* do we bless God, the God
who has everything? As one recent student aptly put
it, “blessing God” sounds like an “oxymoron.” For
the sake of background, let us first look at a few
examples that provide specific reasons or occasions
for blessing God.

A particularly dramatic example is found in
Genesis when Abraham’s servant has traveled a
long journey to find the right spouse for his son
Isaac. In accomplishing the mission, he exclaims:

Then I bowed my head and worshiped
the LORD, and *blessed* the LORD, the God of
my master Abraham, who had led me by
the right way to obtain the daughter of my
master’s kinsman for his son (Gen. 24:48,
NRSV; italics added).

The servant’s response is one of awe of, and gratitude
for, God’s gracious guidance. The act of “blessing”
God seems to be a vivid way of giving thanks to God
for an act of benevolence. One finds this also in the
directive given in Deuteronomy for receiving the land
and its benefits as God’s gift: “You shall eat your fill
and *bless* the LORD your God for the good land that
he has given you” (Deut. 8:10; italics added). Indeed,
the New Jewish Publication Society translation, the
Tanakh, renders the verb *bless* as “thank” in this
case. Thus, occasions for blessing God include
occasions for thanksgiving, such as sustenance, peace
(Josh. 22:33), and victory (Judg. 5:2, 9).

The highest concentration of instances of God
being “blessed” is found among the Psalms, which
covers the full range of its significance. On one end
of the spectrum, the act of blessing in the Psalms
seems to be equivalent to the act of praise.

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my
mouth (34:1 [2], NRSV.)

Bless our God, all you nations!
Let the sound of his praise be heard!
(66:8).

Such blessing is often proclaimed publicly “in the great
congregation” (26:12; 68:26; cf. 22:25 [26]; 35:18).

Blessing God does not occur in a vacuum; reasons
are often given. For example, the psalmist blesses
God for giving counsel (16:7), for providing refuge
(26:12), and for just about everything (103:1; 104:1). In
Psalm 100, blessing corresponds to giving thanks.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, his courts
with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!
(100:4, NRSV adapted).

In the Psalms, God's "name" is equivalent to God's presence, a presence made accessible by calling upon God's name ("YHWH"), which the psalmist does repeatedly, beginning with an invocation. God's name is the psalmist's lifeline, one might say, making possible his or her petition. And as for blessing, to "bless" God's "name" is tantamount to blessing God, who acts *pro nobis*.

So far, we have encountered examples of blessing as a form of thanksgiving and praise to God for various reasons. But is there something more going on when one "blesses" God? God blessing others, as we have seen, fundamentally involves God giving something tangible to the recipients of God's blessing. What, then, is conferred to God when God is "blessed"?

Let us return to Psalm 34. The opening verse, as noted above, pairs together blessing and praise. But the third verse suggests that something more is going on with the speaker's resolve to bless God.

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my
mouth (34:1 [2], NRSV).

Magnify the LORD with me;
together let us lift high his name! (34:3 [4]).

These two verses suggest that blessing God has everything to do with "magnifying" God, literally "making God great" (cf. Luke 1:46). "Magnifying" also involves "lifting high" or exalting God's name. The connection between blessing God and lifting up God's name is even tighter in Psalm 145.

I will lift you up high, my God, the King,
and bless your name forever and always
(145:1).

Psalm 63 gives a kinesthetic twist to such exaltation:

So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands in your name
(63:4 [5]).

The lifting of one's hands perhaps serves as an outward sign of lifting up God's name. In any case, blessing God involves, at the very least, acknowledging God's greatness. The well-known hymn "How Great Thou Art," thus, would serve as a hymn of blessing, of blessing God. Blessing is a

form of acknowledging God's greatness "in the great congregation." It is fundamentally an act of worship. But the question remains: does blessing God do God any good?

Take, for example, Psalm 68. In its climactic section, the psalm bursts with the command to "bless" God "in the great congregation" (v. 26 [27]) and concludes with explicating the implications of such blessing:

Give strength to God,
whose majesty is over Israel,
and whose strength is in the clouds.
Awesome are you, O God, from your
sanctuaries,
the God of Israel who *gives strength* and
power to (his) people.
Blessed be God! (vv. 34–35 [35–36];
italics added).

Note the correspondence between the command to "give strength to God" and the reference to God "who gives strength" to God's people in the following verse. While the NRSV translates the first instance as "ascribe power to God," it is the same verb in the following verse: "give" (Hebrew *ntn*). Indeed, one of the oldest psalms in the Psalter revels repeatedly in transactional language, opening with the repeated command to "give to the LORD":

Give to YHWH, you divine beings!⁴
Give to YHWH glory and strength!
Give to YHWH the glory due his name!
Bow down to YHWH in holy splendor!
(29:1–2).

The members of the divine assembly are commanded to "give" to God "glory and strength" as a sign of their submission ("bow down") to their Lord. In an ancient Babylonian myth (*Enuma Elish*) whose parallels with Genesis 1 are often noted by biblical scholars, such a transactional act ("Give . . .") involved conferring universal sovereignty to one, singular deity, specifically Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon. Similarly in Psalm 29, God is given "glory and strength" from the "divine beings" of the heavenly council (elsewhere referenced in the Bible as God's "messengers" or "angels"). After the opening command to give to God "glory and strength," God's sovereign power is demonstrated in the "voice" that convulses nature.

YHWH's voice is over the waters;
 the God of glory thunders;
 YHWH is over the mighty waters.
 YHWH's voice is power;
 YHWH's voice is majesty.
 YHWH's voice breaks cedars;
 yes, YHWH shatters the cedars of Lebanon.
 He makes Lebanon skip about like a calf,
 and Sirion⁵ like a young wild ox.
 YHWH's voice strikes with bolts of fire;
 YHWH's voice convulses the wilderness;
 yes, YHWH convulses the wilderness
 of Kadesh (29:3–8).

Witnessing God's thunderous "voice" in nature, particularly over the waters,⁶ the earthly congregation cries out "Glory!" With such a pronouncement, the congregation acknowledges God's glorious power, and thus "gives" glory to God, tantamount to blessing God (v. 9). The "giving" of "glory and strength" confirms God's enthronement over the forces of chaos ("floodwaters"). This most ancient of psalms concludes, not coincidentally, with an appeal for God to give "strength" to God's people (v. 11).

YHWH sits enthroned upon the floodwaters;
 YHWH sits enthroned as king forever.
 May YHWH *give strength* to his people.
 May YHWH bless his people with *shalom*
 (29:10–11; italics added).

The movement of Psalm 29 is unmistakable: at the outset the divine assembly is commanded to "give glory and strength" to God, and the warrant for such transaction is given in God's thunderous control over the waters and the wilderness. Acclamation is given by the earthly temple congregation in the ringing cry of "Glory!" Concluding the psalm is an appeal made that God "give strength" to God's people. To quote from another psalm, Psalm 29 moves reciprocally "from strength to strength" (Ps. 84:7): from the "giving" of strength and glory to God by God's people to God "giving" strength to God's people. Such is also the case, as we saw, at the end of Psalm 68.

Finally, Psalm 96 provides an earthly counterpart to the heavenly scene given at the beginning of Psalm 29 with the following words:

Sing to YHWH a new song!
 Sing to YHWH, all the earth!
 Sing to YHWH, *bless* his name!
 Proclaim his salvation from day to day!
 Declare his glory among the nations,
 among all the peoples his wondrous works,
 that great is YHWH, and greatly to be praised,
 fearsome is he above all gods,
 that all the gods of the peoples are worthless
 idols,
 but it is YHWH who created the heavens.
 Majesty and splendor are before him;
 strength and splendor are in his
 sanctuary.
 Give to YHWH, O clans of the peoples!
 Give to YHWH glory and power!
 Give to YHWH the glory of his name!
 Offer gift(s) and enter his courts!
 Bow down to YHWH in holy splendor!
 Tremble before him, all the earth!
 (96:1–9; italics added).

It is as if the human congregation in Psalm 96 assumed the role of the divine assembly in Psalm 29, namely the role of "giving" to God the glory that is due God. And there is more: blessing God's name takes several forms in this psalm—testifying to salvation, declaring God's glory, acknowledging God's "majesty and splendor," offering gifts, and bowing down and trembling before God. To bless God turns out to be much more multifaceted than simple praise.

Implications

Fundamentally, blessing involves *giving* something, whether it is from God to human beings or human beings to God. In the latter case, psalmic poetry seems to suggest that God is somehow enhanced ("magnified," "exalted") by human blessing, that God *gains* "glory and strength" through the act of human blessing. For the ancient worshipping community, "blessing" God was deemed a necessity both for God and for the worshipers. Could it be that the liturgical act of "blessing" God by "giving" God "glory and strength," by exalting or "lifting high" God's "name," provided a heightened sense of divine presence within the context of worship, a more profound experience of praise and thanksgiving?⁷ One wonders.

God as Recipient

In any case, the poetry of the Psalms is evocative, and in the case of blessing God, such poetry implies that God's greatness is somehow sustained by *our* blessing. As we "bless" God, we become participants in sustaining God's greatness in the world. But, of course, inquiring minds need to know: does God really *need* our blessing? The God of the Psalms is neither a needy nor dependent deity. To the contrary, the psalmic God exercises power on behalf of God's people and for the sake of creation. The God of the Psalms is no vulnerable deity, especially for those who see themselves as weak and vulnerable in their prayers to God. The "poor and needy," a formula of self-designation in psalmic prayers, require nothing less than a God who can act decisively and powerfully (40:17; 86:1; 109:22). A weak deity will not do for the psalmist.

In the Psalms, God is lauded as deliverer, sovereign, provider, teacher, and creator. But if one insight is to be gained from the psalmic call to "bless" God, it is this: God is also *recipient*, specifically an eager and willing recipient of our words of petition and praise. God's ear is ever "inclined" to receive the prayers of the people and to act upon them, so testifies the psalmist (e.g., Pss. 10:17; 17:6; 31:2), and the same can be said of God being ever receptive to the people's praises and, yes, blessing. God, in short, desires our blessing without being a needy deity.

For the Sake of the World and God's Glory

The vivid language of psalmic poetry does, however, point to a need, namely *our* need to acknowledge God's greatness in times of doubt and uncertainty. The psalmist is convinced that blessing God is just as important for us as praying to God is. Blessing, as well as praising, God establishes a common focus upon God and, consequently, an active unity within the context of corporate worship. Moreover, it broadens the horizon of human perception when it comes to seeing God in relation to the world, indeed all of creation. For these reasons, and many others, blessing God, the Psalms claim, is what *we* need to do. The God of the Psalms, on the other hand, does not *need* blessing in the sense that God depends on it in order to be God, but that God desires blessing as much as God desires praise and thanksgiving. The key is the *public* scope of such

blessing. God desires to be blessed "in the great congregation." The call to "magnify" God is one that invites others to join in (Ps. 34:3 [4]). That is to say, God's benevolent "greatness" is to be acknowledged and sustained, enhanced even, not for God's sake *per se* but for the sake of the worshiping community and, by extension, the world.

Another way to put it: blessing God is a matter of public proclamation. God's "greatness," acknowledged in blessing, has everything to do with God's *renown* in the world. The transactional nature of such proclamation lies in the very nature of "glory" or "honor" (*kābôd*) that God both possesses and desires. You see, the Psalms recognize that "honor" is a quality of being that exists not in isolation but in relationship; it is an attribute that must be conferred or "given" by someone to someone else. For a person to have honor, she must be given honor. Honor exists only when it is acknowledged. In psalmic poetry, the same social dynamic underlies the notions of divine "glory" and "strength." They, too, are deemed ascribable qualities, for they all have to do with God's renown in the world. Renown requires recognition. To "give" honor, renown, glory, and strength to God is to recognize that God is worthy of honor, renown, glory, and, strength. To "give God the glory" is to give acknowledgment that God has acted in such a way as to deserve the ascription of "glory." To "give" God "strength" is to acknowledge that God has done and continues to perform acts of power in the world and to make known to the world the God we worship is a glorious and mighty God.⁸ To put it another way, if God's people were to refuse to give praise and blessing to God, then the stones themselves "would shout out" (Luke 19:40)! Acknowledgment of God's glory can come from anywhere, but it has to come.

Blessing God not only acknowledges and heightens the sense of God's agency in the world; it also acknowledges and heightens human agency, for blessing God requires much on the part of those giving the blessing. Fundamental to the reciprocity of blessing is the giving and the receiving, a heightening of agency for both the one giving the blessing and the recipient. Blessing, in other words, assumes a position of agential power for both the giver and the recipient. The "bless-er" must have something to give, and the recipient invariably has something to gain.

The Stewardship of Blessing

Moreover, as we have seen in certain psalms, such blessing requires concrete acts, from verbal praise and testimony to offering gifts and submission. To “bless” God is, among other things, to “bow,” to “bow down to the LORD in holy splendor” (Ps 96:9). In the end, to bless God is to offer freely our submission to God’s sovereign will; it is to offer our freedom to God *in freedom*, a freedom *for* God as well as freedom *from* the need or temptation to worship, praise, indeed bless, anything that is *less than worthy* of worship, praise, and, yes, blessing.⁹ To bless God is to offer ourselves to God and to no other. Blessing God, then, is the ultimate act of stewardship and, in turn, the ultimate subversion of idolatry.

Perhaps the dynamic, transactional, reciprocal power of blessing is best encapsulated by David himself, the author according to tradition behind so many psalms, in this grand passage from 1 Chronicles:

Then David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly; David said: “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name”
(1 Chron. 29:10–13, NRSV).

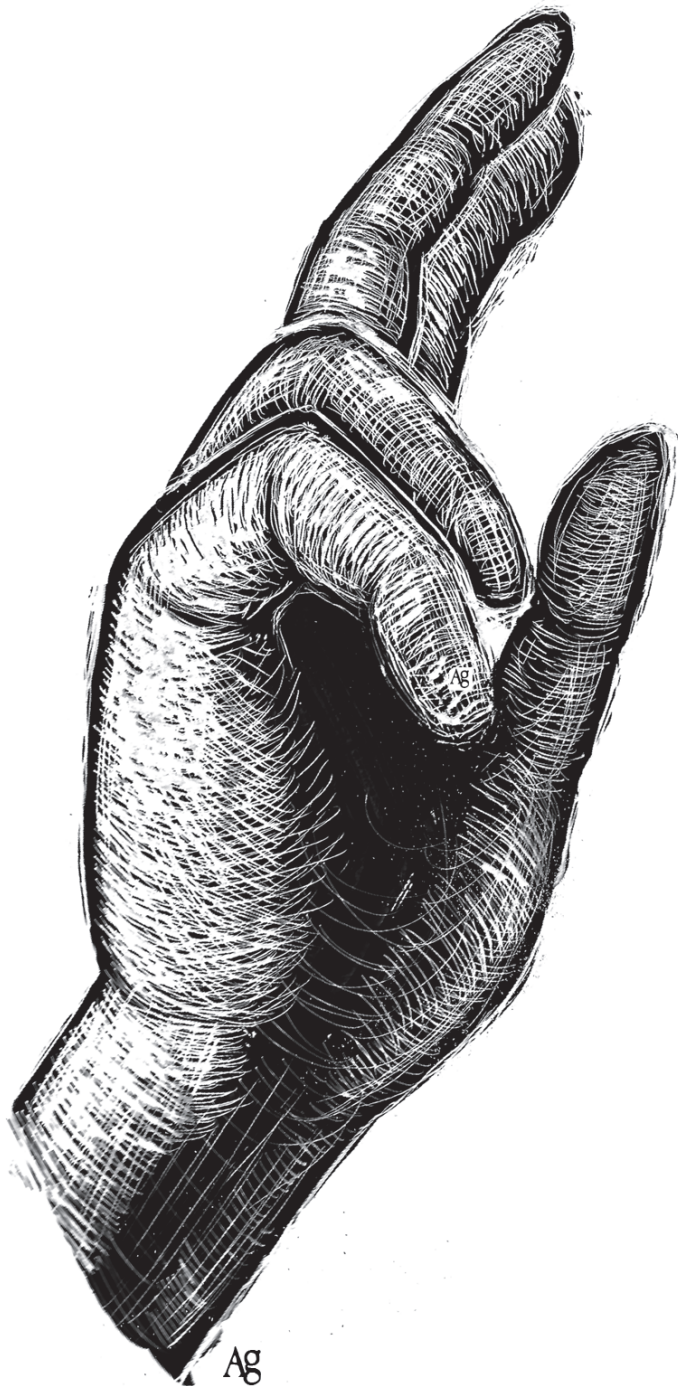
David’s act of blessing God is that of the king of Israel blessing the King of the cosmos. Narratively, it marks the culmination of David’s resolve to donate his own “treasure” of gold and silver to the temple’s construction, to be implemented by his son Solomon (1 Chron. 29:3). Hence, David’s blessing is set from the outset within the context of stewardship. Its content consists of his effusive acknowledgment of everything that is *due* God, from “greatness” to “glory.” One may recall the liturgical conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer: “for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever and ever.” David acknowledges that whatever power he has as Israel’s king is power that is *due* God, the King

of glory. In his blessing, David, moreover, includes all of creation, from heaven to earth, within the orbit of God’s sovereign rule and possession. The possessive word *your(s)* is unmistakable throughout the passage. “In your hand,” David proclaims, “are power and might.” But note also what David says reciprocally: “in [God’s] hand” is the power “to make great and to give strength to all.” Acknowledged in David’s blessing is God’s way of distributing power “to all.” Such is the reciprocal nature of blessing God, effectively summarized in verse 14: “For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.” In blessing God, the world is received from God and given back to God.

So what can I say to my church friend who initially posed the question about what God gains from our blessing? The short answer is: “Everything.” Such is the dedicatory force of blessing. In blessing God, we offer everything to God that God already has: honor, glory, majesty, strength, as well as the world. We offer ourselves to God, and we do so for the sake of the world, which so desperately yearns for the blessing of God’s “steadfast love” (*beseḏ*)—the core of God’s renown. Such is the reciprocal nature of blessing, a paradox one could say, but not quite an oxymoron.

Notes

1. For “curse” couched euphemistically as “bless” in biblical Hebrew, see Job 1:5, 11; 2:5, 9.
2. Unless otherwise noted, biblical translations are that of the author.
3. Here and throughout this article the verse in brackets indicates the verse in the Hebrew Bible.
4. Literally, “sons of gods” (*bênê ’ēlîm*). Cf. Ps. 82:6.
5. The Sidonian name for Hermon.
6. Psalm 29, not coincidentally, is the psalm appointed for Baptism of the Lord in years A, B, and C.
7. Pss. 18:46 [47]; 21:13 [14]; 30:1 [2]; 34:3 [4]; 57:5 [6]; 99:2, 5, 9; 107:32; 108:5 [6]; 118:28; 145:1; cf. 46:10 [11].
8. The issue of divine power is worth a separate discussion, but suffice it to say that divine power cannot be and must not be equated with notions of human power, which can tend toward the abusive, as history has painfully demonstrated, including the present. Paul, for example, plays with the paradox of God’s power shown in weakness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18, 25–29; 2 Cor. 12:9).
9. Except, of course, when it comes to one person blessing another in the name of God, as in the case of Aaron’s blessing discussed above.



Ag

All Creatures of Our God and King: Blessing of the Animals

Elizabeth McGregor Simmons

And other eyes than ours
Were made to look on flowers,
Eyes of small birds and insects small:
The deep sun-blushing rose
Round which the prickles close
Opens her bosom to them all.
The tiniest living thing
That soars on feathered wing,
Or crawls among the long grass out of sight,
Has just as good a right
To its appointed portion of delight
As any King.
—Christina Rossetti,
“To What Purpose Is This Waste?”

Bettie was well known as an accomplished painter, chef, gardener, musician, and needle worker in the college town where I lived. She was also a lover of dogs, and the lover of one dog in particular, for anyone who knew Bettie was also well acquainted with her furry companion, Wags. Anywhere that Bettie was, Wags was too.

One day, Bettie asked her pastor, “Can Wags come to church with me?” Not hesitating for a second, I responded, “Absolutely! Yes!” for, you see, in the last two churches where I was privileged to serve as pastor, animals had been coming to church with their human companions for many years as participants in an annual Blessing of the Animals. Because of the congregation’s experience with the Blessing of the Animals, I was confident that Wags would be welcome in church. And I was right. From that day until the week of Bettie’s death, Wags and Bettie would be welcomed to Sunday worship upon arriving in the sanctuary a few minutes after the Call to Worship and settling together into a pew.

I first was introduced to the Blessing of the Animals when the SoL (Source of Light) Center at University Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, a center for adult education informed by faith, was approached by a local bookstore about hosting author Debra K. Farrington as a speaker upon the publication of her book *All God’s Creatures: The Blessing of Animal Companions*.¹

As the SoL Center executive director and I, along with a planning team, considered the request, we reflected upon how on any given Sunday as I preached and led worship, I looked out through large clear-glass windows opening up onto the beautiful university campus that was a favorite route for Sunday morning dog walkers. The unexpected invitation presented the congregation with an opportunity to open our doors wider to our neighbors and to act out the vision articulated by the prophet in Isaiah 11:6–8:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Elizabeth McGregor Simmons served as pastor of Davidson Presbyterian Church in Davidson, North Carolina, from 2008 to 2017 and is now retired.

The planning team pulled out all the stops. The rugs in the sanctuary were rolled up just in case there were any accidents (there weren't!), contacts were made with local animal shelters and advocacy groups inviting them to have representatives on site, the youth group gathered wash tubs and dog shampoo in anticipation of offering complimentary baths for pups, a congregation member set up a course on the lawn for an agility demonstration. Someone even recruited a pet massage therapist!

The *Book of Common Worship* states, “[Blessing of the Animals] may be used on or near October 4, the commemoration of Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226), reformer and renewer of the church” (BCW, 569).² October Sundays in San Antonio, Texas, can be hot, and October 1, 2006, the date of the first Blessing of the Animals at University Presbyterian Church, was no exception. The air conditioning and cool sanctuary tile were grace itself for animals and humans alike as we moved inside to worship. We sang “All Creatures of Our God and King,” “For the Beauty of the Earth,” and “All Things Bright and Beautiful.” We confessed our failures to respond to God’s good creation with awe and the times when we had not lived up to our calling to be responsible stewards. We read Psalm 104, and worshipers laid hands on their animal companions, blessing them with these words, “May this creature (*name*) be a blessing to me and me to him/her. In the name of the One who blesses all creatures. Amen.”³ Perhaps Ruth Ann (human) summed up the sense of the afternoon for many of us who were there when she reflected, “When I looked down at Molly (dog) curled up beside me on the pew as we sang and prayed and worshiped, I caught a glimpse of how deeply God desires peace for the whole world.”

A few years later, I would be called to serve as pastor of another congregation whose sanctuary is located on another beautiful college campus where neighborhood dog walkers mingle with Sunday morning worshipers leaving services. The worship committee overcame some initial skepticism to give its okay for an outdoor service, an expression of the Davidson College Presbyterian Church Session’s commitment to live as an Earth Care Congregation. Flyers announcing the worship service were posted in shop windows along Main Street. Participants were invited to bring their pets, leashed or caged, real or stuffed or represented by a photograph, lawn chairs for sitting, and a voluntary offering of pet food or money to be contributed to a local food pantry and an animal rescue program and shelter. One planning

team member’s cat had recently died; she suggested a time of remembrance to begin the service. Candles were provided, and a gathering time consisting of the lighting of the candles accompanied by a reflective musical medley of creation-related hymns played by the church band was added to the liturgy.

Why Offer Blessing of the Animals?

Blessing of the Animals was embraced in both of the congregations which I have mentioned, but not immediately by some and not at all by a few. Some who were initially skeptical posed the important question: why, theologically speaking, offer a Blessing of the Animals?

The *Book of Common Worship* answers the question in part by its appropriate placement of the service in the section “Mission in the World: Creation and Ecology” (BCW, 559). Further, there is the inclusion of commentary from the Directory for Worship which will be of help to those who may encounter questions or outright opposition to Blessing of the Animals:

God sends the Church to share in the stewardship of creation, preserving the goodness and glory of the earth God has made. . . . As caretakers of God’s creation, we are called to: tend the land, water, and air with awe and wonder at God’s gifts; use the earth’s resources wisely . . . and seek beauty, order, health, harmony, and peace for all God’s creatures.⁴

The BCW commentary helpfully continues,

In worship, Christians enact their relationships with God, with one another, and with God’s good creation. With psalms and hymns we extol the Creator for earth’s beauty. In our prayers we thank God for the gifts of the earth, confess the injury we have caused to the earth, and plead for the healing of the planet.⁵

The themes mentioned in the commentary are profoundly present throughout the Blessing of the Animals liturgy, from the Opening Sentences excerpted from Psalms 84, 104, 148, and 36, through suggested prayers, additional Scripture readings (BCW, 580), and hymns found in *Glory to God* and the *Presbyterian Hymnal* (BCW, 581).

The liturgy for Blessing of the Animals as it appears in the *Book of Common Worship* gives voice to the ways that the creatures with whom we share our homes provide us with opportunities for expanding our connections to the breadth of God's amazing creation. As we move through the liturgy, we are reminded that we are servants and caretakers of God's creation; we are not the Creator. As church historian Roberta Bondi has written in her delightful and moving book *Nick the Cat: Christian Reflections on the Stranger*,

For large numbers of . . . us, animals are a significant part of our ordinary lives, including our spiritual lives. They offer us comfort, companionship, pleasure, order, and love. Like God, and unlike most human beings, they frequently love us unconditionally. Like God, when they love us, they love inexplicably across species and not because we are like them. As Christians, we can learn a lot from them, if we pay attention. They can help us live more fully in the actual, present, concrete world God gave us than we might otherwise be able to do. They can teach us humility, humor, kindness, and faithfulness . . . they can offer us badly needed help as we seek to grow in love of God and neighbor.⁶

Through the many years that I have led Blessing of the Animal services, I have been grateful for a responsive prayer by Christine Robinson which enables worshipers to lift up thanks and praise for animals in ways that we human beings may tend to overlook or not even be aware of. Perhaps you will find it useful in your setting, an addition to the elegant and faithful liturgy found in the *Book of Common Worship*.

Leader: Surrounded by the animals we love, we remember with gratitude the pets, protectors, and animal companions who have blessed our lives.

People: We give thanks for our childhood pets, who taught us to love and to cry. We give thanks for our children's pets, who help us to teach them responsibility and relationship, and we give thanks for the pets who brighten our days and comfort our nights.

Leader: Surrounded by our beloved pets, we remember that many animals suffer.

People: We remember that some animals are hunted or deserted or tortured or hungry. We remember that nature can be cruel and that people can be mean. We remember and want to help.

Leader: Surrounded by the animals we love, we know that many animals contribute to our lives.

People: We give thanks for all those animals who help us: worker animals who guard us and find our lost and guide the blind, the animals who provide us food and clothing, who tote our burdens and entertain us with their antics, and for animals who give their lives to help us learn.

Leader: Spirit of life, help us to remember that we live and work and love among the animals. Help us to be their friends, to love them and care for them and protect them from harm, to thank them when we use their lives for ours. Especially this [day], Spirit of life, bless these animals who are the companions of our lives. Hear our outpouring of love and gratitude for them and help us translate that into love and gratitude for all your creatures.

People: We bless these animals we love. We pledge to care for them tenderly and faithfully, and to remember that we are not alone on the earth.⁷

Some Things to Keep in Mind for First Blessing of the Animals

One size does not fit all congregations.

In one congregation that I served, the service was held indoors, in the sanctuary. We rolled up the rugs, some worshipers sat (or lay!) on the floor, and others found a place in the pews. In another congregation with a more traditional worship space, the front steps provided a perfect chancel, plus the music drew in curious neighbors who were taking a leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll down Main Street.

While the Blessing of the Animals often takes place on or near October 4, the commemoration of Francis of Assisi, you and the session may wish or need to consider a different day such as Earth Day or a day which aligns with a special weekend celebration carried out by a local animal welfare organization or agency with whom you might partner. Remember to consider the weather too, and don't forget to devise a rain plan if you are planning an outdoor service.

In addition, while it probably does not need to be said to anyone who has taken the time to read this article, those who composed the liturgy for Blessing of the Animals found in the *Book of*

Common Worship intended for the service to be adapted to fit one's own context and theological perspective. I, for one, have not chosen to "circulate through the congregation, ask the name of each animal, place my hand on the animal's head, and bless the animal,"⁸ as the *Book of Common Worship* suggests that the minister or worship leader do. Rather, the ritual act of the human companion placing his or her hand on the head of the animal companion and saying, "May this creature (*name*) be a blessing to me and me to him/her. In the name of the One who blesses all creatures. Amen," has seemed more authentic to my context, more in keeping with my Reformed appreciation of the theology of the priesthood of all believers, and more respectful of a skittish animal who doesn't know this Presbyterian minister from Adam!

Children and college students are likely to be the most enthusiastic worshippers.

Not every congregation is blessed to be located on a college or university campus, but I was doubly blessed as a pastor to serve in not one, but two such settings. I quickly learned that college students really miss their canine and feline companions who are still living "back home." The campus ministry committee at Davidson College Presbyterian Church for many years has hosted a cookies and milk study break during exam week (with homemade cookies provided by congregation members); after experiencing the delight that college students showed when they walked across campus on Sunday afternoon and encountered a worshiping community that included a bunch of children, dogs, turtles, even a bearded dragon and a goat, along with music, my husband and I began taking our dog Leonard along to the student union for the cookie study break. He turned out to be a very effective provider of pastoral care amid the late-night stress of exam preparation, and now the dogs of several campus ministry committee members are regulars on this end-of-semester scene.

One of the ways that I have "seen God" (as we like to say in youth group) in the Blessing of the Animals is through the active participation of children in the service. Animal companions obliterate the age barriers that society and even churches are prone to erect between generations. What could be more holy than witnessing an eight-year-old and an eighty-year-old engaged in deep conversation about animals and life and God?

If you are looking for a "sermon" to share at the Blessing of the Animals, that is, one that will fit the attention spans of both four-year-olds (don't forget to issue a special invitation to the children and families who are enrolled in your congregation's weekday early childhood education programs) and border collies, not to mention the grown-ups, you may wish to consider *How Did the Animals Help God?* an imaginative midrash on Genesis 1 and 2, by Nancy Sohn Swartz.⁹ The story begins, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. God created the fish in the waters and the birds in the sky, and all the wild creatures upon the earth. And God saw that it was good. But something was missing." So, the animals whom God has already created proceed to give their advice. "Make them brave," said the tiger. "Make them gentle," said the lamb. The advice giving goes on for a while and culminates with the following conclusion by the narrator,

God thanked all of creation for their gifts. Then God said, "Humans will be partners with Me to care for you and all the world. I will give them the gifts of goodness and kindness and love. I will bless them so they can choose between right and wrong. Just as you give to them, they will give to you." In the image of God and in the image of nature, God created us. And God saw that it was very good.¹⁰

You may get some pushback.

Interestingly, the strongest negative reaction to the Blessing of the Animals that I have experienced related to what was, to my mind, an innocuous allusion to Francis of Assisi in a newsletter announcement about the upcoming service. A congregant wrote to me, "Saint?! We are part of the reformed (sic) tradition. That tradition asserts that 'saints,' in the Roman Catholic understanding of that word, do not exist," followed by an excerpted quotation from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Were that letter to come to me today, I would be grateful to have at hand the paragraphs found on page 1,145 of the *Book of Common Worship* regarding the Calendar of Commemorations. Acknowledging that the Protestant Reformers rejected the cycle of saints as it was used in the sixteenth century, the BCW commentary states that some heirs of the Reformation in the Protestant church of today

have begun to recover a calendar of commemorations for a different set of purposes—as a way to remember our history, to give thanks for ancestors in the faith, to pray with the great cloud of witnesses, and to draw encouragement and challenge for our daily lives. In the broadest sense, as Paul used the term, we are all called to be saints—to be holy before God in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We therefore find support and encouragement in remembering those who have gone before us in faith. . . . We turn to these saints to perceive the God of history working in and through frail human beings like ourselves. We give honor to the presence of God in them, and we learn from them.¹¹

The congregant’s critical letter about the Blessing of the Animals pressed me to learn more about Francis (whose name, of course, the current Holy Father took as his own), and indeed, I have discovered in his life and witness support and encouragement for my faith and discipleship. If you are inclined to do the same and have time to read one book, I recommend *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* by Augustine Thompson.¹²

Expect the Holy Spirit to touch you in deep places. I could tell you about Oliver, the labradoodle, who, when his human companion Karen died and her husband, her friends, and I stood around her bed to pray and entrust her to God’s eternal safekeeping, placed his paws up next to Karen on her bed. If anybody tells me that dogs don’t pray, I will tell them that they have never met Oliver.

I could tell you about the individual, not a member of the congregation I served, not even someone whom I could have picked out of a crowd, who called the church one day, distressed that she had missed the Blessing of the Animals. She asked if she could bring her two dogs, both of them quite sick, to church for a blessing. At the time, my own husband was quite ill with end-stage liver disease, his hope for a liver transplant growing dimmer by the day. I was exhausted, physically and emotionally, and quite frankly, the last thing in the world that I wanted to do was to bless a dog! But we went into the chapel; we sat quietly; I offered a prayer, and wouldn’t you know it, my balled-up hurting heart got a little softer, a little more unclenched.

I could tell you about the person who had experienced a boatload of hurt in her life sending me this email:

I hate that I will miss the blessing this year.
 I am thankful
 For warmed laps and wet noses
 For teaching us that accidents happen
 to the best of us
 For excitedly meeting us on days
 it seemed that others didn’t care
 For teaching us about responsibility
 For forgiving us when water ran empty
 and food was late
 For allowing us to have conversations
 in strange voices without complaint
 For letting us experience love and
 at times the bittersweet pain
 associated with losing someone you love
 For good memories and funny stories.
 I know it will be wonderful.

I could tell you all these stories and more, but, if you find yourself entering the tender delight and joy of leading a Blessing of the Animals, you will have your own stories to tell, for as Roberta Bondi writes, “Like our relationship with God, our relationships to the animals with whom we live is a deep and wonderful mystery. . . . Such love and mystery fill us with awe, as well as a sense of the presence of beauty beyond anything we can imagine. It makes us humble; it teaches us gentleness; it opens us to joy.”¹³

Notes

1. Debra K. Farrington, *All God’s Creatures* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006).
2. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 569.
3. Adapted from Andrew Linzey, *Animal Rites: Liturgies of Animal Care* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 103.
4. Directory for Worship, W-5.0305.
5. BCW, 560.
6. Roberta C. Bondi, *Nick the Cat: Christian Reflections on the Stranger* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 11.
7. Christine Robinson, quoted by Farrington, 194–195.
8. BCW, 572.
9. Nancy Sohn Swartz, *How Did the Animals Help God?* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2004).
10. Debra Farrington offers many suggestions for rituals and practices for children and families in relationship with their animal companions. See *All*

God's Creatures, p. 76 for a liturgy of covenant and care when an animal new to a home is named; p. 90 for the suggestion of posting Psalm 104:24, 27–28, “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. . . . These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things,” near an animal’s food supply as a reminder of the importance of what one is doing when one fills the dog’s bowl or the bird feeder; p. 170 for a liturgy marking the death of a pet.

11. BCW, 1145.
12. Augustine Thompson, O.P., *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012). If you would like to share the story of Francis with children, I found the following titles in our local public library: Tomie de Paola, *Francis, The Poor Man of Assisi* (New York: Holiday House, 1982); Margaret Hodges, *Brother Francis and the Friendly Beasts* (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1991); Karen Pandell, *Saint Francis Sings to Brother Sun: A Celebration of His Kinship with Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2005).
13. Bondi, 137.



House Blessings

Catherine Neelly Burton

Catherine, I want you to come to my new apartment and bless it.” She stood before me in the church fellowship hall, petite in stature with her white hair styled from a trip to the beauty shop two days earlier. She smiled as she spoke.

I was a little taken aback by her request, but said, “Yes, of course, I would love to,” and then wondered what I had agreed to.

The woman was Libby. I was relatively new to her church and had come to know her through her husband’s illness and death. I had spent time with the two of them on the patio of their old home and later in the hospice facility where he died. After his death I continued to visit her at her home.

In time Libby and her children made the decision that it was best for her to sell her house and move to a retirement complex. This was a hard decision but fortunately not one fraught with tension and anger, only sadness. The sadness was compounded knowing that her beautiful old ranch-style house, decorated from the 1970s and on a large lot, would be demolished and replaced by a larger new home. Still, it was time.

After Libby got settled into her apartment, we made a date for the house blessing. I had participated in one house blessing prior to this. While in seminary, two friends got married and moved into a school apartment. They asked one of our professors and her spouse to lead a blessing service. It turned into quite a social event with some fifteen or twenty of us cramming into the small apartment, bulletins in hand, for a blessing and refreshments. In my experience, seminarians are always up for free entertainment, and liturgical entertainment was especially intriguing.

We followed the blessing service from the 1993 *Book of Occasional Services*. The service consists of Scripture and prayers in different parts of the house while the worshipping body moves from space to space. What stands out the most in my memory is that in the couple’s bedroom, our professor and her spouse read the Scripture and prayer while lying on the bed. This moment of levity made us all laugh and/or blush.

Not long before Libby’s invitation for me to bless her apartment, I learned of Edward Hays’s book *Prayers for the Domestic Church: A Handbook for Worship in the Home*, which includes a house blessing. Hays’s book is filled with prayers and blessings for many events and stages of life, including the blessing of a home. I took the book with me and headed for Libby’s apartment.

Hays’s book is designed to be used by the people who live in a home, with no expectation of an outside religious leader participating. Hays’s “Blessing Prayers for the Home” is structured and labeled for a father and mother to read the parts. Of course, not all households have fathers and mothers; some don’t have children, others are led by single parents or same-gender couples. Families come in all sorts of configurations, so the blessings need to be adapted and that could be a reason to choose a different resource. I opted to use the book at Libby’s house but to do the readings myself.

Families come in all sorts of configurations, so the blessings need to be adapted and that could be a reason to choose a different resource.

Catherine Neelly Burton is senior pastor and head of staff at Grace Presbyterian Church in Wichita, Kansas.

When I got to Libby's she wanted to show me around and offered me something to drink. Leaning on the kitchen counter she giggled as she pulled out a new swimsuit from a Lands' End package. She decided to take water aerobics at the retirement home and hadn't bought a suit in years. Her laughter was part disbelief and part delight.

I noted the wooden bowls on her living room shelf, and she told me the story of the church member who had made them years earlier; Libby was an endless resource for church history. She was keenly observant with a sharp memory.

We sat at the kitchen table and visited, and then we started the blessing. Her apartment was small, and so as we moved from space to space, it was often with just one step or the turn of a shoulder. As I offered the blessing and read the words, I began to believe them more and more, and began to experience God's presence in a deep way.

At the doorway:

Blessed be this doorway.
May all who come to it
be treated with respect and kindness.
May all our comings and goings
be under the seal of God's loving care.

In the kitchen:

Blessed be this shrine of the kitchen.
Blessed be the herbs and spices,
and the pots and pans used to prepare
our meals.
May the ill-seasonings of anger and bitterness
never poison the meals prepared here.

We wound our way through the small spaces and back to the doorway:

Open be this door
to the neighbor or to the stranger.
May our friends
who come to us in times of trouble
and sorrow
find our door open to
them and to their needs.¹

"Amen," we said together.

Our homes are deeply personal. Inviting someone into your home is inviting them to see who you really are. Asking to come to someone's house is asking to see how they live.

At the start of my ordained ministry, several colleagues and I had a conversation with a clergy person some thirty-five years our senior. One of the generation gaps we discovered was around home visits. For our senior colleague there was no question—pastors visited people in their homes; it's what pastors did. We noted to him that in our experience, people of a certain age (under fifty) were less inclined to want the pastor in their homes.

For me, this still proves true, ten years later. As part of the process of getting to know people who visit our church, I call them and ask if we can get together to talk. I let them know that I can stop by their home, they can come by my office, or we can meet for a meal or coffee. Almost everyone wants to meet for a meal or coffee. A few people come by the office. Only once has someone suggested I come to their house.

There's also the matter of practicality. As congregations shift from being places where "churched people" come to be fed to being missional communities that send people into the world to be part of what God is doing, home visits are not always the best use of the pastor's time. In the congregation I serve now, deacons are responsible for home visits. This empowers them to use their gifts.

The home visits I make are for particular reasons. I am only in homes for events such as new member gatherings, when someone is sick or had a family member die, or to ask someone to give time or money.

A house blessing is different. I'm not in the home because of a loss. I'm not there for a gathering with a goal. I'm not there to ask anyone to give. I am there to offer a blessing. That's it. What a gift this time can be.

One of the benefits of a house blessing is that it most often happens when someone moves into a new home, and this is the time when people are more apt to accept a visit. They aren't yet worried about the dust on the shelves, or the spot on the carpet, or the clutter on the table. Instead, whether they are excited, unsure, or remorseful about the move, there is a moment of vulnerability where we can offer a ritual, where we can offer to speak holy words into a holy space.

I love house blessings for much of the same reason I love home communion. Home communion turns a bedside tray or coffee table into the Lord's table. It takes a nursing home's shared space and proclaims, "This is holy." A house blessing takes what might seem ordinary—say, a kitchen, for almost everyone has a kitchen, even if it's a microwave and coffee pot—and names the sacredness of the space.

As much as I love house blessings, I don't often think to offer them. I led a second blessing at the prompting of a church member. The blessing was not for her but for another woman in our congregation.

Carolyn moved into a new townhouse after a family member died in her old home. Carolyn's family was incredible, and her sister and brother-in-law walked with her through the grief and the moving. They took a dated townhouse, knocked out walls, added fresh paint, and created a bright and open sanctuary for Carolyn.

Carolyn's friend called me at the church office and suggested we go to Carolyn's new home and bless it. She would bring lunch.

The friend, Carolyn, Carolyn's sister, and I gathered in the new home. We marveled at the way the sunlight both gave life and serenity to the living room. We admired the craftsmanship that took a cramped kitchen and made it open and fresh. Then we all paused and looked at each other. With that, I knew it was time to start.

One of the gifts of a house blessing, or any ritual, is that it gives the opportunity to say what everyone is thinking but no one knows how to say or whether they should say it. We all knew that Carolyn was enduring horrible grief. We knew that as much as she loved her old house, it was now a sad place. We knew that this new home was a gift, and instead of trying to come up with our own words, we used a script.

I read from Hays's book:

Surround this shelter with your Holy Spirit.
Encompass all its four sides with the power
of your protection so that no evil or harm
will come near. May that divine blessing
shield this home from destruction, storm,
sickness and all that might bring evil to those
who shall live within these walls.²

Upstairs and out to the back patio we went, praying and speaking holy words. The Holy Spirit's presence was palpable as we said "Amen" and sat down to eat.

House blessings are not only acts of care but they also provide the church a way to be countercultural. In 1973 the average new house in the United States was 1,660 square feet. In 2015 it was 2,687 square feet.³ The U.S. housing industry is central to the nation's economy. In addition to the construction industry, home buying and home renovations fuel a major media market. The Home and Garden Television network, or HGTV, is filled with shows like *House Hunters* and *Love It or List It* that summarize the home buying or renovation process into short episodes. The HGTV show *Fixer Upper* turned the hosts Chip and Joanna Gaines into stars. Fans flock to Waco, Texas, the Gaines's hometown. Their brand, Magnolia, is available at Target so that the masses can decorate like Joanna.

There is nothing wrong with buying, selling, or renovating a home. My family bought our house four years ago. It is a small bungalow built in 1930, and we're gradually making updates both to the structure and to our hand-me-down furniture. This year we bought a new chair (a forever kind of chair) and replaced six of the original twelve house windows. All of this to say that I am not against spending money on homes.

What concerns me is the way that U.S. culture pushes us to do more and have more. It saddens me that some people buy homes they can barely afford. In the 2008 housing crisis it was the most vulnerable in our society who suffered the most. At a blessing we aren't there to see the new backsplash or backyard fire pit. We're there to name that the space is holy and to ask God to bless it. We pray that the home be blessed, whether it is listed with Sotheby's or subsidized by the city.

I am pleased that the "Dedication of a Home" or "House Blessing" service is in the new *Book of Common Worship*. More so, I am grateful that it is included in the pastoral edition. The large *Book of Common Worship* rarely leaves my office, but the pastoral edition is always in my bag.

While I like Hays's book, the "House Blessing" service in the BCW incorporates Scripture in a way that *Prayers for the Domestic Church* does not. The Scripture is theologically appropriate, and it gives the blessing some grounding for those who might not be initially comfortable with the idea of a blessing service.

There is very little privacy in our world. Much of this is by choice. Many of us choose to share our lives online, but the lives we share are curated. Some of

the lack of privacy we experience is not by choice; you can't go to the grocery store without being recorded on video. This means that our homes really are some of the only private spaces left.

To let someone into our home means giving up some of that privacy. Again, this is a countercultural opportunity for the church. As members of the body of Christ we belong to each other. This means that we not only share our curated lives, but we also share our real lives. To offer to bless someone's home is to offer to bless who they really are, not just who they want the world to think they are.

Long before social media, there was a time when pastors opened their homes for "open houses." As a preacher's kid I spent many December open houses at the punch bowl. Still, that was a curated view of our home life. We spent days dusting and tidying up clutter to prepare for those two hours on a Sunday afternoon.

A few years ago, my sister asked me if I planned to host an open house for the congregation I serve. I laughed. The idea never occurred to me. That era is over, at least from my vantage point. Instead, I hope to be part of the blessing era. The gatherings are smaller, and the experience is less curated and more open to what the Spirit might do. Still, there is a script, holy words spoken and prayed by many before me.

Everlasting God,
in whom we live and move and have
our being,
you have made us for yourself,
so that our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in you.
Make this house your abiding place,
and bless all who dwell here.
Fill them with your Holy Spirit,
and send them out in your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁴

To offer a house blessing is itself a blessing, and one for which I am grateful.

Notes

1. Edward Hays, *Prayers for the Domestic Church: A Handbook for Worship in the Home* (Notre Dame, IN: Forest of Peace, Ave Maria Press, 2007), 17–20.
2. Ibid, 17.
3. Mark J. Perry, "New US Homes Today Are 1,000 Square Feet Larger Than in 1973 and Living Space per Person Has Nearly Doubled," *AEIdeas* (blog), American Enterprise Institute, June 5, 2016, aei.org/publication/new-us-homes-today-are-1000-square-feet-larger-than-in-1973-and-living-space-per-person-has-nearly-doubled/.
4. *Book of Common Worship: Pastoral Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 308.

Children and Blessing

Rebecca Davis

Her parents brought her to church each week as they worshiped together in the cavernous and formal sanctuary at Myers Park Presbyterian Church. She was “almost four” years old and was learning the language of faith and the dance of worship. In the pew behind her was an “almost ninety” year old woman whose life was a testimony to a mature and sustaining faith in a sovereign and grace-giving God. By all accounts they should not have met—this shy, nearly four-year-old Allison and this seasoned nearly ninety-year-old Lib. Yet meet they did. Most weeks Lib came to church with her two adult sons and their families, and while the adults greeted one another, Allison tucked herself safely behind her parents’ legs. One Sunday during the prelude, Allison turned in the pew and peeked over its back. Lib, catching her eye, did, in her words, “exactly what should be done,” and gave Allison a grin and a wink. In that moment a mutual love was born. Each Sunday Allison would look for Lib and insist her parents sit in front of the Harkeys. First it was a smile, then a wave, then each Sunday worship began with a hug between the two. When Allison’s parents had responsibilities in worship, ushering or playing handbells, the young girl would sit with Lib until her parents returned. A pattern of worship emerged as both Allison and Lib grew to expect the other’s presence as a part of what it meant to praise and honor God.

One afternoon the phone rang in my office. It was Lib. “What do I get a four-year-old for her birthday? It has to be something special. I’ve been invited to Allison’s fourth birthday party.” Having a present delivered, or given to Allison on the Sunday before or after, was not what Lib had in mind. She was going to that birthday party. We had a similar

discussion the following year as an invitation to Allison’s fifth birthday party arrived and Lib made plans to attend. A grand and glorious relationship was birthed in the midst of worship between two people who had no occasion or opportunity beyond that one hour a week to know one another. It was a relationship that was grounded in their mutual love of God, their commitment to the vows taken in baptism, and a faith that transcended almost eighty-five years and two pews in worship.

Shortly before a new call beckoned me away from my position as associate pastor for children and their families to associate professor of Christian education, a family member took a photograph of a candid moment between Lib and Allison while worshipers from both services met in the middle to enjoy fellowship. Allison’s friends played on the lawn and climbed in dogwood trees. Lib’s friends, and they were legion, visited with one another and caught up on the week’s happenings. Yet, here in this beautiful moment Lib and Allison enjoyed one another. On my last Sunday they gave me a framed copy of this picture, and to this day it sits on the shelf beside my chalice, paten, pitcher, and bowl. It is a daily reminder of the power of worship to transcend boundaries and bring together kindred spirits regardless of age.

Lib died a little over a year ago at the age of ninety-eight, and I went back to give thanks for this amazing woman and the inspiring Christian life she lived. Allison was there as well, wearing the baptismal shell pendant Lib gave her for her birthday all those years ago. The conversation with Allison and her mother paralleled one I had with Lib a few years earlier. Both spoke of the power of blessing each experienced by the relationship that was fostered in worship. It shaped identity,

Rebecca Davis is associate professor of Christian Education at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina.

cultivated a sense of belonging, and embodied a faith deeply marked by God's blessing.

Southerners (in the interest of transparency, I am one) have a tendency to toss the word "blessing" around as if it were a football on a Saturday in the fall. Phrases such as "Bless your heart," "Oh, bless you," and "God bless" are staples in everyday conversation without much reflection or discrimination. The biblical and theological understanding of blessing, however, carries a much different meaning. The ancient Hebrew word for blessing is *barak* or *ba-ruk*. It is a dynamic and multifaceted word that in English can mean to show respect, to kneel, or to share something of value. By its very nature blessing invites us to greater awareness of God's presence even as it asks the Holy One to bring abundance upon those we seek to bless.

Inherent within this understanding of blessing is reciprocity. "Go," says God to Abram and Sarai, and off they went, trusting the promise of God still ringing in their ears: "I will bless you . . . so that you may be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1–3). *Ba-ruk* is both a gift and a responsibility. As we receive the blessing of God, we in turn share it with others. It is almost as if the Divine is saying, "Now what?" In the presence of God we say, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel . . ." (Ps. 41:13) to honor the majestic and sublime Creator whom we worship and serve. The very utterance reminds us in whose presence we stand. We bow our heads in hope and reverence as the pastor speaks the words given to Moses by God as a blessing for the people, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you" (Num. 6:22–25). Left unsaid in the blessing is the expectation of reciprocity, "Now what?"

Jesus made full use of *ba-ruk* and its abundance of meaning. He called "blessed" the meek and those who mourn. As far as we know, he never forgot to bless the food as he gave thanks to the One from whom the bounty came and beckoned all those within hearing to recognize their dependence on God's faithful providence. He admonished his followers to bless the ones who curse them, for even they are within the mercy of God. When asked about the greatest in the kingdom, he took the one whom society would discount and marginalize, then

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blessed and gave a place of honor to that person.

The story of Jesus blessing the children is told in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 19:13–15, Mark 10:13–16, Luke 18:15–17). It is a much beloved tale that brings a wistful sigh that the Son of God would take children in his arms and lay hands on and pray for them. The disciples thought it was ludicrous and unnecessary. Here is the long-awaited Messiah doing important work around the

countryside. He healed people, performed miracles, raised some from the dead, taught and preached profound and important messages. In their minds, he certainly did not have time for the little ones. Children were expendable in the Greco-Roman world. During that time it was perfectly legal to set an unwanted infant or child outside and abandon him or her to the elements, slave traders, or predators. It was simply called "exposure" or "child exposure," and while certainly not practiced by everyone, it was one way of managing family size, accounting for a large portion of the 25 percent infant mortality rate and maintaining the enslaved labor force of 30 percent of the population. The *paterfamilias*, the father, was head of the household. In this *oikos* system that included wives, servants, slaves, and children, the father had ultimate authority. Welcome and membership in a family was not automatic upon birth. A father had to pick up the child in his arms within the first ten days of life before she or he was accepted as a member of the family. So when Jesus admonishes his disciples for turning away children, it was not a simple, anecdotal Polaroid moment. He was, in essence, rebuking the culture. He challenged the hierarchical and cultural system that diminished children's lives and reduced their worth to transactional merit. When he took children in his arms, he was proclaiming these children to be members of *his* Father's family. They were his brothers and sisters—worthy of the kingdom not because they had any market value but simply because God created and blessed them. They were, and had always been, members and heirs of God's covenant of grace. In his insistence that the children be welcomed and blessed, he proclaimed the absolute necessity of children in order for the covenant community to be whole.

We in the Reformed tradition are a people who dare to emulate Christ as we take children in our arms around the font. In the name of the triune God we bless and proclaim them members of God's covenanted family. In baptism God calls us, even children, by name and marks us as Christ's own. Baptism is the sign and seal that we are grafted into the body of Christ and are heirs of the covenant of grace. These covenantal promises hold true for children as well as their parents. Baptism shows us, tangibly, the priority God has for children and the expectation that they be seen as God sees them, valued members of the community of faith from the very beginning of their lives. It is concretized in the communal vow taken on behalf of the church universal, "Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture N. [and N.] by word and deed, with love and prayer?"¹ Few, if any, have ever heard a "no" as the church stands to respond. In that moment we are implicated for a lifetime of welcoming and nurturing children into the fullness of a life of faith. Reformed believers understand baptism not as the moment when we become children of God but rather the inauguration of our Christian life. The sacrament commissions us to a life of discipleship. Children are not disciples in waiting; they are on the road of grace and gratitude with us. It is a road that begins and ends in the worship of God.

Baptism shows us, tangibly, the priority God has for children and the expectation that they be seen as God sees them, valued members of the community of faith from the very beginning of their lives.

Worship is the heartbeat of the Christian life and center of gravity for any congregation. It is the primary place in which we give honor and praise to the Creator of the universe who redeemed us with the extravagant self-giving love of Jesus Christ. It is a public witness of our commitment and allegiance to God rather than the ways of the world. In worship we are called from our individual lives to gather, over and over again, as the people of God in community. It is where we are reminded of who we are and to whom we belong. Worship is where we live into the primary purpose for which we were created

and where we are reminded of and strengthened for the living out of our secondary purpose—to live as grateful disciples of our Savior. Worship shapes our identity, forms our faith, and orders the very rhythm of our living. Here grace is reliably mediated; God's covenant people are blessed so they may be a blessing to others. It is in this embodied theology where we come to understand that children, perhaps more than anywhere else in the church, belong in worship. When children are in the midst of worship, the reciprocity of blessing is experienced in the wholeness that Christ so clearly intended.

Children are the bearers of blessing even as they are the receivers. They model for us an encounter with the sacred that speaks to the heart of faith. Their candid questions teach us how to wonder once again and marvel at the transcendent immanence of God in our midst. In their ability to embrace mystery with eyes and hearts clear of cynicism and weariness we are more likely to catch a glimpse of the majestic and sublime rather than only the quagmire of the mundane. They guilelessly welcome stranger and luminary alike, transgressing culturally imposed boundaries inconsistent with Christianity's precepts. The very presence of children in the sanctuary is a tangible reminder that we are not the focus of worship, nor are we the audience for which the pastor and choir perform. God is the guest of honor upon whom all worship attends and we, children and adults together, bring the best we have to offer.

We are not born knowing how to worship. It is an acquired aptitude. While it may be our primary purpose, it is not necessarily our native tongue. Each of us must learn how to worship and integrate its language, cadence, and progressions. The blessing of learning to worship is also the blessing of teaching to worship. It is widely known among those who teach that if you really want to learn something well, then teach it to someone else. The teaching and the learning become a mutual blessing in the cycle of "showing how" to give praise and honor to God. It is as intentional and unwitting as the patterning of behavior that leads to walking. The seasoned worshiper intentionally shows the novice how to navigate the hymnal and unwittingly shows how to join a single voice to the chorus of those who make a joyful noise.

I was nine years old when our family moved into a new home. Sent out the door, across the backyards connected by the manse in between,

I showed up on the doorstep of the church unaccompanied by any adult. I did not know how to worship nor even why I should worship. I simply knew it mattered to people about whom I cared and respected. Nell and Ed Miller, whose own children were long grown and gone, put me in between them each Sunday and taught me how to manage a bulletin, find a hymn and a passage of Scripture using something other than a page number. The quality of their singing was made up for by their enthusiasm and created space for my own emerging voice. Years later, we stood between the pew where they showed me how to worship and the font where I was baptized, and I was ordained. They reminisced about what a blessing it had been to worship with me those early years. I had thought the blessing was all mine.

Many congregations incorporate a formal worship education experience into their ministry with children before they become regular participants in Sunday morning worship. This is very helpful as these young disciples begin to find their place in the sanctuary or worship center. It decodes complex language and assists with familiarization of rituals. It is important that parents be included in these occasions for learning as well. The meaning behind the language and rituals may be unfamiliar for parents and raise within them a mild form of panic when the inevitable question arises from their child as to why there are so many prayers and why they go on so long. An additional class for parents on “the good, the bad, and the ugly” of worshiping with their children is especially valuable for newcomers to this sacred responsibility. The gathering of fellow travelers on this worship expedition provides helpful support for one another. Knowing they are not alone, that their child is not the only wiggler or outside-voice whisperer, and that their children are *always* welcome in worship, no matter the age or stage, is a much-needed comfort as they find the joy and blessing of worshiping with their children. Any perceived “bad” actions can be debunked as leaders remind parents it is perfectly fine to take their child to the restroom, that utter silence and stillness is not required, and that they should by all means sit up front so their children can feel engaged in the service instead of sitting in the back behind a sea of adult-sized backs and heads. Minimizing the stress of worshiping with children begins long before the time of worship. Casual conversations during the week that convey excitement and meaning for

upcoming worship experiences, reflecting on who they hope to see at the service, singing worship songs and responses (such as the Doxology or Gloria) while riding in the car, spending time the day before helping children find their “church clothes” are all things that have the potential to reduce the “ugliness” of the Sunday morning dash to church so many moms and dads recount. This sort of class can also build commitment cohorts who support one another along the journey to live into their baptismal vows.

Occasions for continuing education
throughout one’s lifespan nurture the faith
of all worshipers, regardless of age.

Intentional worship education is not only for young children and their parents. Like baptism, it is a lifelong process of growing in the life of faith. Occasions for continuing education throughout one’s lifespan nurture the faith of all worshipers, regardless of age. Second graders who participate in a Young Disciples class learn the language and meaning of faith as they study the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, participate in “pew work”—identifying aspects of worship they have just explored—and become acolytes. Third graders spend the year learning their Bible as they discover its origins, its organization, and an overview of content. This focus on our tradition’s sacred text culminates in recognition in worship and a lunch following the service during which they are given the version of the Bible commonly used during the service. Fourth graders put their newly acquired skills to fine use in leading worship as they begin to serve as readers. Fifth graders are invited to design and lead worship for younger children and in so doing come to a greater understanding about each part and how the parts work together to create a whole experience for the community.

Beyond curated worship education there is the blessing of the providential relationships cultivated in worship. We live in an ever increasingly segmented society. Children are divided by ages while adults are segregated by stages and further fractured by the self-identification with a particular race, class, socio-economic status, or worldview. The church, and worship in particular, is one of the last places where generations come together in consistent

ways. Relationships that transgress these imposed boundaries are possible because we share pews, chair rows, and a common fealty to our common Creator. Worship becomes the birthing place for bonds that personify the reciprocity of blessing. The grandparent whose children live on the opposite coast eagerly anticipates what the children will say during the Time with Young Disciples and trusts that the congregation 2,800 miles away is offering the same welcome for his family. The widow whose family lives down state may receive the only hug she has had in a long time from the child whom she greets each Sunday morning. The young adult who waits for the day she will have little ones of her own anticipates the time when she can watch the wonder of sacraments brighten the eyes of her children.

One of my favorite memories is of a monthly occurrence at First Presbyterian in Sarasota, Florida. The families of preschool and elementary children decided they would sit together in a section of pews in the first few rows of the sanctuary every Communion Sunday. The children would have a clear view as the mystery of the Lord's Supper would unfold. The parents could support one another and help each other's children as needed. Trays were passed, bread was shared, and there in the pew next to families, in the midst of a beautiful mess that is children and tiny cups of juice, sat Parker Lansdale. He was a retired minister who had moved down from "up North" after years of serving in the Marine Corps, as an executive administrator for the YMCA, as a community leader, and as an activist. He firmly believed the palpable presence of God could be experienced in unique and delightful ways only in the presence of the children's tangible curiosity and joy-filled awe when gathered around the Lord's Table.

Within any congregation there are grandparents without local grandchildren, empty-nest parents who miss their little ones long grown, people who thought they would have children and found themselves on another path, youth who love tending to children, those who took their baptismal "yes" seriously, and any number of people for whom our own children will behave better than

they do for us. These are potential worship mentors. Worship engagement bags, children's bulletins, and worship education classes can all be done with exquisite excellence, and still children and parents will struggle to worship together some days. A sleepless night, the wrong color socks, and a lost favorite toy can send a child, and hence his or her parents, into a tailspin on any given morning, but on a Sunday morning when all are trying to get to church on time and in relatively one piece it can mean mutiny in the narthex. This is the moment when having a significant adult as a worship mentor or buddy can diffuse the impending tension. While it may be a surprise to some parents, there are

He firmly believed the palpable presence of God could be experienced in unique and delightful ways only in the presence of the children's tangible curiosity and joy-filled awe when gathered around the Lord's Table.

adults who find it a blessing to worship with children and nurture their faith through common rituals. It can also provide a weary parent with a bit of respite. The key is to develop the relationship between the parents, the worship buddy, and the child before the inevitable crisis. Worshiping together as a family and mentor, spending time together outside the

sanctuary, or sharing a meal together can help the relationship develop naturally. Reviving the lost art of writing a note can reinforce the relationship, as most all children enjoy receiving mail the old fashioned way. Inviting worship mentors to special occasions in the children's life, asking them to sit together at fellowship suppers or at the family table during the Third Grade Bible Luncheon deepens the connection and the blessing. It will be helpful for parents and mentors to discuss acceptable practices, such as having the child stand when the congregations does or putting away enrichment sheets during prayers so there is consistency between what the parent expects and the mentor reinforces. There will be times when families will deem it important to be together during worship. Discussing this decision in the days preceding Sunday may minimize mixed expectations. However, on many mornings giving a child the choice to worship with their family or their worship buddy will open space for encountering the Holy.

Jewish midrash creates space for theological imagination to engage text and belief in a way that enriches faith. In the body of midrash there

is a conversation between God and Israel that is sometimes used in the *B'rit Milah/Bat*, or Covenant of Circumcision, ceremony:

When Israel stood at Sinai to receive the Torah, the Holy One said to them: "I am giving you my Torah. Present to Me good guarantors that you shall guard it, and I shall give it to you."

They said: "Our ancestors are our guarantors."

The Holy One said: "Your ancestors are not sufficient guarantors. Bring Me good guarantors, and I shall give you the Torah."

They said: "Ruler of the Universe, our prophets and our sages are our guarantors."

God said to them: "The prophets are not sufficient guarantors. Yet bring Me good guarantors and I shall give you the Torah."

They said: "Here, our children are our guarantors."

The Holy One said: "They are certainly the best guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah to you."

They said: "God, you have given a Teaching to Israel, instructing our ancestors that the generations might come to know it."²

Throwing wide the doors of worship for children's full welcome and inclusion creates sacred space for the reciprocity of blessing to abound and guarantors of the faith to live fully into their baptismal promise.

Notes

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 409.
2. Mark M. Rubenstein, "B'rit Milah Ceremony," 1F, mohelrubenstein.com/B-rit-Milah-Ceremony.html.

The Work of Our Hands

Wading through the questions one splatter-painted step at a time

Allison Wehrung



Psalm 27. Canvas board, newspaper, magazines, watercolor and acrylic paints, permanent marker.

Allison Wehrung is campus minister at UKirk, Ole Miss.

I became an artist by accident. Sure, I've always liked to be crafty, but the word *artist* for a long time felt far too official. I didn't start with fancy brushes or semesters full of studying theory, though of course there's nothing wrong with those. I started with cardboard and colored pencils, with found objects and my trusty glue stick. Growing up, I spent hours designing my posters for school projects. In college, I made collages of magazine clippings simply to hang on to images that stood out. I became an artist by accident. Or so I used to think. Really it was my grandmother and great aunt and mother before me saying, "We could make that." It was the Holy Spirit wind rustling the pages of a magazine and whispering, "This could be more." It was my eye drawn to a discarded piece of parking lot metal and thinking, "That is the sun." Image-making is part of who I am.

Everything I make starts with some kind of prompt, but it's rare that I know the whole plan when the first bit of paint hits my palette. And honestly, even when I do have a plan, things rarely turn out the way I thought they would. My sketchbook is full of first brainstorming ideas that are nothing like the finished product.



Luke 2:8-18. Canvas, acrylic and watercolor paints, magazines, newspaper, paper bag, colored pencil.





I often find myself interpreting Scripture through image, so I might start with a specific text. Other times there's a current event, general theme, or quotation that inspires a project. Still other beginnings might come from a particular found object turned muse (like the piece of crab trap that once washed up on a south Alabama beach). Some artworks only get as far as asking a question. Even when an answer does bloom, I know better than to think mine is the only one, or that it's the last one. I believe in "I don't know."

Most of the mediums I use could just as easily end up in a recycling bin or a trash can. This came about from some combination of convenience and necessity. For most of my life I've either been a full-time student, a full-time volunteer, an intern, or some combination of those things. I'm privileged enough to have always been comfortable, but fancy art supplies weren't a priority for what excess expendable income I did have. As it turned out, the more I made with things I already had, the less pressure I felt to make it good (whatever "good" art is). Having shaken off the largely self-imposed pressure to meet a certain standard, and confident that if I did mess up my materials could be replaced with a quick trip back to the recycling bin, I felt free to experiment and imagine and see what would happen.

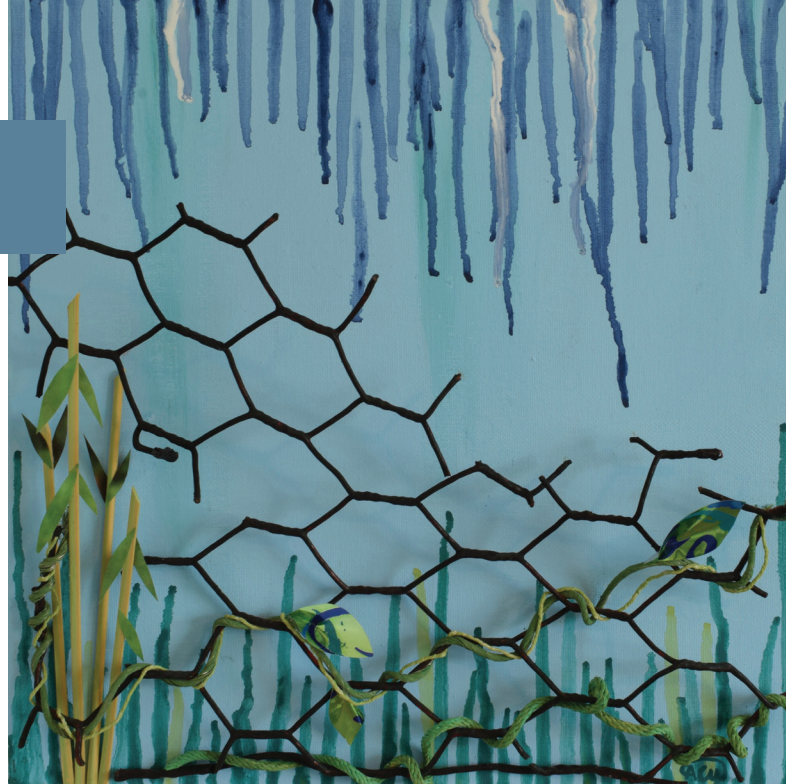
A friend once referred to what I do as "trash crafting." It's a pretty catchy label, and an accurate one. Cardboard still regularly serves as my canvas, and the containers of art supplies in my house are full of magazines and newspapers and random bits of wire or packing material.

Psalm 143. Canvas, cardstock, acrylic and watercolor paints, magazines, plastic bag, newspaper, book pages, glass.

Canvas, acrylic paint, crab trap, sushi rolling mat, rope, computer charger, magazine pages, aluminum can.

On one hand, there are materials I choose to represent a related idea. Newspapers often stand in for current events or society in general. Likewise, shiny magazine ads appear for consumer culture. Book pages are language in general, and hymnal clippings the prayers we sing. (Don't worry, I promise the books are already falling apart when I repurpose them.) On the other hand, there are found objects completely reimagined—a sushi mat turned manger, coffee filters turned creation story, a computer charger made into vines.

Not all of the recyclables I use end up attached to the canvas. I use plenty of paint, and when messy dots or similarly imperfect lines make their way into a project, you can bet they came from bubble wrap and ripped-apart corrugated cardboard. When it comes to the paint itself, drips and splatters also turn up frequently. They're hard to predict, and there's some risk involved. I can do my best to guide their direction but honestly when it comes down to it, splattered or dipped paint is going to fall where it wants. Sometimes that's nerve-wracking, especially when I've invested hours in making whatever background is waiting. Other times, it's utterly freeing. The Holy Spirit tends to show up either way.



Calling myself an artist still feels a bit unwieldy at times, but through the personal practice of making, I've come to value my visual voice just as much as the spoken one. And my way of making has changed the way I see the world.

The act of creating has helped me trust myself, to start with what I've got and to shake off my own expectations of what art "should" be. Joining in the work of creation has helped me trust God, by putting faith in the process and bringing each piece into being one spark of an idea at a time. It doesn't mean I'm sure of all the answers. What it does mean though is that I'm willing to wade through the questions one splatter-painted step at a time.

I've learned that the tendency to look past first impressions is as good a habit for being a person as it is for making art. I'm used to imagining what else a coffee filter or soda can or newspaper page might be, and each of those imaginings reminds me to do the same with my fellow humans. A cardboard box has more potential than simply getting a package to your doorstep. There's more to a person than their gender, voting habits, heritage, love life, or general disposition on any given day.

Art has been a spiritual practice of mine for longer than I used to realize. Or maybe I knew it, and it just took a while to call it art. Either way, making art has become my favorite prayer.



Genesis 1 and John 1. Canvas, coffee filters, acrylic and watercolor paints, dried loose leaf tea, tape, old book pages, pencil.

On Liturgy: Endings

Mary Beth Anton

The filmmaker Paul Schrader once remarked, “A good movie begins as you’re walking out.”¹ A good film articulates questions that percolate in the minds of the audience long after they leave the theater. Isn’t this what we want from worship? To worship we bring the experiences and questions of our lives. We bring our faith and our doubts, our joy and our grief. In worship we praise and glorify God. In worship we hear the Word read and proclaimed. Through worship we are moved by the Spirit to faith and service. Might worship really begin as we leave the sanctuary?

While I fully acknowledge that all parts of the worship service are important, I confess that I am far better at the beginning and middle parts. This is also true of my sermons. Sermon endings are not my long suit. But endings are important. A good ending stays with us as we move from worship out into the world. The sending at the end is at least as important as the gathering at the beginning. In what ways are worship endings meaningful?

Several years ago I attended a Bible study at Princeton Seminary led by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld on the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6. She asked, “What comes to mind when you hear the words of this text?” Someone immediately mentioned Peter Lutkin’s anthem from 1900 and began to sing: “The Lord bless you and keep you . . .”

Soon the entire room joined in four-part harmony, a cappella. We sang the final “Amen” and were quiet as the beautiful text and tune lingered

in the room; familiar, meaningful, grounding. How many of us have left our worship weekly with this anthem in our hearts?

I doubt my millennial children would recognize Lutkin’s setting. They are not choir people and it was rarely sung in their home congregation. But what is familiar to them is the refrain of “On Eagle’s Wings” by Michael Joncas. For many years, every Sunday service of their home congregation concluded with the singing of that refrain.

I confess that as a pastor of this church I came to dread the singing of “On Eagle’s Wings.” By the time I arrived the congregation had been singing this chorus weekly for almost ten years. As worship planners, we inherited a tradition that seemed set in stone. After only a season of singing “And he will raise you up . . .” I was more than tired of it.

I came to appreciate its importance, however, when helping numerous families plan their loved one’s funeral. Family after family asked for “On Eagle’s Wings.” Usually they wanted the entire hymn sung, the stanzas by a cantor and the refrain by the congregation. The words of the hymn paraphrase those of Psalm 91, expressing trust, promise, and hope in our Savior and God. The psalmist sings:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my
fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”

Mary Beth Anton is a Presbyterian minister and coordinator of the Women in Ministry Initiative at Princeton Theological Seminary.

At each funeral I watched from the chancel as not only the family, but many of the congregation sang the words by heart with joy and conviction. These familiar and final words of worship were embedded in the hearts of God's people. At their most vulnerable the words spelled out their faith and hope. They provided the foundation for the daily practice of following Jesus no matter the circumstances.

As important as the refrain was to this congregation, as planners and leaders of worship we began to push the congregation beyond this one hymn. With good explanations in the worship notes of the bulletin, the congregation learned to trust us to change the final chorus of worship to reflect the liturgical season or particular theme of the service. In Ordinary Time we continued using the cherished refrain.

During Advent we shaped the worship of the season using the ancient hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." At the end of each Advent service we sang the refrain: "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel." This final refrain echoed the opening of worship with a cantor singing a different stanza of the ancient hymn each week.

During the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany we ended worship by singing the chorus of "Go, Tell It on the Mountain":

Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and
everywhere;
go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ
is born!

The children of the congregation knew this by heart and would lead the worshipers in its singing complete with hand motions. What better way to remind us to follow the example of the Bethlehem shepherds in making the Christ-child known?

During one Lenten season we began and ended worship by singing stanzas of Isaac Watts's "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" to the tune O WALY, WALY. Before the call to worship a soloist would sing one of the first three stanzas. The sending would finish with the fourth and final stanza sung by the congregation:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

It was our hope that with time and repetition, these additional words and tunes would work their way into all our hearts, minds, and souls, informing our daily discipleship.

Perhaps good worship truly does begin as we're walking out of the sanctuary. What we have seen, heard, spoken, sung, and confessed stays with us as we seek to faithfully follow the risen Christ into the world.

Note

1. Reported by Ethan Hawke in an interview with Stephen Colbert on *The Late Show*, June 5, 2018.

On Music: As-salaamu lakum

Peter Ncanywa

#Blessed! What does this mean? I, too, have used this hashtag when I feel that God's favor has been sprinkled upon a certain part of life. But the definition of this word often eludes me, and I am almost always drawn to the Beatitudes in the book of Matthew as I try to discern its meaning. Margaret Aymer argues that here the meaning of blessed is "greatly honored."¹ Reading the Beatitudes in this light, I am drawn to these words: "Greatly honored are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9). Can making peace be a source of blessing? And how can we greatly honor one another through music in the church?

* * *

He sat in his favorite spot in the pew and patiently waited for the prelude to mark the beginning of worship. He looked down at his gray shirt and at his matching polka-dot tie. He thought of his grandmother. She was a poor woman and he had no gifts from her or any other thing to remember her by. Not even a photograph. This shirt and tie he had bought for her funeral on June 28, 2006. He wears it for the service closest to this day each year.

"America! America! God shed his grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea!" they sang on July 4 last year. All were adorned in outfits themed on the colors red, white, and blue. Except for him. He remembered the Mount Stanley peak of the Rwenzori Mountains in his mother's home country, Uganda. The mountains his family would visit every other year. "Look at all this creation, Arinze," his mother would marvel as he stared unblinking at his PSP. Arinzechukwu is the name his Nigerian grandmother chose for him. A name that means "thanks be to God."

He hoped this year would be different. He

hoped he wouldn't have to sing the song whose words he struggled to articulate but had to, so he wouldn't attract questioning glances. He thumbed through the bulletin and was grateful to see "This Is My Song" instead this year. When they sang the hymn, he thought of his wife's family in Germany and his children studying in Austria.

* * *

Her alarm blares at 7:45 a.m. and she hits the snooze button. She remembers that she is hosting Fellowship Hour at church this morning and slowly begins the day. While she sips on her morning coffee, she looks up at the framed family portrait against a very dusty skyline of Baghdad. It was taken in the summer of 1999 a week before she was to begin her five-year program at Notre Dame University.

On her way to church, she remembers that it is November. November 11 to be precise. The last several years have been better in Chicago since she left South Bend, Indiana. She remembers her baptism when she converted during her sophomore year of college. After the September 11 attacks, professors had glared at her, her voice coach had refused to work with her for that semester's opera role, students had spewed hurtful words, and her dorm room had been vandalized countless times. The day after the opera performance in 2004, the audience stopped clapping when she bowed during the curtain call. That day had ended with her receiving a phone call that her father and brother were killed in the war. November 11.

Peter Ncanywa is director of music at Prospect Presbyterian Church in Maplewood, New Jersey, and a recording artist.

She arrives at the church with her grocery bags and prepares the coffee maker and tea, refrigerates the juices, sets out the bagels to bring them to room temperature, and sets the table. She dreads this day every year, and this time it happens to fall on a Sunday. No one knows her story; she's just Nadia Awad. She heads into the sanctuary and glances at the hymns—"My Country, 'Tis of Thee," "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies," and "Eternal Father, Strong to Save." Next to her sits a gentleman she has never seen before. She can see from his neatly placed lapel pins that he is a veteran. She introduces herself as Nadia and he as Max. He was deployed to Iraq in 2003. She smiles and nods. The service begins. She sings the hymns but chokes on several lines. The benediction response this year is hymn number 448 in the *Glory to God* hymnal—"As-salaamu lakum." The community is welcoming enough and sings the hymn in both English and Arabic. Max refuses to sing. As Nadia sings, she hears her dad's voice saying, "As-salaamu lakum, ya binti." Peace be unto you, my daughter.

* * *

According to the Directory for Worship, the Lord's Day concludes with a blessing and charge: "We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others. The charge calls the church to go forth as agents of God's mission in the world."² Or, to put it another way, we are greatly honored to honor others. May it be so. #GreatlyHonoured

Notes

1. Margaret Aymer, "Confessing the Beatitudes," *Unbound* (Feb. 1, 2012), <http://justiceunbound.org/journal/current-issue/confessing-the-beatitudes/>.
2. Directory for Worship, W-3.0502.



On Preaching: Telling God’s Big Story to Help Shape Our Own

David E. Lower

Some years ago, my then-young son Matthew requested while I put him to bed, “Dad, tell me a story. A BIG story. One with SUPERHEROES in it. Not the cartoon ones, the REAL ones. And you and me.” That bedtime request has always stuck with me as an expression of a yearning I have, too, to hear and feel part of a great big powerful real story. As a preaching pastor, I have also come to understand that this desire to hear ourselves as part of a big wondrous true story is on the hearts of all who come to worship.

We understand ourselves through stories, as they help make our shifting lives coherent. Psychologist Dan McAdams coined the concept of “narrative identity”—the personal stories by which we identify ourselves. We make choices in the narratives we construct for ourselves through episodes of suffering, challenge, and triumph. McAdams has also observed that revising or rewriting our stories can have a big impact on our lives and wellness.¹

The Bible, of course, helps us consider the stories by which we understand ourselves in light of the redemptive story of God at work in the lives of people and in the course of the world. The Bible can help us understand the narratives that define our senses of identity and trajectory in redeeming ways, which can make us more healthy and whole. That the good news of the gospel comes to meet the human need for a validating and redemptive narrative identity seems to have implications for what and how I should preach.

In my own preaching life, I have started to explore and uncover the riches of the overarching narrative of the Bible, not as a replacement for

but as an essential complement to the pericope-based preaching of my tradition and training. My appreciation for the Bible’s overarching narrative was prompted by use of the Narrative Lectionary, which traces the story of God in the Bible episodically through each of its cycle’s four years. Focus on the bigger narrative, of course, is worthy of any lectionary or nonlectionary preaching. But having the big narrative deliberately and explicitly scripted out in this way has helped me experience the narrative dimension of the whole canon and its capacity to preach and call and heal.

For instance, when God gave Jeremiah words of judgment upon Judah in exile and the promise of a new covenant, it comes not as a singular statement but in the middle of a story that is already unfolding and headed somewhere. For God made covenant promises to Abraham extending into a bright and prolific future and kept working to keep that covenant with many who would come after—Jacob, Joseph, Moses and the Israelites, Hannah, David, and Elijah—working for their good against the forces of sin, steep odds, and great enemies. In the big story of God and the people, we meet a faithful God who makes and keeps promises, who never gives up, and who shows up finally in person to demonstrate the power and the vulnerability and the ultimate victory of the divine way. In Jeremiah 31, God speaks on the move, addressing a people who have traversed a trail and are still working their way up the mountain by a path already marked.

Theologian Hans Frei highlights the forward-moving patterns of meaning and fulfillment that are revealed by the connections across events of

David E. Lower is senior pastor of Saint Luke’s Presbyterian Church in Dunwoody, Georgia.

the biblical narrative, flowing like a stream through historical reality.² While I am uncomfortable with Frei's assertion that the overarching narrative of the canon carries God's supreme authority, surpassing that of any text or pericope therein, I nonetheless have come to appreciate the great power of that narrative for biblical interpretation and the formation of our Christian narrative identities. The broader narrative helps to situate the ancient moments about which we read in the context of God's nature, revealed in their past and future. Telling God's big story in our proclamation also helps to situate our analogous moments of promise and challenge in the light of what God has done and will always do for us. I have noticed, either by my retuned ears or by shaping hearts, echoes of this big narrative in the field of pastoral ministry, reflected strikingly when a hospitalized parishioner said, "I suppose if God isn't going to give up on me, then neither will I." This was an action shot of narrative identity development in the light of the gospel.

While I continue to explore spaces and devices for preaching God's big story in and around the Scripture readings for worship, several practices have proved to be fruitful: using a big-story call to worship, setting the scene before reading Scripture,

beginning a sermon by noting the historical and theological context of a passage, using a big-story refrain throughout the sermon, and using the Psalms and our church's confessions to speak God's story. A narrative approach to worship and preaching has inspired new creative ideas for storytelling and learning, including a fifty-foot biblical timeline. Once we embraced the movement of the story, it seems we were ready to be moved by it.

Forming redemptive stories of identity can heal and give new life, and we yearn for them at almost every age. Thankfully our biblical canon meets this need; this overarching narrative is another mode by which the Word of God is expressed and by which God's will for mercy and peace is done. I am grateful for this revelation in my development as a preacher. I also relish the privilege to hear and share that great big wondrous real story, with each of us in it, by which God helps us rest at night.

Notes

1. D. P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5 (2001): 100–122.
2. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 28–29.



Come,
Lord Jesus,
be our guest,
and let these gifts
to us be blessed.
Amen.

On the Arts: Blessing and Charge

Sally Ann McKinsey Sisk

In 1950 Hans Namuth photographed abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock candidly in his studio as he painted. Pollock was known for dripping, splattering, and pouring liquid paint on large-scale canvases, and Namuth's photographs captured rare images of the painter stepping into his work, using sweeping gestures to fling paint onto a canvas that covered the studio floor. These photographs sparked critic Harold Rosenberg, in a famous 1952 article in *ARTnews*, to coin the term *action painting* and initiate a critical shift in the field of American painting.

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear . . . as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.¹

According to Rosenberg, the painting is a visual document of a bodily action rather than a static object or reproduction. The painting is the result of an event.

Though not all worship planners may consider themselves painters, many, myself included, have learned to approach worship planning as we might approach an artistic activity. Here Rosenberg's thoughts about Pollock's action painting may help us to think more about what it means to plan worship this way.

We know that at its best, worship is the work of the people rather than a replica of our plans for it. At its best, worship becomes an experience made by each of those present rather than a production of a few in leadership. Worship is indeed an event more than it is a picture. This doesn't mean that worship is not a work of art. On the contrary, our liturgical theology builds a nuanced aesthetic located in the actions of worship. Our most authentic singing, praying, preaching, and celebrating are artistic activities in themselves, and also the results of our encounters with God and one another, evidence of a larger artistic event.

During times when the relentlessness of the calendar takes over, I must admit that I have caught myself planning worship as if it were a static object rather than a live document, writing prayers as if to an audience, and rehearsing the words and transitions of a service as though perfecting a painting. But there are moments in those weeks when, by God's grace, something goes differently than rehearsed, or, despite the blinders that routine often creates, I hear familiar words in a new way, or a child comes to join me at the font unexpectedly. These are moments when it becomes obvious to me: worship is an event and an encounter more than it is a pretty picture.

At the end of the service, we who have encountered God in the actions of worship are activated ourselves, blessed and charged. We are bound in a mystery that propels us into the world.

Sally Ann McKinsey Sisk is a Minister of Word and Sacrament and current master of fine arts student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

A Sending prayer at Iona Abbey in Iona, Scotland, evokes this sense of being propelled into the world. Beginning with a recognition that walls and buildings will crumble, it identifies worshipers, not buildings, as God's habitation, God's hands and feet in the world. The prayer ends this way:

Take us outside, O Christ, outside holiness,
To where nations clash at the crossroads of
the world.²

I find that this prayer reflects well the new language for the sending portion of the Lord's Day service in the newest edition of the *Book of Common Worship*. In the event of worship we hear good news and receive God's blessing with humility and wonder. Then we are charged to share what has been embodied. Blessed by God's grace, we are activated by God's Spirit.

In worship we enact God's intentions for the world and for our communities: justice, mercy, reconciliation, and love. We live in active hope for a

world where all are fed and freed. As we are blessed and charged, we are sent to make events of welcome and reconciliation in the diverse communities of which we are a part. When worship becomes an event, it sparks many more as we step deeper into our hurting world. The space and the service have been arenas for action. After encountering God and one another in the event of worship, the sanctuary teaches us to leave its doors. The familiar pews and pulpit show us how to depart to more unlikely places. We are finally charged to act: to sing, to pour, to proclaim, to pray, to break, and to bless.

Take us outside, O Christ, outside holiness,
To where nations clash at the crossroads of
the world.

Notes

1. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *ARTnews* (1952): 22.
2. The Iona Community, "Take Us Outside," *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2017).

Ideas

Longest Night Service of Wholeness

Colleen Cook

This service is to be held on December 21, the date of this year's winter solstice, during the third week of Advent. The church is invited to bear witness to the longest night, seek wholeness in this paradoxically painful season, and uphold one another as a community.

Prelude

"Of the Father's Love Begotten"

Greeting

Beloved ones, welcome to tonight's service
of wholeness,
where on the longest night of the year,
we seek healing for the year's griefs,
for long years of pain woven into the season
of joy,
for the long nights of the soul we experience
this Advent.
Please rise with me in body or spirit as we
enter into worship.

*Call to Worship

In the dark of this longest night,
God is in our midst.
Let us be aware of our bodies.

We have come for healing.

Let us own our aching spirits.

We have come for wholeness.

Let us reach for each other.

We have come for community.

Let us hold both grief and hope in our hands.

We have come to worship.

*Please rise in body or spirit

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Tonight, we light three candles,
lights in the darkness.
Jesus is the light that came into the world,
and the darkness did not overcome it.

(Three readers will speak and light a candle.)

We light the first candle for hope.
Our hope is in the name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
Our hope is for healing of grief and pain,
and for the return of Christ,
who will reunite us to all we have lost.

We light the second candle for love.
We hold in our hearts all whom we
have loved
and all who have loved us.
We offer thanks to God for this love,
which can never be extinguished
even when death and estrangement
separate us.

We light the third candle for joy.
A joy that surprises,
a joy which does not depend on
circumstances
and is different in quality from happiness,
joy which is found in communion with God
and God's good creation.

Reading Isaiah 40:1–5, 28–31

***Hymn** "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

Colleen Cook is a dual degree senior at Columbia Theological Seminary
in Decatur, Georgia, whose area of concentration is worship.

Call to Confession

With confidence that God hears when
we cry out,
And faith that God graciously answers
our prayers,
forgives, and heals,
let us join our voices in confession.

Prayer of Confession

**Merciful God,
our hearts are heavy;
our burdens many.
Loss, brokenness, and our participation
in sin
weigh us down.
Because we have believed we are alone,
because we have not believed there is
enough mercy for all,
we have not loved you
with our whole heart and mind
and strength;
we have not loved our neighbor
as ourselves.**

**In your mercy forgive what we have been,
help us amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be,
that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your holy name.¹**

Declaration of Forgiveness

Beloved ones,
hear this good news:
Christ was born for us,
Christ died for us,
Christ was raised for us,
Christ will come again for us
and unite us to God and one another.
Nothing can separate us from the love
of God.
Know that in Christ you are forgiven
and beloved.

*Doxology

Reading Matthew 2:1–12

Sermon “Home by Another Way”

A sermon might focus on the sudden change in plans of the Magi after being warned in a dream of King Herod’s plot against them. Loss precipitates an unwanted change in plans, the need for a different route home, but the congregation is given hope that there is indeed a way, a hope for rest, and reconciliation through Christ who guides us, even in our grief when we cannot see the way.

Solo “I Wonder as I Wander” Niles

Prayer

To the God who makes a way out of no way,
whose good pleasure it is to find us a way home,
we offer ourselves in prayer and petition for healing.

God, Creator of all,
you pronounced your creation good
and promised that nothing can snatch us out
of your hand,
where it is your will for us to abide.

Have mercy on us.

Jesus Christ, Son of God,
you came into the world
to love, heal, and save us.

Have mercy on us.

Holy Spirit,
you dwell within us
making us temples of your presence.

Have mercy on us.

O triune God,
great mystery of our existence,
we offer our prayers.

For all in need of healing this day . . .

silence

Lord in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

For all who have lost and suffered this year . . .

silence

Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

For those who are separated from those they love
by distance, death, addiction, sickness,
or dementia . . .

silence

Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

For those for whom the season of Advent
has ceased to hold joyful expectancy,
but instead holds dread . . .

silence

Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

For those for whom Christmas cheer feels insincere
and false . . .

silence

Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

For those whose memories of joy and laughter are
shrouded in pain . . .

silence

Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

For those who long for another way home . . .

silence

Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

During this longest night, O God,
we commit all in need of comfort and healing
into your loving care,
trusting in your saving mercy,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

And now, with the confidence of God's children,
let us pray together the prayer Jesus taught us.

The Lord's Prayer

Laying on of Hands

At this time, you are invited to come forward to one of the two pastors to receive prayer and the laying on of hands. After that—or instead of that—you may take one of the candles and light it from the flames of the Advent wreath as you say a prayer for healing in this season. You may take your lit candle and return to your seat. After all have had a chance to pray, we will sing our final hymn, then take our candles outside into this longest night as a light in the darkness.

Congregants will come forward to light candles and/or will go to one of two pastors at the front.

The pastor may pray for specific needs or pray these or similar words, while laying on hands:

Spirit of the living God,
Comfort (*name*) with your presence,
and heal (*her/him*) of all that harms (*her/his*) body,
mind, spirit, and memory.

While there is movement an instrumental arrangement of "While We Are Waiting, Come" is played. When all have had an opportunity for prayer and candle lighting, the congregation sings a final hymn.

***Hymn** "While We Are Waiting, Come"

Charge and Blessing

Go into the night savoring God's light,
expecting to be guided home.
Surrounding each other with love and
community
in this season when so many feel wounded,
let us be Christ's church.

And now may the justice of God,
the mercy of Christ,
and the comfort of the Holy Spirit
fill you deeply and carry you forth.

Amen.

Note

1. Adapted from the *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 20–21.

Feasting and Fasting

(A new hymn based on Isaiah 58)

Tune: KINGSFOLD

Michael Morgan

God bids me with a trumpet blast to raise a hymn of praise,
to celebrate both feast and fast throughout my earthly days.
In lowly truth may I resign all false pretense of pride:
before the Lord, faith be confirmed and arrogance denied.

Though with sublime and mortal tongues I speak but have not love,
my song cannot with music ring; my heart with pity move.
'Tis love for me that gives me life and brings my life delight;
yet love from me to others shown is greater in God's sight.

Refresh the poor who thirst, O Lord, and let me hold the cup;
for those who fall, endue with strength my arms to lift them up.
Teach me to live and love so that the face of Christ I see;
until that day, my God, I pray that you be seen in me.

Let my rich mouth taste hunger, Lord, that I may know its pain;
as I am fed, so let me feed; by bread and love, sustain.
With humble heart, help me to claim my place amid the least;
may I who dine with servants greet the Giver of the feast.

Lord, let your light around me shine; give hope to my despair;
and in the shadows of the night confirm that you are there.
Convince me of my weakness, God; remove my vain conceit;
I cannot rise in glory till I worship at your feet.

Michael Morgan is a well-known author of hymn texts and metrical psalms. He is an organist who serves as seminary musician at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and was given an honorary lifetime membership to PAM at the 2018 Worship and Music Conference.



AB

Book Reviews

Companions: Accompanying Newcomers into Church Life and Faith

Marney Ault Wasserman (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016)

Reviewed by Katie Owen Aumann

Nearly every church I drive by advertises itself as a welcoming congregation. Many of those churches have mastered the art of welcoming first-time visitors: making sure they are greeted, conveying a certain warmth and hospitality that makes them feel comfortable, introducing the visitors to someone they might connect with by name, ensuring the building's signage and the worship bulletin are user-friendly for outsiders. These are all important aspects of Christian hospitality.

But for churches facing membership decline, being welcoming often is not enough. Bridging the gap from the first visit to full engagement in the life of a faith community is a major struggle for many churches today. Simply offering an inquirer's class or selling the church's many programs over lunch doesn't move the needle for a lot of newcomers. Their primary question is not about program offerings but about genuine belonging. And this is where the brilliance of Wasserman's *Companions* lies. *Companions* challenges the church to move from an informational model to a conversational model, from spiritual consumerism to spiritual friendship.

Wasserman is very intentional about her use of the word *companioning*. Her book is really a guide to personal one-on-one discipleship, but her reframing as a relationship of companionship offers greater mutuality. She emphasizes equality in conversations and expects that both a newcomer and their church member companion will grow because of time spent in holy conversation. While Wasserman's focus is on addressing the spiritual hunger of newcomers, this model of discipleship through companionship would be valuable for multiple facets in the church. Her resource is theologically grounded and speaks from personal

experience of wrestling with questions of hospitality and belonging. Yet, her resource is abundantly flexible and is a valuable resource not only for potential new members but for long-term members looking for greater spiritual depth or for church leadership needing formation as spiritual leaders.

Wasserman's book offers a guide that is flexible enough for congregations of virtually any size and context because it builds on the strength of individual relationships. She provides an in-depth way to engage newcomers in genuine Christian relationship with real depth, on their own schedule, person-to-person. *Companions* places priority on the spiritual needs of newcomers whose presence in a sacred space should signal a spiritual hunger, or at least curiosity, that needs tending. This is not a silver-bullet how-to guide to boost your membership rolls, although membership growth can and, Wasserman hopes, will happen as a result. As a result, *Companions* takes the work of discernment seriously.

Perhaps the greatest gift in her book is her conversation guides. They follow a clear, simple, and repeatable model: Word-Share-Prayer. The conversation guides are grounded scripturally and theologically and provide multiple avenues into faithful conversation, but they are not overly complex, making them accessible to both companions and newcomers regardless of their religious experience. She leaves abundant space for companions to follow where the Holy Spirit and their conversations lead but provides enough structure to give the conversations shape and intention.

At the same time, Wasserman seems to recognize that individual discipleship can feel awkward if you've never done it before, and so her conversation guides provide comfortable ways to

Katie Owen Aumann is associate pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

begin to have conversations about faith that enable *both* individuals to grow. Her resource doesn't leave the responsibility of discipleship solely up to the pastor but acknowledges that this is something that any member with a few resources and some spiritual maturity can do. Above all else, she sets clear expectations about prayer. Don't simply say to a newcomer, "I'll pray for you." Pray out loud in the moment together.

Companions provides every tool along the way to help make discipleship easy, from outlines for training companions to easy-to-reproduce conversation guides to several pastor-led class sessions. The selection and training of companions feels much like other one-on-one caring ministries like Stephen Ministries. Wasserman offers some clear guidelines for how to pair up companions and newcomers so that those relationships have every opportunity to thrive. She also emphasizes that this type of discipleship requires individuals with some spiritual maturity; thus, it is best to recruit companions with particular gifts rather than simply ask for volunteers.

While she focuses her efforts on the role of companions, she considers thoughtfully the role of the pastor. The pastor is often the first person to have a real in-depth conversation with a newcomer and can be helpful in introducing this kind of intentional

spiritual relationship to a newcomer, but she's clear that for a newcomer to truly *belong*, the relationship with the church must extend beyond the pastor. Further, she emphasizes that the pastor has an important role to play in providing some intentional theological formation, and thus, *Companions* uses the pastor's gifts and time thoughtfully.

Wasserman writes from experience and success in forming new Christian disciples through spiritual friendship, but she is realistic that challenges still exist. Finding the right people with both the spiritual maturity and time to serve as companions may be a challenge depending on the size of the congregation; often the people best suited for a companionship role will also be active in lots of other ways in the life of the church. Similarly, identifying a coordinator to do the logistical matchmaking work and to check in regularly with the companions is a fairly time-intensive responsibility. Above all, this book doesn't solve the problem of getting new faces through the doors.

Despite those challenges, *Companions* is the best resource I've seen for helping a congregation move from simply being welcoming to first-time visitors to becoming a spiritually hospitable community for newcomers to belong and engage with intention and purposefulness.

Pathways to the Waters of Grace: A Guide for a Church's Ministry with Parents Seeking Baptism for Their Children

David B. Batchelder (Eugene, OR: WIPF and Stock, 2017)

Reviewed by Christopher Q. James

I was privileged to get an early glimpse of this book a while back when David Batchelder shared what would become Part 1 with the Christian Initiation seminar of the North American Academy of Liturgy. I remember telling him at the time to hurry up and finish because I desperately needed the rest of it.

When I was in seminary, I developed a love for liturgy and sacramental theology. Like many of my classmates, I even took a class as an elective that enabled me to practice presiding at the sacraments. I thought I was ready, and in that narrow sense, I was. Early in my ministry, when I scheduled a baptism I would meet with the parents (once) beforehand to talk about the sacrament—what would happen, when they would come forward, where they would stand, and so forth. Then after the day of the baptism, I would wonder why those same parents seemed no more ready to help their child live into the meaning of the baptismal promise than they were before. I soon came to realize that merely presiding well at the sacrament is one thing, but preparing parents well to present their children for baptism is something else altogether, and that preparation contributes to the baptismal event far more significantly than the baptismal act by itself. I know many other pastors who have discovered the same thing but still struggle with preparing parents well.

David Batchelder is a poet and theologian who brings the best of both to his calling as a pastor. His love of the sacraments and for God's people are given flesh and bone in the thoughtful, purposeful, intentional, and deliberate way by which he draws out the meaning and gift of baptism for those seeking life with God through God's community,

the church. This prebaptismal preparation is so much more than merely information about what the sacrament means. Rather, this is preparation that helps parents begin to understand what they mean because of it. Since this preparation is formational, rather than merely informational, it takes time.

In Part 1 Batchelder gives shape to a new vision for the church as the baptized and baptizing community that sees as one of its primary reasons for being to welcome parents most fully and helping them discover themselves anew within the many layers of meaning in the church's first sacrament. "Faith does not exist as a set of ideas to be exchanged," he writes, "but as a way of being in the flesh. . . . Though we talk of faith and what it looks like, faith does not make its appearance in our words. Only in the manner of our living is faith most truly what it is—the salvation of God in us and the world" (p. 8). Not only is this prebaptismal preparation a process that takes time, but it also makes room for others of the community to enter in and offer their own lives as witness and guide in the process.

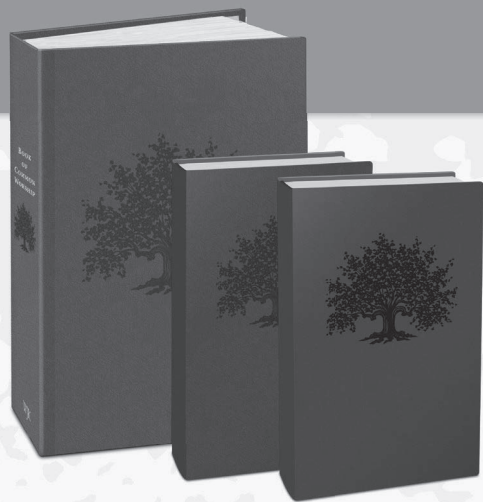
In Part 2 Batchelder offers a blueprint for what this prebaptismal preparation process might look like. Each of the six sessions begins and ends with a brief liturgical ritual and gesture that is meant to acquaint parents to the embodied practice of giving and receiving blessing to one another and to their child. Throughout, the sessions are meant to form parents in baptismal faith as a practiced way of life so that their children will receive that faith and be formed by it as it takes on flesh in the family's daily living.

Christopher Q. James is the pastor of the New Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Charles, Missouri, and a member of the North American Academy of Liturgy.

Not only do I recommend *Pathways to the Waters of Grace* as an excellent read in pastoral and baptismal theology, but I commend the process of pre-baptismal preparation it presents, as I have adopted and adapted it within my own pastoral practice and congregational context. In this book, David Batchelder offers the church a marvelous opportunity, which is to engage new parents in community and conversation about the sacrament of baptism and the life it begins. Far from a how-to manual, this book is an invitation to dialogue and relationship between pastors, elders, new parents, and whoever in the church bears the responsibility

and privilege of leading parents interested in presenting their children for baptism. In my own pastoral experience, I find that new parents thirst for meaning in the worship and practice of the faith community, and preparing for baptism is a time ripe with possibility, growth, and discovery in shaping and equipping these new parents for their new role within that community. *Pathways to the Waters of Grace* does just that, and anyone interested in attending to the sacramental and communal nature of the church would greatly benefit from the process it presents.

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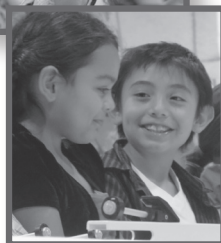
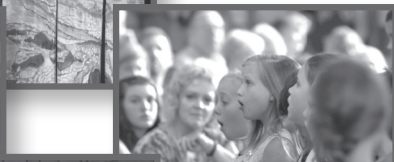


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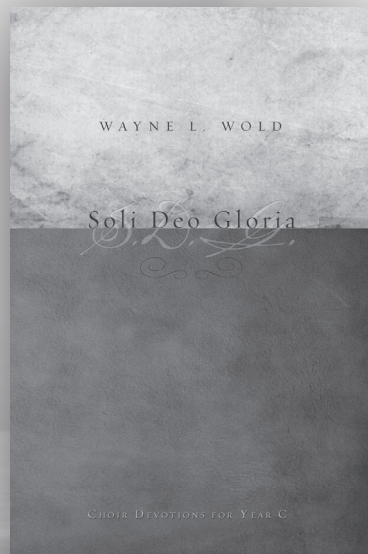
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