LITURGY AT GROUND LEVEL

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I. "My Living Lord is Seen"—The Easter Focus of the Liturgy

On the back yard of our parish lot is a patch of ground I drive by every day. It is the place where we have a bonfire of trees and greens on the Twelfth Night of Christmas. Each Ash Wednesday, if it is not covered by snow, it is a blackened smudge on the face of the lawn. By Easter, however, that patch seems the most alive. For there the green blade rises, unhindered by dead overgrowth, looking even greener against the charred earth.

We look to the ground to see the first signs of the return of life to earth. The sight and feel and smell of fresh spring soil is a welcome antidote to wall-to-wall carpeting. It is inviting to anyone with a spade and a seed and a desire to make something grow. This living ground is the image which suggested the theme “liturgy at ground level.” These three sessions have to do with some basics of the theology of liturgy. Ground-level stuff. But to speak of “basics” or “fundamentals” can imply dry and dusty facts, or well-worn turf. Instead the hope is that we might dig around in this soil to find some things which give it life and promise. And it has been suggested that we do this in a way that requires no specialized tools. Too often the liturgy has been perceived as something like a towering, mighty oak, or perhaps a bonsai tree, ancient, artistically shaped, but in any case the tending and cultivation of which is best left to professionals. But the fact is that increasingly people in congregations are called to tend the liturgy, not merely admire the pastor’s stylings. I suspect that all of us here, whether we consider ourselves theologians or not, are in fact doing much tending. By digging around at this level, maybe we can come to that task refreshed and with a new perspective or two.

Ground Level—Cross and Tomb

To speak of “liturgy at ground level” also points to the place where we might well begin. Ground level is where we find the cross and the tomb of Jesus. The cross is firmly planted in the ground, not suspended in the air by invisible wires, as some architects have imagined. The grave where Jesus is laid is hewn
from the earth’s crust. The death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the ground of the liturgy. Maybe that seems obvious. But I think it is worthwhile to examine the ways in which the liturgy reveals this core reality. This center can help to orient our thinking about and participation in the liturgy.

**Easter Focus—Paschal Focus**

Thus the title of this segment, “The Easter Focus of the Liturgy.” Yet it doesn’t quite hit the mark. Better yet would be “The Paschal Focus of the Liturgy.” “Paschal,” unfortunately, is jargon. After ten years of using it in the parish, I find I continually have to translate it. Still, it is a good word because so much is packed into it. Most Christian lands use a variation on the word “Pascha” as the name for the Festival of the Resurrection. We are stuck with “Easter.” It is another good example of where we have been gypped by the English language. “Easter” is a static word. It is a point on the compass. It is the sun in the morning sky. It is always happy and undimmed light.

On the other hand, “Pascha” is a word brimming with movement. It is the equivalent of the word “Passover.” Passing over is movement from death to life, from slavery to freedom, from the desert to the Promised Land. It holds the two together, both death and resurrection, both cross and burst tomb. The Lamb who has begun his reign was, indeed, slain. In Luther’s great Paschal hymn, we begin with Christ firmly in death’s strong bands, locked in strange and dreadful strife, before we sing the final “Hallelujah.”

The liturgy is “Paschal” in that it is always presenting to us and engaging us in this very same movement. In worship the movement of Christ from death to resurrection is in many different ways being proclaimed. And the liturgy leads us in just such a variety of ways through our movement with him, dying with Christ that we might also be raised with him.

What are some of these ways in which the Paschal focus of the liturgy may be seen? What are some of the ways in which this focus has been strengthened in recent revisions of the liturgy? What are some ways in which we who tend the liturgy can make this focus more plain?

**Paschal Candle**

We might begin with something which is perhaps secondary, but which represents a vivid sign of progress. The most striking visual symbol which draws this Paschal focus has made a comeback in many churches over the past generation. The Paschal Candle combines the marks of Christ’s Passion, the cross and nails; a sign of his burial, the grains of incense placed in each nail print; and the light of his rising. Burning throughout the Easter season, and thereafter at every Baptism, it is a visible word worthy of craft and care.

And if it can be used to its fullest extent, as the visual focus of the Resurrection Vigil in the night of Easter, so much the better. For then it carries
that sense of movement, the "Pasch," the passing over from darkness to light and death to life. Even when it is standing still in its appointed place, we will remember how it led us with Christ from dying to rising; into the crypt of a darkened room, only to be the source of light which banishes the grave’s darkness. It assures us, in the words of Richard Baxter, that “Christ leads us through no darker rooms / Than he has been before.” The Paschal Candle speaks movement, the pillar of fire before Israel, the chariot of Elijah pacing the way, the Son of Man in St. John’s vision with shining face and eyes of flame, the first and the last, drawing us after him to our glorious resurrection.

One way that some parishes have found to extend the impact of this symbol is to provide smaller versions of the Paschal candle for use in the home. Members of a household can work together to mark the candle and inscribe their names sometime during Lent, then bring them to the Vigil or on Easter to light them from the Paschal Candle and carry the light home from the service. The Paschal “movement” continues, as the Light of Christ makes a pathway from the altar to the hearth.

**Baptism as Paschal Movement**

The Easter focus, the Paschal movement from death to resurrection can be seen in a much more fundamental way in the liturgy of Holy Baptism. Our teaching and practice of Baptism use a whole constellation of different images, including washing, rebirth or new birth, adoption, initiation. But no interpretation of Baptism is more radical than that spoken of in Romans 6. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” This word is proclaimed at every Baptism. Baptism is a Paschal movement, from dying to rising with Christ.

We are enriched by all the various interpretations of Baptism, of course. But the power of this death-and-resurrection motif is one that may be especially important to recover. The emphasis on Baptism as washing or cleansing, for example, which has seemed to predominate in Lutheran circles, has sometimes led to a minimizing of the problem which Baptism addresses. Especially when water is applied scantily and antiseptically, what may get communicated is that our fundamental separation from God is no more than a minor cosmetic difficulty. Just a little smudge on an otherwise cherubic face, easily dabbed away, like the mother applying a little spit and polish to get rid of the donut crumbs from coffee hour. This may be a popular and appealing message in a culture which often seems to say that all we really need is a little spiffing up, but it is an impoverishment of Baptism. It is Baptism as Handi-wipe.

For Martin Luther Baptism was more about drowning than about washing. When we remember his well-known comments about the need for daily renewal of Baptism, by pushing the old Adam’s head under water, so that the new person
might come forth and arise, it comes as no surprise that his "druthers" seem to have been for Baptism by submersion, in order to proclaim more clearly the death and resurrection that is happening there.

And in this preference Luther was echoing what Christians a thousand years before did as a matter of course. Research into early Christian baptisteries, such as S. Anita Stauffer has been doing in recent years, tells us that many of these early fonts vividly depict the Paschal movement of Baptism. Especially in the first great church-building period from the 4th to 6th centuries, the Romans 6 burial-and-resurrection theme was reinforced by the architecture. Baptismal pools were set into the floor in much the same way as today's sunken tubs. Some appear to have been derived from the design of mausolea, burial crypts. Some are thus shaped like a rectangular coffin; others are in the form of a cross. Decorative mosaics and tiles depicted death and resurrection themes. Baptism was experienced at ground level! One could not escape the message that Baptism meant being united with Christ in a death like his, a burial like his, and a resurrection like his, while descending into and rising from such a font.

Anyone in a position to influence new architecture or revisions in Baptismal space has a wonderful opportunity to help recover this essential focus of Baptism, by ensuring that it is large enough to be an effective symbol of death and resurrection, and that its location speaks of the centrality of Baptism to the life of the community. Most of us, however, have to work with what we have. Then it is perhaps even more crucial to make the most of the words and signs of the Baptismal liturgy which make this connection. Ample water, not a little dab. Pouring from a worthy vessel, perhaps during the prayer of thanksgiving over the water, rather than having a bowl filled at the sink before the people arrive. Deliberate, visible signing with the cross using the oil of anointing. Lighting the candle from the Paschal Candle which proclaims the crucified and living Lord. If the Sacrament of Baptism is to have the depth sufficient for a lifetime of re-entry and renewal, then it is important that the liturgy of Holy Baptism be profoundly "at ground level," connected to Christ's cross and tomb. In strong ways the liturgy of Baptism can communicate the reality that we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

The Paschal Core of the Church Year

We can also see the Easter core, the Paschal center of the liturgy revealed as the underlying principle of the Church Year. The rather complicated outline of the Church Year as we know it from Advent to Christ the King is a product of a long process of development. What we can tell about the "ground-level" of this tradition is that the basic segment which emerged early on was the fifty day period from Passover through Pentecost. These were two of the great annual festivals of the Jewish year. But their carryover into the Christian tradition is not just a matter of inertia or reverence for the past. These days were subsequently associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the descent of
Yet there was a continuity seen moving through all of God's saving acts in history, in time. The Passover of the chosen people of God is brought to completion in the Christian Passover. Now it is Christ who has brought us over from death to life. Now it is Christ who is the Paschal Lamb sacrificed for us. Likewise, Pentecost took on another dimension of meaning. By the first century AD for Jews it commemorated the covenant on Mt. Sinai, the culmination of the Passover event in the formation of the people of Israel. The Christian Pentecost was the culmination of the Passover of Christ, the outpouring of the Spirit to form the New Israel of God.

To the foundation of these fifty days additions were built on over the centuries. There was a main addition in the Christmas and Epiphany feasts, which came about during a time when Christians were struggling to define their understanding of the person and nature of Christ. Out of this addition developed another level built over the Paschal foundation, namely the tracing of the life of Jesus over the course of each year. Upon that was added still another level, sometimes called the “sanctoral” cycle, the remembrance of holy men and women, martyrs, saints. The additions to this level proliferated so greatly that they threatened to obscure the foundations. Later church reforms have helped to recover some of the cleaner and simpler lines of the earlier structure.

Still, it is not always clear in our experience of the Church Year that it is the death and resurrection of Jesus which is at the center and which provides the impetus to move us through that year. The Church Year is not like the typical calendar, from which we peel pages one by one, each of relatively equal significance. Sometimes it is pictured as a wheel, which is a little better, but still does not usually convey the centrality of Easter, and can leave the false impression that the Church’s life is just a timeless, repetitious cycle, governed by the rhythms of nature. Perhaps we could think of the Christian Passover as the engine providing power to both the front end and the rear end of the Church Year. It is the force which not only spins us through an annual cycle, but moves us ahead and onward through time towards time’s end.

The calendar changes with which we have been living for about the past fifteen years have helped in some ways to restore the centrality of the Paschal movement. The most significant rediscovery, however, is one which is still only partially realized, and that is the setting apart of the Great Three Days from Maundy Thursday at sundown through Resurrection Day. My previous experience of these days, and perhaps it has been yours, too, is of services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday which were quite distinct from one another. Then Lent just petered out. There was a backstage scene change on Saturday, and then come Sunday early: Voila! Christ is risen! In contrast, the concept of the Three Days, in Latin “Triduum,” gives a unity, a continuity, and a strong sense of the Paschal progression from death to life. Death and resurrection are not two distinct events but one dynamic sweep, which can be seen most profoundly in the Easter Vigil.
The Vigil is still an optional novelty in most Lutheran circles. But this can change when other elements of parish life zero in on it. When, for example, the midweek Lenten services prepare for the readings of the Vigil; when all new members incorporated into the community over the year are royally welcomed at the Vigil; when children receiving First Communion do so at the Vigil along with the renewal of their Baptism; when the breakfast after the Vigil offers a more tantalizing menu than the Sunday morning fare; then, more rapidly than might be expected, the Vigil can become the golden core of the year which lends its movement to all the rest.

**Eucharist and Daily Prayer**

Finally, though certainly not last in importance, the Sunday assembly of the people of God around Word and Sacrament reveals the Paschal movement as the center of the liturgy. “As often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” Before there was any organized liturgical year with special days to commemorate the death and resurrection, the life of Christians was oriented around the Paschal meal. They gathered on Sunday, the day of resurrection but also the eighth day, the day of new creation. The risen Christ was present in their midst in the Word proclaimed. They partook of the Lord’s Supper as a remembrance of Christ the Passover sacrificed, and in joyful thanksgiving for the victory of the resurrection. And thus they were renewed in that passage from death to life which they had undergone through the waters of Baptism.

Likewise, in other forms of the Church’s prayer the crucified and living Lord is seen. Within daily prayer at evening and morning, the marking of our passage through time is overlaid with echoes of the Paschal passage of Christ. Every dawn represents a ripple of resurrection light. Every nightfall recalls the connection between sleep and death, grave and bed, as well as the light of Christ which scatters the darkness. These Paschal echoes have been amplified in our revised liturgies by such things as the Paschal Blessing which can be attached to Morning Prayer, and the Service of Light at Evening Prayer, with its resemblance to the procession with the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil. But, more on the Eucharist and these other forms of prayer in the time we have ahead.

**A Vigil Story**

Why is it important to come to this ground level, to identify this Easter focus, this Paschal center of the liturgy, to tend its place in the Church’s life, to keep it from being overgrown by all the variegated “themes” that crowd our calendars, to free this Paschal dynamic to exercise its power? One sort of answer would be another theological one about the cross and resurrection being the
central saving event, the defining act of God in history, the heart of the Christian Gospel, and the like.

Let me try to get at it in another way through a story from the parish. It is, admittedly, a kind of success story, and we all know that for each of these there are some that do not turn out so well. But one like this can carry us a long way.

Two years ago at the Easter Vigil a neighboring family visited with us for the first time. Mother and father had some church background and were fairly motivated to pursue renewing their ties. The three children under the age of 10 were not baptized. One year later, after a time of incorporation into the community and instruction, the family was received by affirmation at the Vigil, and the children were baptized. They entered into all the preparations with enthusiasm and the liturgy itself with intensity. But what was most striking to me was hearing about what happened when they got home. They wanted to keep it going. They turned off all the lights and took turns leading each other up and down the steps with their Baptismal candles. They wanted to stay up all night. When the parents finally got them settled down, they wanted to go to bed wearing their Baptismal garments, like holy nighties, I suppose. They had caught the spirit of the Vigil, a night of feasting, a joy which has no end. This year at the Vigil the oldest, Laura, came to her first Communion. She told me several times how wonderful it would be to do this on the night she had been baptized.

Exceptional, yes, in some ways. But for this family, the Church’s Passover as expressed in the liturgy has become the focal point for their passage from death to resurrection in Baptism and renewal.

The liturgy, at ground level, proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the liturgy draws the people of God into and through that dying and rising. That has implications both for the community as the Body of Christ, and for the fields of our own hearts.
2. “Like Wheat Arising”—Liturgy as Leaven for the Body of Christ

The title of this section was inspired by a little phrase in a book on liturgical theology by Alexander Schmemann [Introduction to Liturgical Theology, The Faith Press, 1966], in which he describes the liturgy as “the leaven which raises the loaf.” It struck me, partly because of the theme of this year’s Institute, and partly, perhaps, because in our household we have recently rediscovered the process and occasional frustration of bread-making. In any case, it is a metaphor which we might use as a starting point in thinking about the place of the liturgy, especially the Holy Eucharist, in the life of the Church, and in the Church’s life in the world.

The type of leaven with which we are probably most familiar is the yeast which bakers put in dough to make it rise. Yeasts, I learned from my nine-year-old again this year, are among the simplest forms of plant life, one-celled living organisms which multiply when they are in contact with a source of food and water in temperatures which allow the enzymes in the yeast to work. These enzymes break down the starch in flour, converting it to sugar which in turn is converted to alcohol and carbon dioxide gas. The gas bubbles up through the mixture, making the mass light and porous, and giving bread its character.

This natural process of fermentation is the source for a definition of leaven in an extended sense. Leaven is “an agent or element which acts in or upon something to produce a change.” To leaven is “to permeate with an altering or transforming influence.” How is the liturgy a leaven for the Church as the body of Christ?

Liturgy brings the living Christ into transforming contact with God’s people. The crucified and risen Christ is the essential ingredient which can bring us “back to life again.” How are we in contact with this source of our life? We sometimes speak of the Word of God and the Sacraments as the “means of grace,” the primary avenues by which the life of Christ is channelled to us. Think of liturgy as a culture in which all the essential ingredients are present for this transforming contact to take place. The mass of God’s people is assembled together, gathered in one place as grains of wheat are brought together from the hillside in the harvest. There is water, the water of Baptism, warmed by the Spirit’s fire. Into this mixture is introduced the living Christ, present in the Word, present in bread and wine. As a result an ongoing process of conversion takes place. Our stiff and starchy defenses are broken down. The goodness of the Lord sweetens us. The risen Christ brings that same rising to God’s people. The Spirit bubbles up in us and enlivens us and gives us our true character. Bread that is truly bread is not a lump but a loaf. This is one way in which we might speak of liturgy as a leavening process: it brings to us the living organism of Christ, the living One who is continually transforming us.
In the life of the Church, liturgy is not the whole loaf, but an important catalyst. The breadmaker discovers that yeast is a small but precious ingredient in the process. If you buy it in those little packets, it may be the most expensive single ingredient in a loaf. Yet, there are other ingredients. Our contact with the transforming power of Christ does not end there. The effects of that contact permeate the rest of our lives, and the rest of our work as the people of God. Still, that liturgy is a precious ingredient. It may be the most “expensive” in terms of the time and energy and care that goes into it. That investment, however, is for the sake of the loaf. The liturgy is a catalytic agent by which the Church is formed as a single loaf, filled with the Spirit, a Bread of Life, one which provides nourishment not only to itself but for the world.

**Action/Reaction**

There is another way to think about this leavening process which might help us towards some basic definitions we commonly use when we speak of worship. The action of leaven stimulates a chemical reaction, resulting in a change in substance and causing the rising effect. There is a similar duality in worship. The saving and transforming action of God, applied to us in Christ, stimulates a reaction. We are changed, for to be in Christ is to be a new creation. And we rise up, filled with the Spirit, responding in praise and in service.

**Gottesdienst**

The Germans have a word for the liturgy which expresses this action/reaction duality: *Gottesdienst*. While it may not have the oomph of *Fahrvergnügen*, there is the efficiency of engineering into one word something which takes a sentence to say. It means both “the service of God to human beings” and “the service of human beings to God,” and also “under God.” The ambiguity of a word like this, even as it is preserved to a certain extent in our English word “service,” is helpful. It reminds us of the conversational, dialogical, “give-and-take” character of the liturgy. Now, we don’t need to see this action and reaction in a chronological sense within an order of service, for the action of God in creating us as worshipping beings and raising us to new life in Christ always comes first. Nor is it very helpful to try to split up the elements of the liturgy into those which are “God to us” and those which are “us to God.” So much of what goes on is really “both/and.” A hymn, for example, can be our “serving up” a response of praise to God, and at the same time God “serving up” the Gospel to our ears, even as we also “serve up” strength and witness to our sisters and brothers. To see the liturgy as service, or better, as *Gottesdienst*, is to enjoy that ambiguity: to recognize God, being humbled to come among us as servant, enabling us to respond to that mercy in faith and praise toward God, and in fervent love toward one another.
Worship

“Worship” is a word which highlights the second part of that action/reaction duality. It is primarily a verb, a fact which makes illogical a statement like, “Worship didn’t do anything for me today.” It is we who do the worship! The word comes from an Anglo-Saxon root which means to give honor, value or esteem to something or someone. Classic definitions of this term have included Evelyn Underhill’s, “Worship is the response of the creature to the Eternal.” More to the point for Christian worship is George Hoyer’s comment at one of these meetings. Referring to those who are reborn children of God, he said, paraphrasing I John 3: 1, “everyone who is a child loves the parent. And when such a child says so to God, that is worship.” Worship is a word which has the breadth to include the response of God’s people gathered as well as the response of the individual heart to God, and thus speaks of the continuity between them. Recent years have brought a renewed interest in “spiritual formation,” including the practice of “disciplines” of prayer and contemplation. Yet even in private the individual never ceases to be a part of the community, and such devotion always finds its source and goal in common worship. Justin Martyr in the second century said it simply: “Try to be together as much as possible.” It is in the lumping together of gathered grains, brought into contact with the leaven of Christ, where, above all, we become a loaf, and our worship rises.

Liturgy

“Liturgy” is a word which emphasizes that communal dimension. It comes from a Greek root meaning “the work of the people.” So liturgy, by its very definition, is about “involving lay people”—that is, the whole people of God—in worshipping. In its secular use, liturgy referred to acts of “public service” on behalf of the community. And for the Church, liturgy does imply a public aspect. It is ordering and organizing the words and deeds which embody God’s action and our reaction in a public way. So we might think of the liturgy in one sense as being like a clear glass container, a bowl, in which those ingredients are mixed, the leaven of Christ, the gathered grains, and where the transforming ferment happens. In another sense, when we use it in a phrase like “doing our liturgy,” liturgy is the process of “mixing it up,” encountering the living Christ, experiencing that ongoing conversion, releasing a part of our being in praise.

Ritual

Here is another word, “ritual.” If the words “liturgy” and “liturgical” are somewhat suspect among many, the word “ritual” has a harder time of it yet. Too often words like “meaningless” or “empty” appear invisibly before it. One of the best little books available which rescues the “fullness” of ritual is Gabe
Huck's *How Can I Keep From Singing?* [Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989]. He describes a ritual from outside the liturgy:

“Rituals are a lot like that kiss which wives and husbands may exchange each morning before separating for the day. It is a kiss, but it is a ritual too. The moment is not for casting around for some word, some gesture, some song that will speak of how I am feeling today about our relationship, about myself, about life in general. It is just done, this kiss. It is the gesture of what I mean, not of what I feel. It is the rehearsal of what I mean and believe as husband and wife.... Liturgy is...ritual activity...that sort of human activity where we use the tools of human expression—words, sounds, gestures, objects, order—use them over and over again in various rhythms to embody and express and learn what we mean and believe.”

Back to the breadboard, if you will. Unless you have one of those new bread machines, the only way bread will work is to knead, knead, knead. To get that energizing leaven in contact with all that sluggish and recalcitrant grain takes a repetitive, rhythmic action. I hesitate to compare the effect of ritual to a process of “pounding it in,” but maybe that description isn’t so far off. In order for the life-starting leaven of Christ to permeate our human being, and to extend throughout the gathered grains in the Church’s “lump,” we need—we “knead”—ritual.

**Eucharist**

We come at last to the Eucharist. Or, it would probably be more appropriate to say, we come at first to the Eucharist. The consensus continues to grow, not only among liturgical types but in the practice of churches across the Christian map, that the unified liturgy of Word and Sacrament is the heart and center of the life of Christian worship. It has been described as “the source and the summit” of the Church’s life. It is not just another item on the list of topics to be covered under the heading of “liturgy.” It is that core of what we are about as an assembly of sisters and brothers before God. All that we do in worship is related in some way to, or grows out of, what we do in Eucharist.

Of course, there are many different approaches to the Eucharist, each of them worthy of a leisurely journey. The patch of ground which I’m going to scratch has to do with a question which has been posed to me. “Why do you insist on using that strange word for Communion, pastor—how do you say it anyway?” Why, indeed, has that growing ecumenical consensus settled on this transliteration of a Greek word, which has no other usage in our language, as the word which sums up better than any other single expression what we want to say about this tremendously multifaceted thing that happens on Sunday morning? Isn’t it a bit dangerous, in fact, to use such an in-house code word, offputting perhaps to the visitor who can’t pronounce the second word at the top of the worship folder?
We could argue that this word’s very distinctiveness is a strength, freeing it from the baggage of distracting associations. We could say that its growing acceptance among Christians of various stripes gives it an ecclesiastical neutrality which “the Mass” or even “the Lord’s Supper” do not possess. We could get practical and admit that it is the only word short enough to fit into those tiny little boxes which the church calendar format provides.

Eucharist is a word like Alleluia, Amen, Hosanna, Abba, which deserves to be retained so that its meaning can continually be unfolded. For every time that we unfold that meaning, we are reminded of what makes it different. Eucharist comes from a verb—“to give thanks.” Other titles for this liturgy draw our attention to its “thingness”—Sacrament, table, meal, supper. “Eucharist” is an important balance to that emphasis because it reminds us of the activity we are assembled to do. We are gathered to give thanks. In a recently published book, Words Around the Table [Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991], Gail Ramshaw elaborates:

Thanksgiving is, as it were, the Christian way of life, and the primary worship service of Christians trains us in such a pattern of living. At the start of the new week, we gather to give thanks. Justin (in the second century AD) writes that the presider “gives thanks at some length”…. And of course we do not always feel like it. Ill, lonely, upset, discouraged, at least tired, perhaps hung over, we would not on our own be thankful every Sunday morning. But to be Christian is to choose the habit of thanksgiving and to join with other Christians to cultivate the habit…not because we have to, not only when we want to, but to train ourselves in thanksgiving.

Eucharist is also a word which perhaps best encapsulates the whole action of the liturgy. We give thanks not only over the table but also in the proclamation of the Word, as we shout “glory” and “praise” to the Christ present there. This does not mean that every word and movement of the liturgy is thanksgiving in a narrow sense. There is room for confession, instruction, intercession, and the like. It is to say that shot through the whole of what we do is a spirit of thanksgiving. The invitation, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God,” is not just a preface to the “Great Thanksgiving” which follows, but a summary of what we are up to in the whole liturgy. Eucharist, thanksgiving, is the reaction to the action of God in creating us and bringing us with Christ through death, back to life again.

Sometimes there is some uneasiness about emphasizing this human response when we speak of the “offering” of worship, the “work” of liturgy, the “action” of Eucharist, as though we might diminish thereby the grace and gift of God. Here, too, “Eucharist” makes it clear what comes first. Thanksgiving is response to what comes before. Occasionally we speak of “thanking in advance.” And there is this dimension to liturgy, too, as we thank God in advance for the final consummation of the victory which has been won. But in giving thanks, we are primarily brought back to what is prior, God’s being and work on our behalf.
Leaven as Sacrifice

God is the breadmaker. It is our God who assembles the ingredients: our being together in one place is already God's work, a gathering by the Holy Spirit. It is God who has come into our human mix in Jesus Christ. And there is one other fact about the action of yeast which is a parable of what the leaven of Christ continues to accomplish in us. After the yeast has done its job of stimulating that reaction which transforms starch to sugar and releases carbon dioxide gas through the mixture, the dough is baked. In the heat of the baking process, the yeast is killed off. The leaven is sacrificed for the sake of the loaf.

The analogy is not perfect, but it speaks of Christ. That we might be God's new creation, that we might be transformed to be living bread, Christ was sacrificed. Like the Passover Lamb consumed in fire, his death was God's own ultimate self-giving. And now in every Eucharist, as we are mixed up with the leaven of Christ's transforming power, we come again to that sacrifice which has made our rising a permanent reality, not just a temporary inflation.

Can we take the analogy one step farther and apply it also to the liturgy as leaven for the life of the Church and the life of the world? Leaven exists to be sacrificed for the sake of the loaf, and ultimately for those who will be nourished by it. Dare we say this about the liturgy—that it exists not for its own sake, but for the sake of the Church, and the world which the Church is sent to nourish?

This can be thin ice; there are those who too quickly delight in seeing the liturgy as purely functional, and co-opting it to carry the weight of whatever denominational programs and bright ideas come down the pike. But surely the Church is not a society for the preservation of the liturgy. Liturgy is not a culture to be grown in a Petri dish under sterile conditions. It must be plunged into the batch of dough so that it can do its job. The people of God are stimulated to rise up in thanksgiving and serving. The Church becomes recognizable as a living loaf, not a limp lump. Through its liturgy the Church is constituted and revealed to the world as bread for the world, yes, the Body of Christ for the world. And in the process, the liturgy is consumed. The service folders go in the trash. Recordings of the liturgy are typically stale. But the nourishment goes on as the Church is broken and shared in its mission. Listen to the context of that phrase from Schmemann I referred to earlier:

worship...places the Church before the face of the world, manifests her purpose in the world, the purpose of the people of God, set in the world with a Gospel and a mission.... It is...the leaven which raises the loaf,...the love of God directed toward the world,...a witness to the kingdom of God,...the good news of salvation,...new life...[rather than] a departure out of the world for a little while, a 'vent' or break in earthly existence, opened up for the inlet of grace. [Introduction to Liturgical Theology, page 25]
Leaven as Ferment

I cannot leave this image of leaven without noting that in much of the Biblical witness, leaven had a negative connotation. It was associated with corruption, even evil. The Passover prohibition against leavened foods recalls this again. And so on Easter, we may have heard or sung, “Cleanse out the old leaven...” But then there is that remarkable parable of Jesus which contradicts that stereotype, to which Gordon Lathrop called our attention at the Institute last year. “The dominion of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened” [Matthew 13: 33]. Is it by accident that the bread of the Eucharist for the first eight centuries in the Western Church and even until today in the Eastern Church has been daily bread, leavened bread? In fact, both leavened bread and wine are foods which are products of fermentation. There are risks involved in that. Leavened bread does not store well on the shelf; it must be used. Fermented wine—well, we have learned its danger potential, to say nothing of what it does to old wineskins.

If Christ is leaven, his ferment in us brings with it some risks. Our death in him to the old nature, our rising with him to be a new creation, is a metamorphosis, a change which may take an unpredictable shape. Despite such things as grape juice or wafers with the shelf life of army rations, despite any and all attempts to remove the ferment, the liturgy which mixes us up with Christ is not “safe.”

But this leaven is life to us. Without it we cannot rise. So shall we sing instead, “Cleanse out the old leaven...to make way for the new.” To make way for Christ.

"Your touch can call us back to life again, Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been." The hymn by John Crum which serves as source for this year’s Institute theme and for the titles of this particular sequence is itself an illustration of what this section will address. It is one of those hymns which draws an especially vivid connection between the work of God and the world of human experience. It speaks in the language of earthly time, the cycle of seasons which brings forth the green blade from the buried grain. It speaks in the language of space, especially of the earthly environment. And it speaks of the passage of human hearts, "wintry, grieving, or in pain," brought to life by God’s touch. These are the three fields, the relationship of the liturgy to time, environment, and life passages, to be explored here.

One starting point in understanding the liturgy is the one with which we started, namely, the sphere of God’s activity. All that God has done, culminating in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, is at the core. Yet there is another starting point, and that is the sphere of human experience. The shape which liturgy takes, its forms of expressions, the stuff which is employed to do the liturgy, the places and situations in which it is carried out, are all affected by the ways in which life takes place within this creation. This is in keeping with the fact that Christian liturgy and in fact the whole Christian gospel is “incarnational,” down-to-earth, taking what is here at ground level and using it in ways that convey the presence of God and the saving power of Christ.

Time

We can see this, first of all, in the relationship of the liturgy to time. The liturgy is related to the operations of God within history. Over and over we are told that God works within time and historical circumstances. Exodus 12 makes the point that 430 years, to the very day, passed between the coming of the Israelites to Egypt and their departure. St. Luke is careful to locate Jesus’ life in relationship to historical coordinates. Christian worship is not an effort to escape from time, but rather to encounter in the present moment the God who has entered into our time to be confined by it. Jesus dies on a particular Friday, related to the Passover of a particular year, and is raised on the third day. It is an event we can locate fairly precisely on our human calendars, and which, as we have seen, is the center of the Church’s version of the calendar.

Week and Year

From another standpoint, the way in which time is arranged and ordered in this creation also affects how we remember and observe those central acts of
God in history. The liturgy connects us with Jesus’ death-and-resurrection, not randomly, but on a regular basis. And this it does, not only annually, as with the Jewish festivals, but in connection with the week. The primacy of Sunday as “the Lord’s day” is attested as early as the end of the first century. The ordering of time by week and year is reinforced in the pattern of the liturgy.

Seasons

The cycles of the liturgy are steeped also in the changing seasons of the earth. The content of carols like “Now the Green Blade Rises,” the timing of the whole Christmas Cycle to coincide with the winter solstice, these attest to the deep connections between the concrete instances of God’s intervention in time and the ongoing observation of what is happening in the surrounding creation. The fact that many of these connections are most apparent to people living in northern climes can be problematic when we think of the growing Christian population south of the Equator. But the acknowledgement of these connections in the way the liturgy and the year are ordered tells us again that our sense of the way our lives are organized around time and season are in important ways incorporated, rather than ignored, in the ways we worship.

Day

If Jesus’ death-and-resurrection is the event at the core of the liturgy’s ordering of the week and the year, there is another aspect of the liturgy’s ordering of time which seems to be more closely related to creation. The creation of the “two great lights” gives us the pattern of night and day. The pattern of praise connected to this daily cycle is related to the fact that “every morning” God’s mercies are new, and that upon falling asleep it is God who makes us to dwell in safety. The daily prayer of Christians has much in common with that of our forebears in Israel, in its reliance on the Psalms and scriptural canticles as the primary hymn collection, Biblical readings, and offered prayer.

The Christian liturgy of daily prayer, or “liturgy of the hours,” does take many of its cues from this natural phenomenon of the cycle of light and darkness. And thus it touches directly upon this fundamental way in which we experience time. However, the daily prayer of Christians is much more than “creation worship.” This aspect of the Church’s liturgy, too, is transformed by the leavening presence of Christ. So in Morning Prayer we cannot help but see in the rising sun the true Sun of Justice whose rising has brought us the healing we need. Although Eucharist is connected with Sunday, not a day can go by in which we do not also give thanks to God for the blessings of creation and above all the gift of salvation in Christ. All over the New Testament, especially in the Gospel and Letters of John, we see the association of Christ with Light; so the orientation of prayer at morning and evening is towards the Light which is Christ, as is illustrated most vividly in the Service of Light of Evening Prayer. Even the intercessory prayer which is a part of our daily prayer is associated
with Christ; we, as members of Christ’s Body, participate in his continuing priestly prayer for the world and all its needs before the throne of God.

Through this pattern of daily prayer, the liturgy touches and brings life to that field of human existence which we call time. Worship is not segregated to that Sunday morning slot, removed from the main channel of time’s ever-rolling stream which rushes us along day by day. By bracketing with prayer those things which are a part of our daily routine, our work, our serving, our leisure, our caring for others, we see more clearly that not only that hour or those minutes when we are directly engaged in worship and prayer are set apart, but in fact all of time, all the hours and events of each day, are infused with the presence of the risen Christ and so are made holy. Daily prayer is not an escape from the rat race to spend time with God; it is a consecration of the race and pace (Morning), and a thanksgiving for it, combined with a plea of forgiveness regarding it, at Evening. Liturgy and life are not two separate categories, but our vocation and acts of love are included in the offering of our selves to God.

Practically speaking, it is a rare congregation which can rally many or any of its troops for corporate daily prayer. A few will turn out in some parishes for the devotion of Holy Week. We can work towards encouraging and cultivating a practice of prayer in households and by individuals, and promoting the use of at least some of the elements of the liturgy of daily prayer, so that there is a sense of participating in an action of the Body even when we are separated from one another. And, we can covet and claim all those opportunities in the parish when daily prayer is more of a “natural,” weekdays in Advent and Lent, retreats, parish meetings, and the like, giving the patterns of this liturgy priority over other “creative” and “thematic” orders. It is only by doing the Service of Light of Evening Prayer at every Advent and Lenten midweek service for ten years that our parish has arrived at the point where it is “in their blood” and the children sing it by heart. And when such patterns of prayer are taken to heart, and come naturally to the lips, and dwell in the bones, there is a readiness and a receptiveness to the life-bringing touch of Christ which comes through them.

Environment

A second “field” of our human experience with which liturgy intersects is that of physical space and the physical “stuff” which is used when we worship. Since God came among us in the flesh of Jesus, who carried out the work of saving the world in specific geographical places and “bore our sins in his own body on the tree,” we find that we can easily embrace and put into service the various contents of this creation.

Space

We have probably all discovered that the space in which we worship is by no means neutral. It is bound to have a huge impact on what happens when we pour people into it. In fact, for most people the primary definition of the word
“church” would be building, not what it contains. The long history of building churches reveals the truth of Winston Churchill’s comment, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.” There is probably no other set of decisions in a parish’s life which is more crucial to its worship, identity, and mission, yet often undertaken without a foundation in understanding what worship is about, than the building or renovation of worship space. This is a time when a careful educational process about “liturgy at ground level” is essential long before groundbreaking.

In recent years an emerging consensus has been that an understanding of worship space starts with the gathered people. This space is first of all the “house of the Church,” or, we might say, the “house of the Body of Christ,” and because of that also the house of God. The assembly comes together to participate fully and actively in Word and Sacrament. The requirements for a place of worship are deceptively simple: a room in which the people of God in whom Christ dwells can gather around Jesus Christ present in “Word, Water, Wine, and Bread.” And it is a room in which the common voice and movement of this assembly can be stimulated so that bodies, whole persons, are engaged in praise and prayer. Space for worship, the literal “ground level” at which our liturgy takes place, is worthy of study and reflection not only by those contemplating changes, but to help those who are “stuck” make the most of what they have and to help the assembled do their liturgy.

Stuff

Within that space for worship is a host of other physical “stuff,” things which are used by the assembly and its leaders. Books, baskets, vessels; clothing for people, walls, altars; painting, sculpture, icon, glass; crosses, candles, chairs; ashes, palms, oil. In their study of worship environment [Where We Worship, Philadelphia: Board of Publication, LCA, 1987], Walter Huffman and Ralph Van Loon use several words to describe qualities we might seek in the things of worship: simple and elemental. Simplicity implies that the whole environment draws attention to the main actions with table, font, and book. It means avoiding “secondary symbols,” such as busy appliques on stoles or little crosses on top of banner poles. An elemental character to the things of worship means that we can sense their clear connection to the creation. Wood, stone, fiber, metal, natural light, all can be employed in ways that display their elemental character rather than having it be disguised under other layers. A third quality we might add: ambivalence. Visual art and design which fills in every detail leaves nothing for people to do except receive it passively. Forms which are more ambiguous enable people to participate more actively and for different people to engage them at different levels.
Finally, within that space for worship are the bodies of the worshipers. The room around them and the stuff in it are ultimately intended to provide for their basic physical requirements, or to engage them in the action of worship. Fortunately, the past few years have seen a lot of progress in recognizing that these bodies are not just ears affixed to trunks plopped in pews. They are also eyes, noses, skin, arms, hands, lungs, legs and feet. Liturgy that takes to heart the Word made flesh engages the bodies within the Body of Christ.

An example: in recent years our synod has rediscovered the tradition of a service on Maundy Thursday where pastors renew their ordination vows and the oils used in Baptism and anointing of the sick are prepared. Now at every Baptism the uncorking and application of that “oil of chrism” not only sends a fragrance around the room, not only affirms the reality that this newly baptized one is one with the Anointed One, Christ, but sends the message that she or he is part of a concrete expression of the Church which goes beyond the local community to all those congregations who will so mark their baptized with that same oil. “Your touch can call us back to life again.” Because we are creatures and live in creation, liturgy involves the space and stuff of creation to bring Christ’s touch to our whole person, and engages our bodies in the response we make to God and to this creation, with our fellow creatures, in their physical needs.

Passages

“Fields of our hearts.” Under this heading we include, finally, ways in which the Church’s liturgy intersects the lives of people at points of passage and transition. Three stages of passage have been suggested: “separation from a past way of life; transition, or the moment when one crosses the threshold into a new order of being; and incorporation into a new way of life.” (Van Gennep) In one sense all of liturgy is linked to the larger passage in which we are always engaged, from the Baptismal death with Christ to the resurrection life. Along that way there are lesser boundaries to cross, and it is these that specific rites of the liturgy have emerged to help us bridge.

A number of general areas are usually identified in outlining these rites. Baptism, now often called Christian Initiation in order to emphasize the process of preparation and follow-through in addition to the sacramental action, is fundamental. Associated with it are rites such as Affirmation or Confirmation which may be seen as an extension or renewal of initiation. Another set of rites have to do with vocation; traditionally these have been limited to vocation within the Church, such as ordination and the setting apart of individuals for other specific ministries. The Liturgy of Marriage accompanies a change in status and ritually celebrates the union of two persons. Another complex of rites provide for the Church’s ministry in time of illness, and still another group,
related to these, encompass ministry in the time of death. Rites of reconciliation, penance, confession and forgiveness form another aspect which is more developed in some traditions than others.

The fact that the occasions for liturgy in these circumstances grow out of the needs of individual members of the Church does not mean that these are “individual liturgies,” a phrase which is a contradiction in terms, like “private communion.” As one of the prayers from the Burial Service puts it, “Almighty God, you have knit your chosen people together....” Woven into one cloth, baked into one loaf, we participate in the pains and joys of one another even as together we participate in the one body of Christ. We are surrounded and supported by this community in joy and decision, in suffering and grief.

The communal nature of these “passage” liturgies, the way they link the individuals involved with the whole Body, can be seen also in their connection to the Paschal center of the Church’s entire liturgical life. The revised liturgies of the last decade or two in the Lutheran church have made this more plain.

This is especially true of Baptism, as we have noted. Not only do the texts and actions highlight that death-to-resurrection movement, but restoring Baptism to a central place in the Church’s regular Sunday liturgy has made the point that this movement is something in which the whole assembly shares.

The revised service of Affirmation of Baptism lifts up the power and significance of one’s Baptism, and makes it clear that “confirmation” and “joining the church” are not separate acts unrelated to that basic reality.

The newer rites of ordination and the setting apart of other ministers reveal more vividly our prayer for the gifts of the Spirit of the risen Christ, and deemphasize the accent on institutional loyalty.

Even the liturgy of Marriage expresses overtones of Christ’s self-sacrificing love and new creation, and when linked to the Eucharist, communicates the joy of the Paschal Feast, the joining of heaven and earth.

The rites of Healing, still new to many, can make an explicit connection to Baptism, especially when oil is used for anointing in both cases. Illness and suffering are drawn into the whole paschal journey which one is making, rather than being experiences only of isolation and alienation.

And, of course, the liturgy of Christian Burial has been richly fortified with Paschal and Baptismal connections. The Paschal candle plays a prominent role. The placing of the pall is accompanied with words which make the connection to Baptism explicit. Its relationship to the Baptismal garment is one we can make reference to throughout life. Earlier we mentioned the desire of those three children, baptized at the Vigil last year, to go to sleep in the white robes of their Baptism. At the grave we see that this is a “holy desire.” They can teach us to fear the grave as little as our bed.

Here, at the soil of the Christian’s grave, we are back to ground level. There is a lot of acreage to be covered in these “fields of our hearts.” In each of them, at every place and moment in time, at every beginning, every threshold, every
transition, every ending, the liturgy has the potential to touch our lives with the life of Christ. We are aware that some of these passages are more directly and satisfyingly addressed by specific rites than others. And so there is ferment and experiment going on, seeking to reach into some areas untouched. The Lutheran *Occasional Services*, for example, was the first Lutheran service book to include prayers at the termination of life support, and at the time of separation or divorce. Still, when we draw the connection between the rites of the personal life and the Paschal reality which underlies them, we remember that there is really no field of our life left untouched. The renewal of Baptism at the font, in every Eucharist, in daily prayer, is the retracing of that passage from death to life with Christ which makes possible every other passage.

**Theology Under the Liturgy**

Here, then, is an approach to some basics of “liturgical theology.” To stay with the metaphor, one could say that it is about the theology under the liturgy. The point which I have tried to press is that an understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection is what underlies and provides the basis for the whole ordered pattern of the Church’s common worship which we call, in the broadest sense, “the liturgy.”

From another standpoint, however, I think we need to acknowledge the limits of any theology of or about the liturgy. These efforts can be like color commentary in baseball: often helpful, usually enlightening, but sometimes you wish the announcer would just shut up and let us enjoy the game. We can drown the liturgy out by explaining too much. Aidan Kavanaugh ([On Liturgical Theology, Pueblo, 1984](#)) makes the point that “primary theology” takes place in the way God’s people respond to their very participation in the assembly’s liturgical events. Through these a “God-induced change” of vision, of understanding, of reflection—finally, a change of heart—takes place. This is the doing of theology on the most basic and wide-reaching plane.

To this doing of theology we are invited in the liturgy: “Let us pray.” “Let us give thanks.” All of our selves, body, heart, and mind, linked in community, are engaged. And the result is not merely insight, but change. A change in us and in all creation. No longer dead and bare, we are called back to life again.