

The Language of the Psalter and Sunday Worship

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Which words shall we use on Sunday morning? Shall we speak Aramaic or Greek, Latin or German, seventeenth-century British English or twenty-first-century American English? Shall our scriptural translation be as literal as possible or as accessible as possible? Shall we concur with the editors of our denominational news magazines and employ a sixth grade vocabulary, or can we hope to engage the brains of also our learned members? Who decides which words we speak or sing: the organist, the pastor, a congregational committee, a national staff of liturgical experts, or an international theological bureaucracy? We are alive in a time of some considerable debate about the words of our worship. Not since the Reformation, and probably never before then, has there been such rapid and continuing changes, such creativity, indeed such rancor, over the language of our praise and petition.

You have asked me to speak to you about the relationship between the word of God in Scripture and the words of our Sunday worship. I have decided not to lay out specific answers to current controversies—although I am always glad to suggest a solution to a linguistic conundrum—but rather to offer you this one idea: In accord with the church's tradition that the psalter is the church's first prayerbook, I suggest that we listen to the psalms about how to pray. As we analyze the psalms, we ought to be able to identify those characteristics of biblical speech that will guide also our choice of language. However, the task is not as easy as constructing copies of the psalms. American Christians of the twenty-first century are not an ancient Semitic people, and they cannot talk as if they were. I will outline five ways in which the psalter should direct our liturgical prayer, and two ways it must not.

Five Positive Points

One: The psalms are about God. When creation is discussed, when Canaanite tribal history is reviewed, or when the Davidic king is lauded, the psalms are always turned to God, who is the creator, the leader of the armies, the greatest sovereign. When individuals are attacked by dogs or covered with sores, their agony is turned in plea toward God.

And so, inspired by the psalms, our words are to be about God. When we delight in the trees of the forest, when we recall our salvation, when we describe war-ravaged nations, when we grieve over private loss—all of which occur each time the body of Christ assembles—we turn all such praise and lament toward God. We will talk about nature, and human nature, and the world situation; we will express feelings of joy and frus-

tration, unity or sorrow. All this and more can occupy half of our sentences, as long as God is in the other half.

Perhaps the kind of people who attend a Liturgical Institute will take this first point for granted. Of course worship language is about God. But let me suggest that this premise does not go without saying. Many contemporary influences push the worshiping assembly to talk about other things. Some people use Sunday morning to promote their personal proposal for the ethical life; others talk fiercely about political oppression; others offer pop therapy. Some use the hour to make statements about Baroque music, either pro or con. With such pervasiveness that we lose awareness of it, American consumer culture urges us to talk mostly about the self. Many homiletical guides boldly teach that sermons ought to begin with a personal story involving the preacher, and we all have all heard sermons that never moved beyond that self. Many newly composed hymns are what I call cheerleading songs: "Aren't we all wonderful" is the subtext of many a new worship piece. Neither the subtext I grew up with—aren't we all miserable sinners—nor the current "aren't we wonderful"—necessarily leads to language about God.

Two: The psalter is filled with lament. The condition of the individual, the community, and the world at large is a mess, and the psalms are honest about that. That a merciful God has promised shalom to a chosen people is the backdrop against which human misery stands out starkly. The psalms beg God to attend to the sorrows of the self and the problems of the world. The psalms do not rush in to provide God with pat solutions to our troubles; rather, they take the time merely to lament. Christian liturgical language has a lot to learn from the psalter's lament. There is not much genuine lament in our Sunday worship, and some recent worship materials, assuming a stance of perpetual glee, are trying to excise what little lament we presently have. Many of us here are used to expressing contrition for personal sin, but that is only one of the many human sorrows that the psalms lament. Many congregations have turned the intercessions into summaries of the sermon and reminders of parish announcements, and this practice leaves even less occasion for the assembly to acknowledge the endless misery of the world and to hurl our sorrow up into the heavens in a way big enough, long enough, and loud enough that God will finally hear and heed.

Three: When the psalms are worn out from lamenting, they praise. Praise in the psalter is not a continuous happy face, a laughtrack running through each psalm, as if human sorrow is a momentary setback in a mindless sitcom. The psalms' praise of God is not a result of an emotional high. Some psalms sound exuberant, but others, in the model of Psalm 22, are characterized by somber doxology, a profound acknowledgment that God is God even when the individual or the community is in no state to be happy. We suffer, yet we praise. Praise is a habit of faithfulness.

Some church traditions are better at praise than others. Historically, Lutherans have used music to assist their praise. A Bach chorale does not

intend to get us laughing, but many of us were reared in such a way that all five stanzas of "Christ Lag in Todesbanden" elicits our joyous praise for God, rousing us to faithfulness and uniting us with both the present congregation and centuries of other Lutherans. But whether we choose vigorous hymnsinging or a Taizé chant, a spoken litany of praise or wild acclamations of Hallelujah!, our praise may be a lonely song in a culture in which joy has been reduced to my momentarily feeling just great.

Four: The language of the psalms is communal. Much of the psalter is written in the plural, and it is clear that, since the book was a worship resource of Israelite assemblies, even the "I" of many psalms is meant to be heard corporately. "I" am beset by troubles. Sometimes, undoubtedly, the "I" was meaningful for an individual; sometimes the individual prayed for the neighbor who was beset by troubles. At all times the entire assembly prayed the petition of its most troubled member, for the entire community stood as one before its God.

For us at the beginning of the twenty-first century, communal worship is astoundingly difficult. Over the last several centuries we who live in the Western world have become more and more isolated selves. The Protestant movement within Christianity was part of this historical development away from the group and toward the self. Martin Luther and countless others since him articulated a personal stance before God in a way that few people in earlier centuries did. Recall Augustine being stunned to come upon Ambrose reading, as we would say, "to himself." Although we think of reading as a private activity, Augustine had never encountered such a thing. Now privileged children sit alone before computer screens for years before they sit together in classrooms. It is as if the I is all.

It is not only worship planners who are dealing more with a collection of individuals than with one body. Theologians can no longer assume, as perhaps the churchmen of the thirteenth century could, that whatever religious language the people are taught will become their faith speech. The Western world has made personal choice the sign of integrity, and even Lutherans now believe only whatever they feel like believing. In our culture, non-Christian influences are exceedingly more formative than is Sunday worship. The task of finding language that is genuinely communal, that unites all our disparate selves into one body, is more difficult than ever before in Christian history.

Five: The language of the psalter is overwhelmingly metaphoric. I, that is we, are not literally surrounded by dogs. I, that is we, are not literally destroyed by enemy hoardes. Perhaps our people once were: now the memory has become a metaphor for life. "Jerusalem" is not what our newspapers mean by Jerusalem. Some of those who take the biblical term "Israel" literally are responsible for terrorist bombings. The Soviet cosmonaut who said he didn't see God's throne up there was talking in contemporary speech, which is big on precision and verifiability, and small on metaphor and truth.

Metaphor is a figure of speech by which calling something what it is not makes it so. Metaphor is speech odd, off, and yet, surprisingly, is more on the mark than we thought words could be. One of metaphor's characteristics is that it is multi-layered. Yes, I get it, it's true like this. But later I see that it's also true like that. And after personal sorrow or amazing joy I see it is true in yet a deeper way. And if you and I stand together, the metaphor is now also in us, part of the bond between us, and so now our bonding is part of the metaphor for us until we die. If after we die some Christians remember us, they recall us connected to the same metaphors that are connected to them. Metaphor is never instantly there. It is a gold mine, a snorkeling adventure, an afternoon with a microscope and pond water. Metaphor takes time. And we will not all see the same thing or at the same speed. Great metaphor can keep us going down, and up, Sunday after Sunday. "Further up and further in," cry out all the Narnians as they swim up the waterfall into Aslan's country.

The psalms describe God not doctrinally or systematically, but metaphorically. God is rock, fortress, light, spring, leader of armies, sovereign. Such metaphoric speech is not safe speech. People with a strong catechetical tradition are sometimes made nervous by metaphor. We cannot memorize a simple, or even complicated, answer to the inquiry of how is God a rock.

In the Lutheran tradition, it is largely hymns that carry our metaphors. Our praying tends to be stark, our preaching practical or doctrinal. Luther of course loved the ambiguity of metaphor, the way it could hint at more of God's mercy than it could ever say. It is no surprise that his first theological lectures were on the psalms.

To summarize thus far: The psalter models for the worshiping church speech about God, both lament and praise, in language communal and metaphoric. But we cannot stop with these five positive points. The psalms also pose us problems. We cannot pretend to be an ancient Semitic people adapting polytheistic language in the worship of the deity of our tribe. Because our minds are different, our language must be different.

Two Problem Points

One: The psalms are not Christian. Neither are they the speech of contemporary Judaism. They reflect the alien worldview and obscure religious rhetoric of ancient Israel, the ancestor of both Jews and Christians. When Christians use the psalms, we need a translation glossary. We remind one another: when the psalm says A, we mean B. When the assembly of the gods is mentioned, we might imagine all the angels in heaven or the principalities and powers on earth. When Jerusalem is praised, we are to think of heaven or the church. When the Davidic king is lauded, we are to worship Christ. To complicate our task, not all Christians agree on the translation key. For example, concerning the imprecatory psalms, the contemporary Christians in New Zealand are not persuaded by the historic claim that

the suffering one is Christ, and so the Anglican church there has excised every single such line from the psalter in their *Book of Common Prayer*.

The monastic tradition became adept at this increasingly elaborate system of metaphoric substitution. The picture bibles of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries known as the *Biblia Pauperum* honed this technique into a sometimes brilliant, sometimes ludicrous typology in which the imagery of the Hebrew Bible had its meaning only in meaning it surely never had. Several twentieth-century developments halted the church's enthusiasm for typological interpretation, which urged accuracy in hermeneutical claims. Another was the Holocaust, after which Christians reflected on their centuries of disregard of the Jews. As we make decisions about Sunday morning speech, we face also the Western ideal that the people know what their words mean. That the three-year lectionary includes an Old Testament reading and a psalm each Sunday requires that not only highly trained monastics, but also Aunt Suzie, who makes it to church about once a month, encounter language like Psalm 22's "strong bulls of Bashan."

The psalter's re-use of pre-Israelite material, for example in its bold continuation and reinterpretation of polytheistic imagery, frees us to consider use of non-Christian material, as long as we provide the Christological key for Sunday worshippers. A hymn to the Tree of Life may be more accessible to contemporary worshippers as an image of Christ than a psalm about the warrior God has anointed.

Lutherans know well the question, "What does this mean?" To the extent that the elaborate code is available, the psalms can have their meaning for Christian worship. But it is a foolhardy fantasy for us to pretend that such a code is readily available. It is shocking to me how many clergy, in spite of their biblical and theological training, cannot see the lectionary's connection between the first reading and the gospel. Do we expect then that the entire assembly can find any contemporary Christian relevance in lines like "All glorious is the princess as she enters, her gown in cloth-of-gold"? When metaphor degenerates into archaism, and archaism becomes archaic lingo, we have a serious pastoral problem. It is irresponsible to continue use of impenetrable language without serious catechesis. And I do not count as serious catechesis offering once a decade, simultaneous to an adult forum on family dynamics, a two-week course on the imagery of the ancient Near East.

Two: You probably expected me to say this, and here it comes. The psalter presupposes, blesses, and advocates an androcentric worldview. God is described in either male or neuter imagery with masculine pronouns. In the psalms God is never once in female imagery. God's chosen one of Israel and the powerful monarchs of enemy nations are male. The only queens around are ornamental beauties giving homage to kings. A recurring image of the helpless human is the widow. An individual human, whether a good tree or a bad tree, is in Hebrew a "he." In this androcentric universe, life is a human pyramid topped by a male deity who appoints

a son as sovereign to dispense the goods of nature and culture to the men who in turn care for women and children. Read any book of ancient history: this worldview is the same old boring worldview we encounter around the globe in most ancient cultures that developed out of subsistence living into complex city-states. It is paramount for us to realize that this androcentric worldview is challenged by the Israelite revelation that God is not sexually male and that God raises the slaves and the widows to the heights. Thus not only the Christianity of the incarnation, but also the tradition of the Exodus, must respond critically to the psalter.

Let me bring you this data. My daughter is a philosophy major at Swarthmore College. I am not surprised that all her friends at such an elite school hold gender equality as a cardinal doctrine of their life. However, I teach religion at a university filled with students from working-class Republican Roman Catholic homes. My students have worshiped weekly all their lives, and many attended from 8-12 years of parochial schools in what is an extremely conservative diocese. Yet also these 20-year-olds believe with deepest personal conviction that God views men and women as equals. Many of them assert, out of stunning ignorance of the gospels, that Jesus taught gender equality, and nearly all of them scorn their denomination's practices of distinguishing men from women in church leadership. Thus, whether we like it or not, it is apparent that a large number of young Americans believe in equality between the sexes as fervently, if not more, than they believe any article of Christian faith.

I agree with those who judge that the idea that men and women are equal is one of the several most revolutionary ideas in human cultural history. I assume that some cultures will adopt this idea, and others will reject it. I further assume that in those societies that adopt it, monumental changes over several centuries will be required in order to shape culture to this new idea. But if I am correct that more and more young people in North America accept this idea as one of the few human truths and that the consequent changes are already beginning, then androcentric religious language is no small matter, usually glossed over, easily explained away, its detractors ignored or, worse yet, maligned as heretics. There are, of course, those Christians who believe that God approves of androcentrism. But I am not Amish. I do not judge Christianity to be irretrievably wed to an androcentric worldview. If it is, many of my students will have no difficulty choosing gender equality over medieval faith. They are taking their gender values and walking right out of the church. The task before us is momentous. An enormous part of our traditional worship language is androcentric. We cannot mindlessly copy this aspect of our historic vocabulary, but we must work away, decade after decade, toward an equivalent language that makes accessible to this culture a merciful God.

An Example

Psalm 46 provides us with an example of each point I have covered. The psalm is about God, our refuge and strength, our help in trouble. The psalm laments the tumultuous state of life on earth, its earthquakes, its upsets, and its wars. Yet the psalm praises: it hears the voice of God and praises the God who both saves and destroys. The language is fully communal. Not only are the disasters national and natural, beyond the personal, but the voice of praise is plural. The language is metaphoric. That God will break the spear assunder imagines God a tribal leader like Agamemnon at the battle of Troy. Surely for even the observant Jew of Jesus' day, these words must have functioned as metaphor, for God was in fact not breaking apart the spear of Rome.

Psalm 46 exemplifies also the problems of psalter speech for us. The image of the river flowing out from the temple of the city is unintelligible to many worshippers. Indeed, the terms "the LORD of hosts" and the God "of Jacob" rely on the words Yahweh, Sabaoth, and Jacob, each of which has a complex history of meaning, first for the Israelite worshipper, and later in a different way for the Christian. Finally, this psalm assumes an androcentric worldview. God is a he, uttering a royal command from on high, with autocratic power over all the hierarchical world. As well, the city is a she, a Canaanite goddess of human nurture and habitation who has evolved into a city in which God dwells, just as the female anatomy embraces and surrounds the erect male within. The sexual imagery may embarrass some, but that is not the biggest problem. In case you have not checked a recent dictionary, the word "city" in contemporary American English is not a feminine noun.

May I say a word especially to Lutherans in this room. This fascinating and complex interplay between biblical speech and liturgical language ought not be troubling to a Lutheran. Martin Luther was not a fundamentalist, mindlessly sanctifying each word in the Bible. He was a critical scholar of the Scriptures, not as the contemporary academy judges criticism, citing dates of original authorship and the history of redaction. Rather, he was, much more to our purposes, a critical liturgical scholar of the Scriptures. He asked: how could the Bible best preach the word of grace to the faithful? What obligation rested on the leaders of worship for biblical explication? Which books of the Bible showed forth Christ well, and which poorly? We see him answering some of these questions when he versified Psalm 46, appropriating its metaphors for their contemporary meaning. Although our task is endless, it is not new.

In conclusion, the psalter has always been and continues to be the prayerbook of the church. By praying ancient words, the church understands that its present is described in language from the past and its future imagined in terms from the past. Yet the words from God are always about surprising grace: the Word who is Christ is alive today, and our baptism raises us to new life daily. The structures and strictures of the past, even

the vocabulary that compartmentalizes our brain, are blown down by the breath of God's Spirit. If in your religious world various angry deities are vying for attention, the psalm proclaims one merciful God above all. If in your social order warring tribal armies terrorize the poor, the psalms promise a new time of peace and communion. If our people face famine or earthquake, God will give wholeness beyond nature. If the Hebrew psalm praises our king as the best one around, Christians remind one another that an itinerant prophet has realigned the universe. The psalms use old words, and we repeat them, century after century. But the psalms speak of new life in God, and thus encourage us at our Sunday worship to write our prayers and choose our hymns and craft our preaching in such a way that our words, inspired by a living God, will embrace us with divine mercy. May God's Spirit of wisdom enable us to accomplish our task.