

## Lenten Liturgies

One of the joys of serving this congregation is Good Shepherd's long-time commitment to theological diversity. That commitment is one of the things that first excited me about being in touch with the search committee more than four years ago and seeing it lived out is just one of the things that continues to make me proud to be your pastor. Of course, that same diversity is one of the challenges of serving this congregation. We've come together from such diverse backgrounds that it's sometimes tricky to find an approach to talking about our faith that's going to ring true for everyone or even to select songs and hymns that are to everyone's taste. I hope I touch on enough different approaches and styles over time to include everyone. If you feel that your own sensibilities are being particularly shortchanged, I hope you'll let me know in the spirit of love and fellowship that also characterizes this church family.

The challenge of leading this diverse group in worship has been much on my mind this week as we begin the season of Lent. For those of you who were raised Lutheran or Episcopalian or Roman Catholic, an increased focus on liturgy and ceremonial rite during this season may seem as natural and comfortable as an old pair of shoes. For those of you, like me, who have been Baptist since Cradle Roll, or from another Evangelical background or from no church background at all, the sudden influx of candles, ashes and communal confession may seem foreign and disconcerting.

But truth be told, even we Baptists have our own revered liturgies and ceremonies. We just don't call them that. We speak of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper but we also expect our worship services to flow in a certain way, even if we don't think of them as having a formal litany. Baptist churches all over the country have the tradition of a mid-week meal which, save the omission of wine or grape juice and words of institution, takes us closer to New Testament practice in some ways than the more formal ceremony we will enact in a few minutes. Even in the most non-liturgical of congregations, there are always certain things that we do that we have come to think of as "THE" way to do things, the way to help us more easily make our connection with God.

As a long-time student and observer of and participant in rituals, primarily those of church and theatre, I am convinced that there is something in the human soul that hungers for such moments of shared, heightened reality. We look to ceremony to draw us together and we look to ceremony to draw us upward. Repetition of age-old words and gestures links us to generations gone by as well as to our fellows in the here-and-now. They help us find our place in the world while reminding us that there is a greater reality than the work-a-day world which absorbs our attention and energy on most days. Providing that connection with the greater beyond helps keep us humble in the face of our often over-weening self-absorption. One of the Christian women who lived as a hermit in the deserts of Egypt in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, Amma Syncletica, observed "we need humility the way ships need nails."

And so, it seems right to me to continue to weave ancient liturgies or their modern equivalents into our normally rather casual worship style here at Good Shepherd. There are some things I'm not likely to try. I won't, for example, hang a sign over the entrance to our sanctuary to match those I remember from years gone by, saying "The Lord is in His holy temple – let all the earth keep SILENCE." This is neither the time nor the place for such enforced formality. But I will offer a judicious sprinkling of ancient practices into our post-modern context – after all, most of

## Lenten Liturgies

us here started our Christian journey with a ceremony that has its roots in the oldest practices of religion – baptism – and together we celebrate another ancient ritual on the first Sunday of every month. Not the Food Bank appeal, which only seems to have been with us forever, but the tradition of the Lord’s Supper.

Before I say more about those two central ordinances of Baptist life, I do want to review the Lenten tradition, both for those who grew up without it and for those who’ve forgotten what all the fuss was about. The season of Lent is a practice which dates to very early in the history of Christianity. In the days before infant baptism became the norm in the Catholic Church, when all baptisms were of adult believers, baptisms happened on Easter to symbolize the new Christian’s joining Jesus in resurrected life. For forty days prior to baptism (not counting Sundays), the candidate was to fast and pray, matching the forty days that Jesus spent fasting and praying in the wilderness prior to beginning his ministry. Eventually, the practice of observing the forty days before Easter as a time of fasting and prayer was extended to all Christians in recognition of the fact that sin continues to mar our lives even after baptism and separates us from our Loving God through guilt and shame or unearned self-righteousness. The continuing need for repentance even for faithful Christians was recognized by Abba Macarius, a predecessor of Amma Syncletica in hermitage in the Egyptian desert, who said, “Lift your hands to heaven, asking, ‘Forgive me, Lord.’ If you’re still anxious, pray, ‘Help me.’ You really don’t need to say much. God knows our needs. His mercy is never tardy.”

But as much as we may identify the season of Lent with penitence and renunciation, it’s also important to remember its positive aspects. The word “Lent” comes from the ancient English word for spring, *lencten*, a word that reminds us that the days are lengthening and that life is returning to fields and forests. Likewise, as Carmen Acevedo Butcher wrote for “Christianity Today” this week, we should remember that this season, which begins in ashes and ends in the triumph of Easter, represents “that the slow, wonderful lengthening of this season in our souls can signal an end to a winter of bitterness and the flowering of Christ’s love in us.” Lent is to be a time of spiritual growth just as spring is a time of natural growth. It’s particularly easy for me to focus on that aspect of Lent as I lead three of our middle-schoolers in a study of baptism and the faith this spring.

Baptism, as I mentioned earlier, is one of the two great ordinances in the Baptist tradition along with the Lord’s Supper, so called because the two observances were ordained by Christ as actions to be performed by his disciples. In a curious way, baptism both unites and separates us from our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. We Baptists, as a general rule, hold to the divine inspiration of the Bible and its authority as a guide for knowing God, so like all Christians we affirm the words of Paul to the Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Like all Christians, we are baptized but we are not baptized like all Christians. It was the point of baptism for believers rather than for infants that separated our Baptist and Anabaptist forebears from the rest of those in the Protestant Reformation who had already separated themselves from the Church of Rome. Our insistence upon this point and upon the practice of total immersion has made us, in the words of I Peter 2:9, “a peculiar people,” set apart even among those who are set apart. Our understanding of Baptism holds us together as Baptists as little else does, even as it divides us from the rest of the Body of

## Lenten Liturgies

Christ with whom we claim one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one God and Father of us all.

Likewise our stance on the Lord's Supper both unites us and divides us. For myself, I will always choose to focus on the unifying aspects of the ceremony, particularly on such days as World Communion Sunday or Maundy Thursday or during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Whether we believe in transubstantiation, consubstantiation or memorial, whether we use wine or grape juice, leavened or unleavened bread, wafers or "Baptist Chiclets," I believe that participating in the Lord's Supper is indeed a reminder of the communion that we share not only with God in Christ but with each other and with Christians around the world and through the ages. Still, we must admit that differences in practice and in belief do separate us as Baptists from the rest of the Body and even within the Baptist family from each other. Some of us grew up in congregations that practiced "closed communion," with participation in the Supper restricted to those who had been baptized as members of that local church. Some Baptists continue that practice today. Different churches in our tradition have different understandings of the role of children in this rite and some of us reflect those differences even now. I suspect that the depth of separation we are willing to let these differences create between ourselves and other believers has a correlation with the degree of separation we experience from God, who loves all people as a mother loves her children.

But Lent, it seems to me, gives us another perspective on these ordinances. In considering the forty days of Lent, we often find the metaphor of a journey to be useful – I've used it myself. As we think of Lent as a journey towards the cross and then to Easter, as we think of the whole of the Christian life as our own progress towards death and resurrection, then baptism and the Supper and the differences we experience in them in our various traditions all fall into place. Baptism is the start of the journey, whenever it may come. Each of us has our own path to travel, each beginning in a different place, even if our final destination is the same. As individual as beginnings are, it is impossible that our experience of baptism should be the same. And the question of where we start fades into unimportance in view of our destination in the Realm of God or the reality of the quality of our journey. In the same manner, we may see the Lord's Supper as that periodic stop that we make on the journey for rest and refueling. Like a desert oasis, it is hallowed ground where travelers of all types come together, putting aside for the moment their differences in order to take nourishment, a foretaste of the Peaceable Kingdom, the Beloved Community.

This metaphor of the journey, its beginning and the rest on the way works for me because I think it puts the emphasis where it belongs – not on the fine points of what we may believe and how we may disagree but on how it affects the life that we live. I suspect that you agree with me – that is why we continue to commit today to what this community has embraced from its beginning, namely theological diversity. So, as we begin Lent, as we prepare to gather at the Lord's Table, as our young people begin their consideration of baptism, hear the words of Ælfric of Eynsham, an English Benedictine monk from a Lenten sermon he gave in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century: "God gives forgiveness to penitent persons and illuminates their minds with his gentle forgiveness, and afterwards he comforts them, because he is the Spirit of Comfort. The test of our love for God is that we be kind to one another. In other words, God wants us to act, so we can honor him with our good works—not by naked words alone—because love is shown through

## Lenten Liturgies

action. If love isn't willing to work, then it isn't love.” May God grant each of us penitent hearts, comforted spirits and loving actions in these Lenten days and in all the days to come. Amen.