

THE ROAD WHERE FAITH IS FOUND

DREAMS DESTROYED BY DEATH

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP • 701

LAMENT AND HEALING IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY



Bishop Stephen Kristenson writes...

We live in a broken world. I am writing on World AIDS Day, a day set aside to remember the millions of people worldwide who are suffering from HIV/AIDS, and the family members who suffer with them. We are literally assaulted every day by all the information media with news about war, rumours of war, death, famine, disease, earthquakes, floods and other human-made and natural disasters worldwide. Violence is part of our daily lives, invading even our homes, families, schools, and communities. Entertainment media glorify violence. Technology has made television and movie violence very realistic, and video games draw our youth into worlds where violence is the norm, and acting out our natural proclivities towards violence is encouraged and even rewarded.

At the same time, we in the church are confronted with an emerging culture which lifts joy to new heights, emphasizing that to follow Christ means to live in joy, peace, prosperity, and happiness. Church music and liturgical form often emphasize praise, and to worship means becoming caught up in a spirit of delight and enjoyment. This is not a bad thing. After all, Nehemiah 8:10 reminds us that "...the joy of the Lord is your strength." Many of the Psalms urge us to praise God for all God's goodness to us. But what happens when we are not feeling joyful; when we receive the diagnosis of cancer, or MS, or any other debilitating disease? What happens when we go bankrupt, or the bank forecloses on the farm that has been in the family for generations? Where do we go when physical healing has not come to us or to a loved one, or a tragedy has ripped a loved one from us?

Dr. Cam Harder of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon has done a lot of research on the farm crisis in the Canadian West, and has discovered that going to church is one of the last things a farmer wants to do when the farm has failed and will likely be lost to foreclosure. When we are hurting, we are not likely willing to come to a place where we are expected to be happy, so if that is the only mode in which we are encouraged to worship, why would we come to church?

Christians are not spared the grief that the death of a loved one brings. The pain of separation is real, and it hurts. Christian families are not immune to strife, anger or division. Divorce happens, as does alienation between parent and child, and between siblings. We may feel very out of place if we enter a worship space where the manifestation of the presence of God is only recognized in joy.

We Lutheran Christians have been given a rather unusual gift: the Theology of the Cross. We understand God to be very present even in the dark times of soul and body. Jesus' death was real, and it was for us. He entered the pain of all humanity, taking into himself all the hatred the world could muster, and put it to death with him on the cross. We acknowledge that we live in a broken world, and that our own lives are often broken. But we do not despair, even in the face of death. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." (1Thessalonians 4:13) So we grieve when we and loved ones suffer, and we need to have a place to do that within the Christian community. We need to recognize liturgically that we live in a broken world, that we are intimately connected with it, and that this brokenness affects us, and will affect us until Christ returns to make all things new.

We have had another wonderful gift as Lutherans for many years in the Service of the Word for Healing. It is printed in *Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (p. 89), but in my experience, it has seldom been used. Some congregations have discovered the power of this healing service, and offer it regularly. In my work as bishop, I wanted to include a healing service every time our pastors gathered for their annual study conference, because we all bear in our bodies the pain of the world around us, the pain in the lives of our parishioners, and our own personal and family pain. We cover this well most of the time, but we need an opportunity to lament together, and to hear a word of healing and hope that helps us face the brokenness with which we have to deal every day.

Some of the most powerful resources we have for lament are found in the Psalms, and I appreciate that *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* includes all 150 Psalms, even the ones that make us uncomfortable. Those uncomfortable Psalms are often the ones that come closest to expressing how we are really feeling about the world and God, but are afraid to actually say it. God knows how we are feeling anyway, so we might as well say it in our prayers. Psalm 22:1 may say it all. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This cry of dereliction came from Jesus' lips on the cross, and we can often identify with this cry when crises come into our lives. Psalm 139 is a powerful reminder that God knows us intimately, and that there is nowhere we can go where God is not, whether that is a physical place or a feeling. "Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also." (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Psalm 139*)

In addition to including all 150 Psalms, our new worship book also includes a healing rite in its liturgy section (*Life Passages: Healing*, p. 276), which may be incorporated into either the Holy Communion service or the Service of the Word. This service offers time to lament, to pray, to be with other Christians in times of sorrow, pain, sickness, or grief. It recognizes that we are not always happy, and that it is just fine to come into God's presence when we are angry with God and upset with what is happening in our lives. It gives us opportunity to vent all our difficult feelings in a safe environment, where we are assured of both God's love for us and acceptance of our feelings, as well as that of the Christian community. We can receive the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, and prayers for healing.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship also provides a helpful section of hymns of lament (697-704) which can be sung during a healing service or at other services when the pericopes refer to Jesus' healing ministry or to pain experienced in the lives of the people of God. Susan Briehl's hymn, *Once We Sang and Danced* (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 701) provides the title for this essay in the first line, "Once we sang and danced with gladness, once delight filled every breath; now we sit among the ashes, all our dreams destroyed by death." This hymn is based on Psalm 137 "By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." (Psalm 137: 1, NRSV) Our new hymn reminds us that we are in a tradition going back thousands of years that acknowledges that our lives are broken from time to time, and that it is important to lament in the presence of God and of one another in order for healing to take place. Jim Strathdee's hymn puts it well: "When pain of the world surrounds us with darkness and despair, when searching just confounds us with false hopes everywhere, when lives are starved for meaning and destiny is bare, we are called to follow Jesus and let God's healing flow through

us.” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 704)

Healing comes in many forms. Sometimes we experience physical healing: the cancer goes away, the bones knit together, the symptoms disappear. Sometimes physical healing does not happen, and our body or the body of a loved one continues to deteriorate until death finally takes its toll. God provides healing even in the midst of death. That is the glorious good news of the Gospel: Jesus has destroyed death. Even when death is imminent — it will come to us all at some point in our lives should Jesus tarry— we receive healing and wholeness which allows us to face death with a sure and certain hope, won for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We need to lament. We need to grieve. We need to hear over and over again Jesus’ triumph over death so that we can face the broken world in which we live with hope. Praying the Psalms, singing the hymns of lament, receiving the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil, praying for one another, receiving Christ’s body and blood in Holy Communion —all bring the healing presence of Christ into our lives. Experiencing this kind of acceptance of our own brokenness, and receiving the physical, emotional, and spiritual healing that comes only from Christ, help us to minister to those who are broken in our communities. We support those in healing ministries in our clinics, nursing homes, hospitals, and other places of care.

Another powerful way of including lament in worship is through the Good Friday liturgy which is included in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* along with the Maundy Thursday and Easter Vigil liturgies (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Lent and the Three Days*, p. 247). Good Friday is the clearest example of God’s coming to humankind in pain, suffering, and death. The bidding prayer may be used to express the lament of our particular community of faith, naming those who are suffering among us, and those who are bereaved.

While joy is certainly a hallmark of our walk with the risen Christ, we also need times to grieve and lament as we live in a world broken by sin and experience this brokenness personally. Lament clears our hearts and opens them to the healing power of Jesus which comes through the Word, the Sacraments, song, prayer, and anointing with oil.

It is my prayer that our congregations would be recognized as places of healing as we open our arms in welcome to those who are hurting and offer opportunities for lament and healing in our liturgies.

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