

## THE ROAD WHERE FAITH IS FOUND

### YOUR LOVE HAS CALLED US HERE

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP • 358

ENTERING THE MYSTERY: THE PASCHAL JOURNEY



*Lyle McKenzie & Karen Johnson-Lefsrud write...*

In 1978, *Lutheran Book of Worship* reintroduced Lutherans in Canada and the United States to the Three Days, as the “destination” of the Lenten journey and the very centre of our life together as Christian people. Today, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* brings this practice home for every worshiper by placing the rites themselves in the people’s worship book, not in a supplemental volume, and assuming the celebration of these days as the normative practice of congregations and other worshipping communities of the ELCIC and ELCA.

As we enter this Lenten season with the new and renewed resources of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, we have an opportunity to explore again the possibility of our giving shape to this wilderness journey of baptismal preparation and renewal in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the centre of our Christian faith, the focus of the Church year and what defines and shapes us as communities of Christ.

Great God, your love has called us here,  
as we, by love, for love were made.  
Your living likeness still we bear,  
though marred, dishonored, disobeyed.  
We come, with all our heart and mind  
your call to hear, your love to find.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 358, stanza 1*

### The Lenten Journey

In the early church, Lent was a time set aside to prepare candidates for baptism. It was a time of profound spiritual searching and renewal. It is no accident that Lent is tied to the old English word for “spring.” Lent is a time of renewal; of clearing out the cobwebs and debris that clutter our lives; of seeds planted to take root and grow within us, and within our communities, to bring forth fruit and new life as we journey to Easter where we will renew our baptismal vows.

*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* calls us to look at Lent as a springtime journey – a

journey of planting and sowing, of tending and renewing, a journey that may lead through dry and empty wilderness places, a journey where we will look closely at the covenant of our baptism and its centrality to our spiritual formation. Lenten hymns within *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* reflect this focus. Moving away from an understanding of Lent as a 40-day reflection on the suffering and death of Christ, to an earlier understanding of Lent as a time of preparation for baptism and, for the whole assembly, a time dedicated to the renewal of our baptismal life, the hymns help to underscore that focus. Images of journey, of the wilderness, of water, of seeds sprouting and growing abound in the hymnody.

A wonderful Canadian text by Thomas H. Cain — new to us in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* — exemplifies the journey imagery:

Eternal Lord of love, behold your church  
walking once more the pilgrim way of Lent,  
led by your cloud by day, by night your fire,  
moved by your love and toward your presence bent:  
far off yet here— the goal of all desire.

So daily dying to the way of self,  
So daily living in your way of love,  
We walk the road, Lord Jesus, that you trod,  
Knowing ourselves baptized into your death:  
So we are dead and live with you in God.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 321, stanzas 1 and 2

Images of the journey are lifted up in another Canadian offering, *Bless Now, O God, the Journey* by Sylvia Dunstan (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 326) and in the African-American spiritual *I Want Jesus to Walk with Me* (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 325)

*Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow* has been included as a Lenten offering in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, again emphasizing the people of God on a journey:

Through the night of doubt and sorrow,  
onward goes the pilgrim band,  
singing songs of expectation,  
marching to the promised land.  
Clear before us through the darkness,  
gleams and burns the guiding light;  
pilgrim clasps the hand of pilgrim  
stepping fearless through the night.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 327, stanza 1

Springtime images are found in hymns such as John Earl's *As the Sun with Longer Journey*

As the sun with longer journey melts the winter's snow and ice,  
with its slowly growing radiance warms the seed beneath the earth,  
may the sun of Christ's uprising gently bring our hearts to life.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 329, stanza 1

and in Svein Ellingsen's *Seed That In Earth is Dying*.

Seed that in earth is dying grows into ears of grain.  
Grapes that are crushed in the vessel turn into golden wine.  
God, through this mystery grant us faith in our deepest darkness,  
life in our night and death.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 330, stanza 1*

Images of the wilderness and renewal are found in hymns such as the spiritual, *Jesus is a Rock in a Weary Land* (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship 333*), *I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say* (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship 332*) and *As the Deer Runs to the River* (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship 331*).

*Christ, we come from desert places, deepest thirst unsatisfied.  
Lead us to the waters flowing from the cross on which you died.*

*Jesus, source of living water, may we drink of you and live!*

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 331, stanza 4 and refrain*

Hymns from other sections of the resource which also embody the themes of renewal, baptism, struggle (sometimes symbolized by the wilderness) may also be invaluable in the planning of a community's Lenten journey.

The liturgies themselves for Lent and the Three Days within *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* follow the foundational order of Gathering, Word, Meal and Sending, but with a different focus for each of the principal festivals. The rich symbols and actions of these days invite every creative effort and the full participation of people of all ages and with a diversity of gifts from within and outside communities. As a season of preparation and renewal, it is an ideal time to involve newcomers preparing for baptism into this foundational time of renewing the baptismal covenant for the whole congregation.

## **Lent and the Three Days**

The Three Days in its ancient observance encompassed Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday as a single act of worship and devotion. In the Jewish understanding of time, wherein the day begins at sundown, the Three Days begin with Maundy Thursday evening and proceed through to Easter Sunday evening. These liturgies are best understood and planned as a whole — the very heart of the Christian tradition. Easter Sunday is not so much the climax of Holy Week, but rather an integral part of the Three Days. Each liturgy and each day makes sense in relation to the others. To eliminate any part of this grand observance is to diminish the fullness of the expression of the heart of our faith and tradition.

## **Ash Wednesday**

Onto a forehead is etched the image of a cross; a cross of ashes: dry, dusty, and a reminder that we are frail mortal beings who will one day return to the dust of the earth. So Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten journey with the acknowledgment of our human weakness and of our need for God. The juxtaposition of the ashes and the cross remind us that even in the midst of human frailty we are not without hope — that same cross is etched onto our foreheads in the waters of our baptism. That cross is the shorthand way of identifying us as beloved children of God. In the water of life and in the ashes of death we are God's children. The stark image of human frailty and mortality is not one that is pushed aside lightly. When we place that ashen sign on the forehead of an infant, we want to shrink away and say, "Oh, but not this one. Surely not on one so young, so freshly created from the dust, the cross still

almost wet on the forehead.” At the same time, placing those ashes upon an elderly forehead often brings the clear reminder that it will not be long before words of dust and ashes are said at a graveside.

Ash Wednesday returns us to God’s baptismal promise that at the beginning and the end of life, in life and in death, we have died and risen with Christ. We are the beloved children of God.

### **Sunday of the Passion**

The forty-day Lenten journey winds its way through the dusty wilderness until we see deliverance in the fresh, green palms handed to us on the Sunday of the Passion / Palm Sunday. Exuberance and celebration mark the opening of this liturgy. The community gathers outside the worship space, —preferably outside!— as we recognize Christ as the King — the one who comes in the name of the Lord — and as we shout our hosannas, singing with abandon as we process into the worship space. But the waving palms and loud hosannas soon are hushed in the reality of where the procession leads, and as we are drawn into the story of the passion, the stark contrast leaves us sobered and deathly silent in the reality of the drama of faith that is before us.

### **Maundy Thursday**

The Three Days arrive with the setting of the sun on Maundy Thursday. A community gathers for this evening’s liturgy. Words of confession and forgiveness are offered, the opportunity for the laying on of hands is provided, and music may attend and surround this public acknowledgment of our human brokenness and our need for God’s word of grace. Candle-light marks a large table, all prepared, around which the community can gather for a meal. Prayers are said, this night’s stories of faith are shared. And in a strange but profoundly intimate action, a community is invited to wash one another’s feet as a sign of Jesus’ new commandment. The washing is completed. The Eucharist is shared in simple form around the table “on this night” which marks Jesus’ institution of the meal with his disciples and as “it was handed on.”

The meal just ended, a single voice breaks the silence, chanting the words of Psalm 22. The community, as instructed, sets about in silence to clear the table and all of the worship space of its decoration and ornamentation and finally, of its light. Worshipers, having been immersed in God’s saving love through Jesus’ offering of himself in washing his follower’s feet, and in the ultimate offering of himself in the meal and being given up to betrayal, remain in the darkness and silence to pray. Night has fallen. The community departs only to return in silence to the cross of Jesus’ crucifixion and death on the morrow.

### **Good Friday**

At the heart of the Good Friday liturgy is the cross of Christ which is for us the tree of life. On Ash Wednesday the baptismal promise of resurrection was etched onto the frailty of human mortality with dust on our foreheads. On Good Friday the cross is lifted up as a sign that life is found in the midst of death. In this quiet gathering, we share the story of Jesus’ passion and death. A single clear voice may be best for its proclamation. Whatever is done, let it serve to tell this story with all its terror and power for us; but never without hope.

Note that we do not wait for Easter Sunday to proclaim that death does not hold the last word for this cross. On this tree of life Jesus brings healing and new life to the world. The procession of the cross, the central action of the liturgy, draws the community to “Behold the life giving cross, on which is hung the Savior of the whole world.” The hymn: “*There in God’s Garden*” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 342) can

be particularly meaningful to conclude the Good Friday liturgy. Last year, in our parish, children and youth from the congregation beautifully and artfully danced a garland of simple greens to the large, rough-hewn cross that had just been processed and placed before the assembly. The garland was draped around the cross — a sign of life arising from the dry and rough surface of the cross. These are the words we sang:

There in God's garden stands the Tree of Wisdom,  
whose leaves hold forth the healing of the nations:  
Tree of all knowledge, Tree of all compassion,  
Tree of all beauty.

Thorns not its own are tangled in its foliage;  
our greed has starved it, our despite has choked it.  
Yet, look! It lives! its grief has not destroyed it  
Nor fire consumed it.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 342, stanza 1 & 3*

## **Vigil of Easter**

A worship festival with a full gathering rite from outdoor fire to candlelight proclamation; a series of four to twelve or more readings with various sung and spoken responses and possibly a sermon; a celebration of the sacrament of Baptism or affirmation of Baptism with the whole assembly; a procession of everyone gathered carrying with them all the elements of worship that were removed on Maundy Thursday —and more!— to adorn the Easter celebration of the Holy Communion around the table of our resurrected Lord — these, together, comprise the great Vigil of Easter.

It can seem a daunting and overly lengthy undertaking for a community the eve before other large and involved Easter celebrations. Do we assume this to be a gathering only for the most liturgically committed and not appropriate for the very young or elders? Quite the opposite can be true, if we see this feast of worship as the great drama of God's saving humanity and all creation that it is, with all the assembly as actors in it; and each, from the very young to the elders, having a central role to play that contributes to the whole. The list can be long for Easter worship roles and can range from fire-preparers to candle-lighters, to story tellers, to bearers of the elements of worship, to musicians and to other assistants of every sort. Still, to embrace people of all ages and stations in a parish (or as a joint effort of combined communities) for this night's celebration is to mirror God's gracious and central act of salvation.

Every role needs to be considered creatively. This is a night to celebrate light from newly struck fire to a growing candle-light that bathes everyone and everything. Tea lights are readily available and safe so that literally hundreds of lights can burn with the light of Christ rising in our midst.

The readings for this night are the great stories of the family of faith. This can be an inter-generational story-telling time. It is difficult to imagine —and would be unfair!— having children sit through twelve long and sometimes difficult-to-understand readings. How important it is to remember that this is a night for the telling of stories, as opposed to the reading of lessons. Imagine the Creation story being told by an elder; the Flood story being told with a toy or flannel-graph Noah's ark; the Exodus story being acted out over a rustling blue tarp of water; Ezekiel's vision of dry bones illustrated with a real skeleton from the university anatomy department; the story of the fiery furnace told with the sound effects of musical instruments and the crackle of red cellophane. These are only a few of the possibilities for expressing the joy and wonder of these stories on this night. Is this taking them too lightly? No, of course not! It is

celebrating that these stories continue to live in us by God's Spirit. These are *our* faith stories and this is a night for the telling of *our* stories. Ways that bring these stories to life for the very youngest among us to the very oldest is part of what makes this a much anticipated evening in the life of our parish.

From our storied lives of faith to storied waters of Baptism, this, like no other night is a night for celebrating Holy Baptism. The culmination of baptismal preparation through Lent for those who are new to the faith, joined with the Affirmation of Baptism of the whole assembly, unfolds as a dry font is filled with water, the Prayer of Thanksgiving is proclaimed and all are touched, splashed, immersed in the water of life — joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to life everlasting.

The Vigil of Easter is a journey of faith and movement is a natural part of the gathering. The paschal candle serves to lead the assembly from the outdoor Easter fire to the place of the stories, to the font, to procession of the whole assembly with cross and Bible and bread and wine and paraments and linens and everything required for the feast, to the table of our Lord.

On this night we live the great mystery of faith, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." The feast of bread and wine, of the body and blood of Christ, is the culmination of our Easter proclamation and celebration that "Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed." even in and through us. The Vigil concludes with the blessing of God for God's people joined to the death and resurrection of Christ. In our parish, the children return outside to the Easter fire following the vigil to roast marshmallows, a sweet ending to a glorious evening! The Vigil service, well-celebrated, has us departing a little smoky, a little wiser, a little wet and certainly well-fed by the extravagant grace of God.

## Easter Sunday

Exuberant from the celebration of the paschal mystery, we wake to the morning and to the empty tomb and to all of the richness of the continuing celebration that marks the Feast of Easter. Alleluias, musical extravagance, visual delight surround and underscore the words of resurrection and the meal of new life on this day of celebration. The Feast of Easter marks the lives of the faithful who have journeyed through the wilderness, experiencing growth and renewal, who have walked through the flood of the baptismal promise to arrive at the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen. Alleluia!

Lent and the three days, from ashes to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, lie at the very heart of our Christian faith and at the centre of our worship life as communities of Christ. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* brings the gift of these days into the yearly rhythm of the worship life of every congregation and worshipping community. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* offers and supports rich and creative ways of celebrating these days as the whole people of God. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* helps us to grow in faith together and to more faithfully proclaim *in our mission for others* the good news of new life in Jesus Christ, our resurrected Lord.

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Pastor Lyle McKenzie serves the congregation of the Lutheran Church of the Cross in Victoria, BC.

Pastor Karen Johnson-Lefsrud is the Director of Care & Social Service for the Luther Court Society, Victoria, BC.