

Planning worship in the shape of scripture

Lois H. Siemens

My stomach assembles several configurations of knots when I am asked to lead worship. In my thoughts, I look around the congregation and notice the bountiful diversity of people: the perplexing and practical, the broken and joyful, the skillful and ticklish. I panic and decide that I dare not enter the space before the congregation and presume to think that my words can help pierce their darkness, be a catalyst for change, or open the way to the holy presence of God.

Leading worship is a sacred task. I begin my preparations by asking: Where will I find the resources for this particular service?

The living word of God grounds us in a language for prayer, agitates us into God's mission in the world, and nourishes our life in community.

How will this service of worship help sustain the congregation's life of faith and mission? I turn to scripture to answer both questions. The living word of God grounds us in a language for prayer, agitates us into God's mission in the world, and nourishes our life in community. As each service is shaped with the biblical text, the sacred task of leading

worship becomes a duet with the Holy Spirit, who knows each heart and intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

This article explores reasons for using scripture in worship and some practical ways to transpose the text.

Grounding a language for prayer

I learned to pray by hearing prayers and then imitating their phrases and appropriating their images. This practice built an internal language which I could draw on for spontaneous and formal, public and private prayers. Scripture also provides a language to imitate and incorporate in shaping prayers for worship. In scripture we find ways to address God: deliverer, wonderful counselor, rock of salvation. Scripture gives us ways to picture

God's activity: reconciling, judging, and loving. We are reminded of our Christian identity and relationship with the triune God as we regularly hear covenant language in worship: beloved, chosen, forgiven. Scripture employs different kinds of language to describe relationships between God and humanity, and among us: familial language of being God's children; marital language of fidelity; royal language of kingship and servitude.

Scripture unsettles us, at times saying, "Go from your country" or "Come and see." Left to ourselves and our own words for worship, our complacency remains undisturbed and our wonder unaroused.

Because of its multilayered character, biblical language needs sign and ritual, metaphor and symbol, to help flesh it out as we communicate with God in worship. But our media-saturated culture does not form us to listen to the poetic and metaphorical prayer language of the Bible. Incorporating scripture in worship (public and private) offers us opportunity to use biblical language to explore the length and breadth, height and depth of the covenant relationship with God and others. Shaping our worship language with scripture is a long labor of love as we trust the biblical narrative to form us into a community that prays.

Agitating us into mission

"Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9).¹ God's call to Adam and Eve was a call to covenant relationship. God longs to restore creation to wholeness. The amazing thing is that we are invited to participate with God, to enter the process of reconciliation, the freeing of prisoners, and the feeding of the hungry. This invitation moves us out of our places of comfort into God's territory. Scripture unsettles us, at times saying, "Go from your country" or "Come and see." Left to ourselves and our own words for worship, our complacency remains undisturbed and our wonder unaroused.

A friend confronted me with questions: "Who is God? What is God doing in the world?" These are questions worship addresses. Our use of scripture in worship reminds us that God is working in all of creation, that God's purpose in the body of Christ moves beyond our church and community. By using covenant language in our calls to worship, prayers, and benedictions, we assert, "This is who God is, and this is how we join in God's mission."

Nourishing our life in community

We long to hear God's word addressed to us, and when this word arrives, it speaks both to the individual and to the community. Biblical texts in worship offer metaphors for our life together and remind us of our individual and corporate identity: you are my chosen people; I have formed you. As we rub shoulders with each other, we need the word to address our relationships. It is dangerous for worship leaders to focus only on biblical texts that reflect the comfortable part of relationships and omit an invitation to undertake the work of reconciliation. Community life includes both comfort and cost: fear not; repent; forgive.

Scripture recognizes a variety of ways for men and women, young and old, to encounter the presence of God in worship. Some experience God with senses and imagination; others need words on a page, contemplative silence, or rigorous study. Community is nourished when this diversity is cared for in worship.

Over time, a congregation is nurtured by scripture as we employ a broad spectrum of biblical metaphors and texts. Rooting our worship in the canon of scripture saves us from extremes of too much novelty and repetitive sameness. It also keeps worship from becoming a projection of the leader's needs and preferences. A narrow canon keeps a congregation comfortable and inhibits our ability to question.

Leading worship is a sacred task for which not everyone is suited. It requires knowledge of the biblical material, insight into congregational life, and spiritual depth. For a congregation to be fed over time in worship, leaders cannot work in isolation. Too often, we hand the task to anyone who wants to try it, and we do not guide those who volunteer. Unfortunately, many worship leaders seem to shun critical feedback and to chafe against the church's authority. As with other leaders whom the congregation recognizes, both call and responsibility need to come from the individual and from the congregation. The pastoral task is to locate those who are willing to be mentored, who love scripture, and who care about the congregation's mission and its questions.

Transposing the text

The worship leader who incorporates biblical texts into worship will find that the Bible has a historical and literary context that is

markedly different from our worship context. F. Russell Mitman suggests we borrow from the discipline of music.² Music is written in a particular key, and musicians sometimes transpose pieces to suit their voices or instruments. “So each liturgical expression in a worship service, each prayer, each response, each hymn, becomes a transposition of the text in its new context and, if crafted carefully, will retain a recognizable connection with the shapes and contours of the text.”³

Moving a text into another medium requires imagination and improvisation.⁴ Some tools I find helpful include a variety of versions of the text, a good concordance (paper or electronic), a thesaurus (an invaluable resource to stimulate one’s imagination), hymnals, and worship resource books. Knowledge of one’s congregation is another essential tool. I recommend writing out words and phrases, adjectives and verbs, questions people in the congregation are asking, metaphors or images they use. Incorporating this language adapts texts for worship to the congregation’s setting, giving the words immediacy.

I invite the congregation into worship by printing the biblical references for prayers and benedictions. These remind the congregation of the biblical context and may inspire them to look up the verses for themselves.

Sampling possibilities for using scripture in planning worship

Working with themes. In crafting a call to worship based on the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, I began with a concordance and listed explicit and implicit ways the Spirit’s action is depicted in scripture. As I read the list, I noted stories that included historically silenced voices, and I considered my congregation’s familiarity with particular stories. I chose stories that would depict a trajectory of time to connect Genesis with the present, a balance of stories about women and men, and stories that include reference to the Spirit’s work within the Trinity.

*From the beginning of time
the Spirit of God encircled the earth—
moving with God over the face of the waters at creation,
going before the Israelites in a pillar of cloud and fire
to the promised land;
interceding for Hannah as she prays for a child;*

*writing psalms;
 bringing visions to prophets;
 moving the hearts of women and men to follow Jesus;
 and coming as God's gift to us at Pentecost,
 in order to increase our access to God,
 that the church might be built, nurtured, and grow.
 The God who gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit
 is the God we have come to worship today.*

Scripture themes can also be used to portray a particular face or attribute of God, as a small portion from a reading for two voices depicts below. I used the method described above, relying on a concordance and a dictionary, and on ways we use *rocks* or *stones* in everyday speech. Then I selected stories with my congregation in mind. This kind of reading can be adapted in various ways: by adding music, changing the narrative or the refrain, weighting it more to Old or New Testament, or focusing on the good news that will be preached that day.⁵ One can do the same thing with faces of God, or with themes such as water or fire.

Reader A⁶

*Our God is a rock
 Our God is the living stone⁷*

*Take two onyx stones
 and engrave on them the names
 of the twelve tribes of Israel*

Hard work

*Our God is a rock
 Our God is the living stone*

*. . . Jesus riding into Jerusalem
 said
 If you are silent
 the stones will
 cry out*

Reader B

*Our God is a rock
 Our God is the living stone*

*Hammer and chisel
 Hard work
 And set the two stones
 on the shoulder pieces
 of Aaron's ephod
 as stones of remembrance.⁸*

*Our God is a rock
 Our God is the living stone*

cry out⁹

Working with phrases. One can take a phrase such as *brooding Spirit* and pour the image into a prayer or other element of worship.

*Holy Spirit of God,
who brooded over the chaos of creation,
brood over us,
that as we open ourselves to worship,
we will find ourselves rebirthed
into the garden of your world.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Calling the congregation to worship. The Psalms have been used in worship for thousands of years and are easily adapted for any part of the service. Some psalms use repeated phrases that the congregation can echo back. A whole psalm can be used effectively with the congregation echoing each line after the leader reads it. Using a concordance, I sometimes search for psalms that can be set alongside the good news the sermon proclaims.

The example below is based on Psalm 33. From this long psalm, I chose verses with lines that could be easily repeated, which showed the face (or identity) of God represented in the sermon. The left side of this chart shows the text and the right side suggests adaptations to fit a variety of settings.

Verses from Psalm 33

Notes on adapting the text

*Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.
Praise the Lord with **guitar and
drum, piano and strings.***

Instruments from our setting are substituted for “lyre and harp.”

*Sing to the Lord a new song;
For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all God’s **creative** work is done
in faithfulness.*

An adjective has been inserted to fit our congregational setting.

*The Lord looks down from heaven
and sees all humankind.
The Lord, the One who **designed
and created** our hearts, watches all
the inhabitants of the earth—*

Verses have been condensed to shorten the call to worship.

Verbs have been changed to reflect the good news of the sermon.

*young and married, elderly and single,
workers in the fields
and executives at their computers,*

Lines are added to locate the psalm in the context of the congregation (general enough to include everyone and specific

students in the library
and parents sorting laundry,
**those bedridden, sick at heart,
and despairing,**
the rich, the unemployed,
the grieving and the joyful—

The Lord looks down from heaven
and sees all humankind.
The Lord, the one who designed and
created our hearts observes all the
inhabitants of the earth—

So come and worship.
Wait for the Lord, the One
who is our help and shield.
Trust in God's holy name.

Let your steadfast love, O Lord,
be upon us, even as we hope in You.

enough to aid members' identification
with the words of the psalm; some
categories are included to connect
with the sermon on illness and
healing).

Verses 13-15 are repeated to reinforce
the face of God as the one who sees.
"Watches" is changed to "observes" to
give a different nuance.

The first line is added to call the
congregation to worship, reminding
them whom we are worshiping and
introducing the idea that God helps,
which the sermon will address.

The last lines act as an invocation.
The congregation could repeat them,
ending with an "Amen."

Praying with scripture. One way of praying with scripture is to use a simple form of prayer called a collect (COL-lect).¹⁰ Collects are prayers with a basic structure that can be adapted for many situations. A collect can be used as an invocation, as a bridge from one element of the service to another, or at the end of a longer prayer as a summation. Short or long, the form has myriad possibilities.

A collect prayer

Sabbath-making God,
whose vision for humanity
includes both beginnings and endings,

expand our courage to stop
even when the world pushes us
from every side,
that we may become rooted
in covenant love
in a way that offers
your extravagant hope
to the world.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Description of the form

A collect begins by naming God.
Then follows a description of the
name, which often begins with the
word "who."
Next comes a petition.

Then we state our hope for an
outcome of the petition, which often
begins with the word "that."

The collect ends with a doxology.

Another way of praying with scripture is to pray through a biblical passage. This kind of prayer is well suited for a pastoral prayer or for a prayer that closes the sermon. Using the Lord's Prayer, one can begin with the first line, "Our Father in heaven," and add one's own words to reflect the congregation's relationship to God as father or parent. Sometimes it is appropriate to read a few verses and then move into one's own words.

Other possible ways of praying with scripture include noting the structure of scriptural prayers and then writing a prayer that uses this structure. A confessional prayer using the structure of 1 John 1:5-9 might move from witness to God's character, to confession, to a statement of trust in God's faithfulness. A prayer based on the shape of Psalm 23 could begin with acknowledging God's character, proceed with testimony to God's active help in trouble and gratitude for the length of God's care, and conclude with resolution to dwell with God throughout our lives. Using Ephesians 3:14-21, one could structure a pastoral prayer that has this shape: acknowledgement of God, petition, intercession, blessing.

Many psalms and portions of scripture can be prayed directly from the text. Prefacing such a prayer with a question or words to look for, for example, can enable those in the congregation to place themselves into the scripture prayer.

Singing. Many hymn texts are adaptations of biblical texts. Most hymnals include a scripture index to assist worship leaders. Worship planners can encourage people to transpose scripture passages into hymn texts, perhaps set to existing tunes.

Offering. A variety of biblical texts can be adapted for use as offering prayers. The offering collect below borrows phrases from Ephesians 4:11-13 and summarizes the gifts included in that text.

*Gift-giving God,
whose hands are held out toward us,
piled high with an astonishing variety of gifts,
help us return a portion of our time, talent, and money,
with gratitude, to you,
that we may join with others
to build up the body of Christ,
to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
and offer practical help to bring healing and hope*

*into our broken world.
In the name of Jesus,
through whom we grow into the unity of faith
and a deeper knowledge of the Son of God. Amen.*

Benedictions. Scripture contains many benedictions. Other phrases in scripture can be adapted as benedictions. For example:

*And now I commend you to God
and to the message of God's grace,
a message that is able to build you up
and to give you the inheritance
among all who are sanctified.
You are sons and daughters of God.
You are God's beloved.
God is well pleased with you. Amen.¹¹*

Numbers 6:24–26 is easily adapted:

*May the God who desires our wholeness
bless you and keep you;
may the very face of God shine warmly upon you,
and be gracious to you;
may the countenance of the Lord be lifted up before you
in all the moments of your week, and give you peace.
Amen.*

A last word

Throughout scripture we encounter new things: new birth, new song, new heart and new covenant, a new heaven and a new earth. God continually creates, births, makes something new. As leaders of worship, we are theologians looking for what God is doing, and poets repeating ancient words and finding new metaphors to declare what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.¹²

Notes

¹ All scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

² See J. Russell Mitman's chapter, "Transposing the Text," in *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 55–94.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴ See Rebecca Slough, "Pastoral ministry as improvisatory art," in *The Heart of the*

Matter: Pastoral Ministry in Anabaptist Perspective, ed. Erick Sawatzky (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004), 186–97.

⁵ By *good news*, I mean the nugget of truth that the preacher wants to leave with the congregation.

⁶ This reading was originally written for a celebration at Peace Mennonite Church, Richmond, BC, at the conclusion of the Bethel Series, which moves through the big story of the Bible in two years. Readers each read down their column, and where readers A and B have the same words, they speak together.

⁷ Refrain based on 1 Peter 2:4.

⁸ Exodus 28:9, 12.

⁹ Luke 19:40.

¹⁰ For more information on this classic form of prayer, see Ruth C. Duck, *Finding Words for Worship: A Guide for Leaders* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 66–68; and Lois Siemens, “The Collect: A Prayer for Many Occasions,” *Canadian Mennonite* 7 (14 July 2003), 6–7.

¹¹ Adapted from Acts 20:32 and Luke 3:22 by Edwin Epp, pastor at Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, MB; used at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary Pastors Week, January 2004.

¹² See 1 John 1:1.

About the author

Lois Siemens is moving into the final semesters of her M.Div program at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN). She has been leading worship for congregations, retreats, and conferences since 1987. Her worship resources have been published by Herald Press Hymnal Subscription Service, and Abingdon Press Hymns and More Subscription Service 3 (March 2005). Living in British Columbia for seventeen years has influenced the colour and shape of her life.