



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Why and how do we sing the Psalms?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Background

While the book of Psalms looks like just like any other book of the Bible, it is quite a different book from the rest. The book of Psalms is a collection of songs that were sung by the Jewish people throughout their long history. Christians inherited these psalms and have continued to include them in worship as well as in personal devotion.

Since the book of Psalms looks like another book in the bible, it can be tempting to speak the Psalms instead of sing them. Rather, consider the Psalter more as hymnal. Then speaking a psalm is much like speaking a hymn text. While we might speak a hymn or psalm on occasion, the practice leaves much to be desired, especially when speaking a text that commands us to sing: “Sing to the Lord a new song” (Psalm 96:1). Singing a psalm can be very simple and need not intimidate even a small worshipping assembly (see below under Practice for suggestions).

A chief reason that the Psalms continue to be a rich treasury for Jews and Christians is their diversity of expression toward God and one another. In the Psalms we find ecstatic praise (Psalm 150), deep lament (Psalm 88), expressions of thanksgiving (Psalm 107) and many more postures of trust, vengeance, and joy. The remainder of the church’s song best patterns itself on the Psalms, engaging the full range of human experience in relation to God and one another.

Practice

The Psalms in Worship

We sing the Psalms in our worship:

As response to the first reading

For each Sunday and festival of the church year, a psalm is appointed to follow the first reading in the Word portion of the liturgy. That psalm serves as the sung response to the first reading, turning the themes of that reading into a prayer, and often creating relationships to the other readings for the day. Another sung response follows the second reading on Sundays and festivals, often called the Verse or the Gospel Acclamation. What is established in this Word part of the liturgy is the pattern of hearing followed by a sung response. This is a natural pattern – listening, singing, listening, singing, and listening – a pattern we receive from Jewish Temple and synagogue worship, and a pattern we inherit in the Christian liturgy from its earliest times. The psalm on Sunday mornings is not a fourth reading for the day. It functions as a biblical way to sing our thanks or petition to God in the spirit of the first reading.

As the basis of other hymns and songs

Theologian/Musician Paul Westermeyer refers to the Psalms as “the womb of church music,” noting that “the church has continually gravitated to the Psalms for the ground of its song” (*Te Deum*, p. 23). Much of the church’s hymns and songs are based on the Psalms in one way or another. Many hymns are paraphrases of the Psalms. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* contains multiple paraphrases of the beloved Psalm 23: “My Shepherd, you supply my need (ELW #782), “Shepherd Me, O God” (#780) and “The Lord’s My Shepherd (#778). “O God Our Help in Ages Past” is Isaac Watt’s paraphrase of Psalm 90 (ELW #632) and “Joy to the World” is Watt’s paraphrase of Psalm 98 (ELW #267). Scriptural reference indexes to hymns such as the one found in *Worship and Praise* have more references to the Psalms than any other book of the Bible. Hymns and songs of diverse styles and eras find resonance in both the moods (thanksgiving, sorrow, joy, etc) and images of the Psalter.

As part of Daily Prayer.

The church’s received pattern of daily prayer includes the regular use of Psalms. In fact, those who sang daily prayer in the monasteries made it a point to sing through all 150 Psalms in a week! Lutherans have made particularly good use of the daily prayer offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, in which Psalms are an important part (See ELW pp. 295-331). At Evening Prayer, we sing Psalm 141 to give voice to the idea of letting “my prayer rise before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” At Morning Prayer, some sing Psalm 95 to invite all people to “come...sing to the Lord; let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation.”

How Do We Sing the Psalms?

There are many ways to sing the Psalms. The Psalms in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* are pointed for singing to simple tones (pp. 290-291). Other tones with these same structures could also be used. Psalms included in various worship bulletins and aids are often pointed in this manner as well. Psalms can be chanted between two groups within the assembly, such as the choir and congregation, or a cantor and the full assembly, alternating between the two groups by full verse. Alternation by half verse is less successful.

Sometimes psalms might be sung with a refrain used at the beginning and end of the psalm and perhaps at various places throughout the body of the psalm itself. The refrain is often a key verse from the psalm, lifting up the main idea of the song. Then a cantor or a choir, inviting the assembly to reflect upon the sung text, sings the body of the psalm.

As mentioned above, hymnals such as *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* contain hymn paraphrases that could, on occasion, be sung in the place of the psalm. One should be judicious in this practice because many paraphrases contain only portions of the psalm. For example, “A Mighty Fortress” is Luther’s paraphrase of Psalm 46 (ELW #503-505). The paraphrase presents the sense of God being our refuge and strength (Ps. 46:1) but does not necessarily give the sense of “Be still, then, and know that I am God” (46:10).

Both children’s and adult choirs can sing settings of a psalm with or without an assembly refrain. While having the choir sing all of a psalm can be a welcome addition to worship, take care that the assembly also has opportunity to sing the psalm.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- 🔗 [How Can I Create Simple Liturgical Music?](#)

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)
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[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Psalter for Worship*, published by Augsburg Fortress. Year A , Year B, and Year C. These volumes include refrains, accompaniments, tones, instrumental parts, and vocal descants for the Psalms printed on the Celebrate and Jubilate bulletin inserts.
- 📖 *The Psalter: Psalms and Canticles for Singing.* Westminster/John Knox Press. This large volume contains all the Psalms used in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) in responsorial forms. Many of the settings in this volume

include translations with attention to inclusive language. Other biblical canticles are also included.

- 📖 *Psalms Settings for the Church Year: Revised Common Lectionary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 *Psalm Song*. Augsburg Fortress. Three volumes: Vol. 1 (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany; Item No. 0800657705); Vol. 2 (Lent, Holy Week, Easter; Item No. 0800657713); Vol. 3 (Ordinary Time; Item No. 0800657721). The collection contains 79 Psalms with responsorial refrains with piano based accompaniments by a variety of composers.
- 📖 Comer, Marilyn, ed. *Children Sing Psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. <http://store.augsburgfortress.org/store/product/3971/ChildrenSing-Psalms>
- 📖 Westermeyer, Paul. *Te Deum: The Church and Music*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998.

Other Resources

- 📖 [*The Psalter for the Christian People*](#). The Liturgical Press. *The Book of Common Prayer Psalter* emended for inclusive language. Also includes a larger essay on psalm pointing and psalm singing methods.
- 📖 Tel, Martin and John Witvliet, eds. [*Psalms for All Seasons: A Complete Psalter for Worship*](#). Brazos Press, 2012.
- 📖 Witvliet, John D. [*The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.

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