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## Preface

This little book grew out of the Mississippi Conference on Church Music and Liturgy, from Tuesday, July 31, through Sunday, August 5, 2007, at the Duncan M. Gray Conference Center in Canton, Mississippi. My faculty colleagues were Judith Dodge from St. Columba's Episcopal Church in Washington, DC, and Thomas Pavlechko from St. Martin's Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas. Pavlechko wrote a *Magnificat* and a *Nunc dimittis* for the occasion. The Director of the Conference was Ellen Johnston, Tom Lee was her Assistant who organized details and personnel for worship, James Martin taught voice, Chan Osborn De Anaya served as Chaplain, David O'Steen and Jeff McLelland were accompanists and organists, Bryan Owen presided at the concluding Eucharist, and Cliff Hill ran the bookstore. The conferees formed a fine choir and worshipping assembly, and they became stimulating conversation partners throughout the week.

A large part of my assignment with this splendid group was to spin out five lectures from the four stanzas of Susan Palo Cherwien's hymn, "Rise, O Church, like Christ Arisen," which served as the conference theme; to meditate with the conferees on 2 Corinthians 5:11-16 for Friday Noonday Prayer at about the midpoint of the Conference; and to preach at the Eucharist on Sunday at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Jackson, Mississippi. The readings for that service were from Proper 13 of Year C in the Revised Common Lectionary: Hosea 11:1-11, Colossians 3:1-11, and Luke 12:13-21. The Gradual Psalm was Psalm 107:1-9 and 43. The following chapters are edited versions of that assignment.

These reflections are not a careful exposition or analysis of the hymn by Susan Cherwien. She may not have intended what is here, and neither she nor anyone I have quoted is responsible for any of it. These are implications I have drawn from her hymn, in the light of the Biblical readings and in relation to our circumstances today. They are not ordered exactly like the hymn, but work at it from the inside out and backwards. This arrangement is not the way I began. I began by considering the four stanzas in their normal order, but the material itself pushed in another direction.

This book is about the church rising, as it does generation after generation, to take up its role in the world. To get at that rising, three themes weave their way through these pages: the nature of the church, its music, and empire. These themes are generated as much by the Biblical readings as by the hymn. They are ones I have been working on in other contexts, sometimes with colleagues, as a result of similar assignments. Some of that material is reworked here. The four hundredth anniversary of Paul Gerhardt's birth (he lived from 1607 to 1676) was another stimulus. It and the recent publication of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*,<sup>2</sup> the service book and hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, along with the content of these lectures themselves, suggested references to Gerhardt's hymns and to other ones as well.

A hymn is a little thing.<sup>3</sup> Even long hymns are little things, but this one in itself is short with only four stanzas. It was commissioned by a little church, The Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Roseville, Minnesota. I am proud to be one of its members, though I had nothing to do with commissioning this hymn for the Church's fiftieth anniversary in 1997. A little hymn like this one is a symbol of many similar hymns. A little church like Resurrection is a symbol of many similar churches. These little things bring with them explosive and far-reaching content. What is little is scorned in our period, though the question "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"<sup>4</sup> and Isaiah's vision that "a little child shall lead them"<sup>5</sup> give the lie to such scorn. A sub-theme here is the power of what is small, like a grain of mustard seed,<sup>6</sup> and the wisdom of not neglecting it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), hereafter *ELW*.

<sup>3</sup> Though the study of hymns, partly because there are so many of them and partly because of their varied genesis and structures, requires lengthy tomes like Erik Routley, ed. Paul A. Richardson, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Nathanael's retort to Philip in John 1:46.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 11:6.

<sup>6</sup> See Mark 4:31 and the parallel passages in Matthew 13:31 and Luke 13:19.

<sup>7</sup> This should not be read as an argument that small churches by definition are good. Some small churches for egocentric reasons turn themselves into self-serving power structures. They should die and be reborn to new life with others. But that is not a self-evident law applicable everywhere at all times. The empire's stronger assumption that big is always better and that statistical details should be interpreted to kill off all small churches are worse than the small church's inertia. Small churches ought to challenge the empire's even more dangerous pretensions and power structures, and the church as a whole needs the courage to resist the empire's lure.

As I was working on this material, it took on a stronger prophetic edge than I had envisioned. I do not apologize for that. For some time I have been realizing that the church musician is now being called to a particularly prophetic role. More importantly, the texts I was assigned make a prophetic edge hard if not impossible to avoid in our current historical circumstances. I do want to make the following clear, however. I assume that those who first heard these lectures and sermons and those who will now read them are seeking to be faithful in the places they are serving. The prophetic edge is directed at me as much as at them and is a necessary part of our deliberations as the church.

A word needs to be said about “empire.” Robert Hausman correctly sees that I use this term in a swampy way. Sometimes he says it means “world,” as in “the devil, the world, and our flesh.” Sometimes it is “global consumerism” and sometimes “along the Brueggemann lines of a nation state gone amuck.”<sup>8</sup> I mean all of that, mostly, I suppose, in the sense of the first two definitions driven through the last one, with “empire” implying “realm” or “domain” as Martin Marty defines it.<sup>9</sup> I am aware, as Robert Jenson says, that the church is not a “civilization” and that “if the church shares her treasures with a civilization,” she “takes the risk that instead of despoiling the Egyptians, she is inviting Egyptian chaos to despoil her: to make of her freedom, libertinism; of her art, blasphemy; of her debunking of myth, nihilism.”<sup>10</sup> She also takes the risk that the civilization as empire will try to co-opt her and, for the sake of control, turn her into a parody. That is the circumstance I think we face. At that point, as the church keeps rising to take up its role in the world, the responsibility to criticize the empire’s euphemistic pretensions cannot be avoided.<sup>11</sup>

This book is dedicated to the members of The Lutheran Church of the Resurrection who regularly discuss topics like this, seek to live them out in their lives, and do wise things like commissioning “Rise, O Church” and its original

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Hausman, e-mail correspondence, August 17, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), [p. xv].

<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “Christian Civilization,” in L. Gregory Jones, et al., ed., *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> This is allied to the problem of sacking the civilization by barbarians who have “nostalgia for the muck” (Jenson, “Christian Civilization,” in *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, p. 157). Both problems need to be attacked because of how people are treated.

tune; to Robert Hausman, their Pastor, who faithfully serves them in quietly courageous and often counter-cultural ways which reflect the essence of the Christian message; to Susan Cherwien whose hymns, life, and teaching are gentle witnesses to grace; to Timothy Strand who, when he was Resurrection's Cantor, set Susan Cherwien's words to a strong tune, *SURGE ECCLESIA*; and to William Bradley Roberts who set them to another equally strong tune called *SHANNON* for the consecration at the Washington Cathedral of Shannon S. Johnston as Bishop Co-Adjutor for the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia. I have been privileged to work with these people. My life has been nurtured and enriched by them, and much of what I have written here has been stimulated by their example.

I am grateful to Kristin Rongstad, the Master of Sacred Music Administrative Assistant at Luther Seminary, for reading an early draft of this material before the lectures were given, for reading other drafts after that, for getting the hymn tunes and accompaniments from the composers and first setting them up for the pages of this book, and for her continual advice along the way. I am also grateful to those who read all or part of the book and gave encouragement, affirmations, and permissions for quotes. These include Walter Brueggemann, Susan Cherwien, Judy Dodge, Rolf Jacobson, Ron Unger, Bryan Owen, and Timothy Strand. Roger Bergs and Thomas Pavlechko sent long and thoughtful lists of incisive questions and suggestions. One of my finest teachers, Gabriel Fackre, one of my finest colleagues, Fred Gaiser, and one of my finest pastors, Robert Hausman who is among the dedicatees, made some of the most perceptive and far-reaching comments. None of these people is in any way responsible for anything I have said here, but I am grateful for their thoughts and for the improvements they stimulated.

*Paul Westermeyer*

*August 15, 2007*

*Feast of Mary, Mother of our Lord*

# 1

## **Alleluia: The Song of the Church**<sup>12</sup>

*Alleluia, alleluia*

### **Alleluia**

A repeated *alleluia* is imbedded in every stanza of Susan Cherwien's hymn, "Rise, O Church, like Christ Arisen." This imbedded repetition points to the church's use of the word *alleluia*. If there is any word that stands at the center of the church's song and serves as its summation and symbol, it is *alleluia*. *Alleluia* comes to us not only by way of cognition, but by way of what transcends cognition. In its literal definition it means, "Praise the Lord." In its usage by the church it means that, to be sure, but it also brings with it an inexpressible vocalise of delicious vocables that embody in sound the response to what God has done and does. It stands for the ongoing doxological song of the church.

What generates it, propels it, sets it singing? Well, where is it sung? The church sings it and has sung it repeatedly when it gathers for the "meal of love and grace." Susan Cherwien's hymn is essentially about what follows that gathering and suggests the church takes *alleluia* with it when it goes into the world. That is true, but the *alleluia* also recalls and presumes the gathering. We need to

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<sup>12</sup> Portions of this chapter have been edited from the lecture "Biblical Preaching in the Context of Worship," which was part of a Biblical Preaching Kairos week at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, on February 3, 2006.

begin then with the church as it sings its *alleluia* around Word and sacraments before it scatters into the world as Christ's body which it has received.

## Word

When Martin Luther was editing the Western Mass in his Latin version called the *Formula Missae*, he toyed with the idea of putting the sermon before the Mass “since the Gospel is the voice crying in the wilderness.”<sup>13</sup> He had too much respect for the wisdom of the church catholic to do that, so he left the preached word in the context of worship at its historic place next to the Biblical readings;<sup>14</sup> but his point about the Gospel crying in the wilderness is well-taken. When he attended to the result of this proclamation, he said that “God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil.”<sup>15</sup> He continued by explaining where this leads. It leads out of the wilderness to a song. Those who believe it cannot be quiet, he said. They “must gladly and willingly sing.”<sup>16</sup> What do they sing? Partly they sing vernacular words so “that others also may come and hear it” and understand;<sup>17</sup> the song transcends understanding, however, and leads to *alleluia*.<sup>18</sup> Martin Franzmann runs out this inevitable progression in his hymn, “Thy Strong Word.” God's strong Word

- cleaves the darkness and leads to *alleluia*,
- breathes new life into those who dwelt in darkness and leads to *alleluia*,
- bespeaks us righteous and leads to *alleluia*,
- breaks forth from the cross and leads to *alleluia*—

until, just before a closing doxology to the Trinity, Franzmann is finally compelled to consider “our songs with alleluias” themselves—still, of course, before God.

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,” *Luther's Works*—hereafter *LW*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 53, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Service,” *LW* 53, p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, “Preface to the Babst Hymnal,” *LW* 53, p. 333.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Psalm 107:31-32, especially as translated in *ELW*, is another instance of this sense.

*Give us lips to sing thy glory,  
tongues thy mercy to proclaim,  
throats that shout the hope that fills us,  
mouths to speak thy holy name.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
May the light which thou dost send  
fill our songs with alleluias,  
alleluias without end!*<sup>19</sup>

Glory, mercy, hope, holiness, and light are among the gifts of God that our *alleluias* express. Taken together they push beyond words to God's gift of music<sup>20</sup> which sets the vocables of *alleluia* in motion. What might this suggest about preaching?

**1. It means that preaching is set next to the Biblical readings and the interweaving Psalmsody.**

Luther left preaching where the church has most often located it—which probably harks back all the way to the Synagogue's practice—because the Word that is preached is not the preacher's word, but the Incarnate Word which comes through the biblical witness to that Word. It is in the Word that glory, mercy, holiness, and light are found. That is why Luther along with the whole church catholic has valued the lectionary. It checks the preacher's "own ideas" and avoids sermons about "blue ducks"<sup>21</sup> or any other irrelevancies like travelogues, inner spiritual states, what pastors presume God has told them personally, or somebody's individual faith. Preaching is about what God does. That is what generates our *alleluias*, not our cleverness or lack of it. What God does is known in the faith of the church,<sup>22</sup> not in the idiosyncratic things we make up.

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Franzmann, "Thy Strong Word," *ELW*, # 511, stanza 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Don E. Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 29f for thoughts about this mystery.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service," *LW* 53, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Bergs (e-mail correspondence, August 28, 2007) asked "what if the faith of (large parts) of the church has been formed by the idiosyncratic preaching that you (rightly) warn us against?" That, of course, is always a problem, and all of our preaching is in some sense always idiosyncratic and off the mark. My point is that the faith of the church, however, is itself a gift which is not encompassed by our limited or mistaken understandings of it. Martin Luther, in *The Small Catechism*, is most helpful at this point. "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith" (*The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], p. 355).



This gravitational pull to put preaching next to the readings is part of the church's need to interpret, to proclaim, to "break open" the texts, to get at whatever it is we are reading about and considering on a given day. This need has issued not only in preaching that uses spoken words, but in singing that breaks open the Word with music. That is why

- the readings themselves have for most of the church's history been sung,
- the Gradual Psalmody between the Old Testament reading and the Epistle breaks into an even more obviously musical expression;
- the *Alleluia* and its partner the Sequence, between the Epistle and the Gospel, bring increasing musical intensity, the sparer expression in Lent minus the *Alleluia* (more about this below under *Kyrie*) underlining music's interpretive role;
- the Hymn of the Day in the Lutheran tradition runs out the logic of the Gradual and Sequence and gives the assembly an even clearer chance to respond to the Word in song that carries narrative heft;
- cantatas by Bach and all similar proclamatory expressions around the readings and sermon run farther with these traditions in choral ways; and
- preachers in some traditions, like African-American ones, do the same thing by breaking into song with their congregations by means of their hymnic heritages.

## 2. *It means preaching is not "relevant."*

We do not make the gospel "relevant" by our preaching with words or music or by anything else we do. It is not possible to make the gospel "relevant." We proclaim a message that is relevant, and we become relevant to it. It breaks and heals us. We do not break and heal it. That is to say, the church is a proclamatory community for the life of the world.<sup>23</sup> It proclaims the faith for all to hear in the most compelling ways we can conceive at each time and place, to be sure,

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<sup>23</sup> See Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (n. p.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973).

but there is no way to shoe horn it in by our cleverness.<sup>24</sup> The lessons, intervening Biblical song, hymns and cantatas that grow from them in their manifold variations, along with the rest of the liturgy, are a large part of what protects us from our silly attempts to be “relevant,” which in the end are little more than collapsing into the empire or the self. (The liturgy with its checks and balances from across the wide expanses of the church’s time and place protects us from ourselves, as I will say again shortly. Without it we have worship wars and kill each other off.) Even if we preach poorly or unfaithfully—which we do and will continue to do, the church’s meaning and message are still proclaimed in the liturgy and its *alleluias*, unless misguided leaders have kept them from the community to whom they belong.

**3. *It means that preaching is for the whole worshipping community, and it is not required to take one single style.***

Preaching attends to the biblical witness, the world, and the community who has gathered. The preacher does the best she or he can by being responsive to the faith of the church, its confessions, the world outside the church’s doors, and those who are gathered whoever they may be; but there is no one style. Every style can be broken to the Word. And that is what is at issue—being broken to the Word—which paradoxically pulls us together in an *alleluia*.

Since preaching is for the whole community in whatever style it takes, it should not be cut down to some arbitrarily pre-conceived notion of understanding, like a seventh-grade level. That not only fails the whole community, it also treats seventh graders with contempt. Children may be our most helpful guide into this topic. We have often treated them badly, either by sending them away during worship or by preaching poor “children’s sermons.” Though these moves may be well-intentioned, they are more driven by the instincts of the empire than those of the church.

Sending children away from worship treats them as a problem rather than a mystery<sup>25</sup> and drives them out of the family. Cyril of Alexandria, among others, speaks wisely when he says, “It is they [children] who, with their spiritual

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, I Corinthians 1:18-25.

<sup>25</sup> See Martin E. Marty, *The Mystery of the Child* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), p. 1.

leaping and dancing, make so beautiful this really holy city which is the Church.”<sup>26</sup> Adults at worship often cannot endure children’s leaping, dancing, and other related activity. To be sure, children who are crying too loudly or being otherwise obstreperous need to be carried out momentarily. Parents or others who care for them set limits and carry them out as necessary. Our responsibility to care for one another as a whole community includes caring for children, and worship is not a time to escape this responsibility or to assume one part of the family is unwelcome.

As to “children’s sermons,” children understand more at worship than adults are willing to admit, intellectually as well as in other ways. They, along with everyone else, deserve the heft of serious preaching, all the complexity it has to confront, and the right to grow into it. “Children’s sermons” normally treat children badly not only by turning preaching into superficial or even dishonest trivia, but also by putting them on display as objects for adult viewing. It is no wonder that children who have been treated badly like this leave the church when they become adults.

Jesus invited the children,<sup>27</sup> treated them with respect, and did not preach “children’s sermons.” We would do well to follow his example in this matter as in others.

## Supper

The church’s *alleluia* not only resounds in response to the Word. It also emerges around the table. With the Word the *alleluia*’s cognitive character is present, though transcended. At the table, cognition yields even more as it and “all mortal flesh keep silence” and stand “with fear and trembling.”<sup>28</sup> The Lord of lords comes “in human vesture, in the body and the blood,” and we receive the very self of God for “heavenly food.”<sup>29</sup> Paradoxically silence itself finally has to yield as the church on earth joins the heavenly hosts and “with ceaseless voice” cries out “*Alleluia*.”<sup>30</sup> What might this suggest about the Eucharist?

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> See Mark 10:13-16 and the parallel passages in Matthew 19:13-15 and Luke 18:15-17.

<sup>28</sup> Liturgy of St. James, translated Gerard Moultrie, *ELW*, # 490.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*