

Colleen and I gather for lunch and staff meetings each Wednesday afternoon. As we settled in this week, we discovered that we each had independently been doing research on the biblical background for why our worship services have a particular order to them. She shared with me that she discovered the Isaiah passage Jim read, and another from the prophet Nehemiah 8:1–12.

In this text the scribe Ezra gathered the Israelites together to hear the Law of the Covenant read aloud. With him were other priests, and the Levites, who helped interpret the law. The story goes that when the scribe opened the book and read the law, and the Levites interpreted the Word so that the people had full understanding, the people wept. I don't know if that was because they understood the depth at which they did not keep the law – but hold that thought. Instead the scribe said to them,

“¹¹ Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to *Adonai*, and do not be grieved, for the joy of *Adonai* is your strength.” ... ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.”

{I decided to summarize the reading, because I thought you all might get a little squirmy if Jim read three texts!}

Here in this early text, we get an understanding for the most important aspect of our gathering for worship – to hear the Word of God proclaimed, and to share in an

interpretation of it so that we may apply it in our daily lives. As the keystone, the reading of the Word stabilizes the entire structure of our worship liturgy.

Ah, and here's a word worth exploring: liturgy. It comes from two Greek words: *laos* ("people") and *ergon* ("work"), so its literal meaning is "the work of the people." One concordance notes that it originally referred to public service, but early Christians gave it a richer meaning: the shared work of God's people as they gathered to worship and live out Christ's commands.

The early church came to use liturgy to describe its public, communal worship, especially the celebration of the Eucharist. The word entered English through the French *liturgie* in the 1500s. Today, liturgy is simply the church's term for the order of worship—the shared work of God's people as we gather before God.

It makes sense, right? If our keystone is the reading and interpretation of scripture, and if we are following the call of Christ to love God, neighbor and self with all that we are, then the worship service becomes the nurturing environment which prepares us to do that beautiful work.

And with the command to honor the sabbath day and keep it holy, we are blessed with a seven-day cycle that calls us back to the liturgy to refocus ourselves on that holy work.

Alright, so Nehemiah has given us the focal point of our liturgy. How do these other texts inform us about how we best create the nurturing environment of worship? Let's stay in the Hebrew Scriptures and turn to the prophet Isaiah, 6:1–8. In our research, both Colleen and I discovered that this text is seen as perhaps the quintessential biblical paradigm for Reformed liturgy. The movement is striking: *{don't read the *headers}*

* God reveals God's holiness.

You have this mystical scene in the temple – the room is filled with smoke, and there are heavenly creatures flying around and a chorus breaks out:

“Holy, holy, holy is *Adonai*, host of heavenly beings;
the whole earth is full of (God's) glory.”

In our worship liturgy, we mark this sacred time together by lighting candles, ringing the bell, and pouring the water – it centers us in the moment and helps us focus on why we are here. Then we call ourselves into the liturgy by being reminded of God's true awesomeness, and we offer God our praise. And just as the heavenly beings broke into their version of “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,” we sing an opening hymn of praise.

* The worshiper confesses sin.

The opening scene in Isaiah appears to convey as much power and majesty as the reading of the law in Nehemiah's story. For just as the Israelites wept upon hearing the law, the young prophet falls to his knees and immediately proclaims his brokenness.

“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am (one) of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen *Adonai*, host of heavenly beings!”

This is why we move directly into a moment of seeking reconciliation with God and one another after singing the opening hymn. The prophet Micah proclaims that we are “required” to serve God by “doing justice, practicing mercy, and *walking humbly with God*.” (6:6-8) The part of the liturgy in which we confess our brokenness, calls us to humility. We can fool ourselves into thinking we have everything figured out—that we never hurt or offend others, God, or even ourselves. But deep down, most of us know better. So we follow the young prophet’s lead, bow our heads before God, and confess that we are people of “unclean lips.” We also acknowledge that we live within communities and societies marked by the brokenness of our shared humanity.

* God announces forgiveness.

Thankfully, the next movement in the prophet’s temple vision is one of cleansing and forgiveness. One of the heavenly beings flies to the prophet, touches their lips with a burning coal, and declares, “Your guilt has departed and your sin has been blotted out.” God honors our honest confession—the beauty and the brokenness we carry—and graciously removes what keeps us from living as God calls us to live. In light of the revelation of Jesus, we acknowledge that through the power of the resurrection God “burns away” the sin of human behavior that led to Jesus’ crucifixion, and the establishment of a new life where nothing “in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39) It is a moment of freedom, where the good road of following Christ’s call is wide open to us once again.

* God speaks.

In Isaiah's vision, once the prophet has been cleansed, God extends an invitation: "Whom shall I send?" Isn't that the heart of God's Word? Throughout Scripture, God calls people into a covenant of radical love and faithful living. Even when we fall back into being people of "unclean lips," God meets our honest repentance with forgiveness and renews the covenant again and again. Most importantly, God gives each of us a purpose: to bear the good news into the world.

* The worshiper responds with obedience.

So, in our liturgy, after the Word is spoken, and interpreted (hopefully to understanding!!), we are called to respond. When God asks,

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

The prophet replies, "Here am I; send me!"

I can think of several occasions, in which I have sung the beautiful setting of those words by Daniel L. Schutte – *Here I am, Lord; Is it I Lord?; I have heard you calling in the night* – and find unbidden tears welling up in my eyes, and a lump forming in my throat. I once again empathize with the hearers of the Word in Nehemiah's story. There are no words to convey the honor of being loved so deeply by God, that God wants to use the complete package of "me" to bless the world in some fashion!?! {By the way, I'm not a fan of the word "wretch" used in John Newton's *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound* – but I grasp what the author was getting at.}

Regardless, we end our liturgy, mirroring Isaiah, with the charge to go forth under the blessing of the One who claims us and calls us out.

Before we close, let me lean into the “Road to Emmaus” story for just a moment. There are a couple of vital elements worth noting. First, when the disciples of Jesus don’t recognize him in “resurrection form,” Jesus’ automatic reaction is to teach them the scriptures:

27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Once again, understanding Jesus, and understanding who we are as people of faith, begins with scripture. We MUST continually grow in understanding of what the whole story of God is calling us into!

Another important part of the story is the disciples’ openness to hearing more. They invite the stranger into their home, creating space for deeper revelation. The same is true for us: when we welcome the risen Christ into our lives, we often come to see more than we first recognized. Jesus reveals himself not only through words but through action. When he blesses and breaks the bread, the disciples are carried back to the Last Supper, where he gave the bread as his body. That familiar act reaches beyond their minds to their hearts, and in that moment they recognize the risen Christ.

The room in Emmaus was just as hallowed as the smoky temple of Isaiah's time. The disciples sensed that, like the prophet, they were being sent with a purpose.

Immediately they left the house, traversed the seven miles from which they'd come, and delivered the good news that not only was it true that Jesus was raised from the dead, but that the Christ appeared to them in the breaking of the bread. And to this day, that sacrament is one of the ways we respond to the Word proclaimed, propelling us into the world to bear the Good News.

Gathering – Word – Sacrament – Sending.

Next week, we'll begin exploring each element of the worship service and the many ways it can foster fertile ground in our hearts for God's Word to take root and bear fruit.