Guest Editorial

Before the Commandments Were Written, There Was Singing

Amy Schifrin

ABSTRACT: In the liturgies of the church, generation after generation have been drawn into the foundational events by which God's promises have been made known in the Holy Scriptures through a performative doxological eucharistic hermeneutic that is fundamental to the shape and function of Word and Sacrament worship practices. This editorial essay reflects upon the Ordinary of the historic Mass, the Proper Prefaces, and the development of hymnody as the eucharistic *ordo* sings the scriptures doxologically. The ritual performance of the eucharistic liturgy that leads to the canonization of the scriptures and the canonization of the patterning of the *ordo*, brings the living Word of God repeatedly into the eucharistic assembly. As the church gathered in the Triune name experiences the presence of God where he has promised to be, it is unified in its life as *homo adorans*, for such a glorious sounding leads the assembly forward in faith to their final destination, the heart of God.

Before the commandments were written, there was singing, dancing, praying, and the retelling of life-giving stories. There were events through which people received the presence of God in His majesty and mercy, which brought about both awe and liberation. They could have died, but like the first human who was formed from the dust and received the breath of life in his nostrils, they found themselves breathing. Remembrance, and repeated expressions of the remembrance of such events (anamnesis), grew as ritual enactments in word and sign led to the conjoined forms of the holy scriptures and the patterning of the eucharistic *ordos*. Both of these structures developed forms of canonization in the 4th century. The liturgy, as the place for the public reading and chanting of texts, became a performative doxological eucharistic hermeneutic for the decisions as to what would be included in the canon. Within the sounding of these remembrances and their proximity to the Eucharist the assembly received the scriptural words as canon, true witnesses to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Before the commandments were written in stone, Miriam sang. As she voiced in the most joyous way that God had saved her and her people from drowning in the sea, being slaughtered by riders on horseback, as well as from the hunger and exhaustion of forced labor, she led the women in an exuberant proclamation of praise and thanksgiving through song, dance, and timbrel. My Lord, what a sight they must have been; what a sound they must have made! In that moment, Miriam was the quintessential *homo adorans*, giving glory to God with her whole being and leading others to join in such stunning praise.

About three months later, the Commandments were given on Mt. Sinai. This is how we hear of the event being recalled in the Book of Exodus. Then, when the scriptures were at last written down, after having been passed on orally/aurally for a number of centuries, we see/read and, more pointedly, hear in the first commandment an echo of Miriam's act of devotion to the one God who is who He is, and who promises to be where He has promised to be. *Promissio*… and he has promised to be *with us*, Emmanuel!

In event, remembrance, elaboration, translation, ritualizing, script, the passing of generations, the correlation of ancient events within later contexts, and the sounded remembrances of what we know in our bones, having heard it while even yet in the womb, (think of the baby Jesus hearing Mary's voice as she sang the Magnificat), the church in its birth within Judaism still sings God's promises to be where He has promised to be, doing so with all those whom He has created in His image and likeness. For God has made the human race to be stewards of one another and of this world that He loves so dearly.

We might think of it in this way: a kairotic event happens, God making Himself known to a person or to a people, leading to the broad category of prayer on the part of those who have had such an encounter. This prayer can be anywhere on the spectrum from lament to praise since the recipients of such a divine experience can run the gamut from overwhelming terror to uncontainable elation. There is a desire within the human heart to both remember and to voice that experience in relationship to the source of this divine power at the same time as we express such feelings to the community in which we dwell. We seek to communicate that we have, in some way, received from the creator of this unexpected experience what was hitherto unknowable.

In the new and now rightfully ordered desire to communicate with the one who may yet be revealed as God, the participants/recipients use their voices to cry out in whatever language is in their hearts, leading to an invocation, a supplication, or even a sigh too deep for words, trusting that such divine power will be benevolent. *Have mercy on me, O Lord, have mercy*…. Over time such prayers take on a pattern that can be repeated long after the initial kairotic experience. That pattern includes a spectrum of prayer genres that are intertwined with elements of narration. It is from such a pattern, one that is defined by actions that are accompanied now by words spoken or chanted, that the nascent community's

rituals arose. And it is from the desire for such rituals to be repeated that what we come to know as holy scripture emerges, develops, and spreads from within this ritual frame. Mirroring God's cosmic design, these rituals are patterned with repeated events of remembrance, hope, and faith that lead to the formation and strengthening of a new community, a community whose identity is rooted in the one God whose promises are trustworthy and true. Each Christian community or group of communities develops distinctive yet often broadly recognizable rituals, whether a community's self-description would be in a sacramental/liturgical, free church, or somewhere in-between. In each enclave, the rituals that one receives by which one is grafted into the community are the patterning by which the assembly makes meaning out of human existence *coram deo*. Through the assembly's rituals, each of us experiences why we were made for love, for mercy, for joy, for praise, and for community.

St. Paul's correspondence with individual congregations could be copied and shared with other assemblies as they gathered "for supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings/*eucharistia*" (1 Timothy 2:1). As early as C.E. 150, Justyn Martyr's work tells of the memoirs of the apostles and the workings of the prophets being sounded in the eucharistic assembly to bring the assembly to that same act through which Cleopas and his companion's eyes were opened in the breaking of bread (Luke 24). Implicitly, a new layer of meaning is brought forth by a text or memoir's ritual placement. "Private" readings of sacred texts could not have been easily imagined, as the readings were given their status constituent of the eucharistic rite enacted and enfleshed in the gathered assembly. The texts themselves were being given an identity as the Word of the One who said "I am" through their proximity to the breaking of bread in the earliest eucharistic liturgies. The writings that formed the canon of the New Testament were those that were voiced as the early church came together to give thanks (*eucharistia*) following the pattern of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, a pattern that has its own roots in the worship of the first temple along with the paschal remembrance of the Seder that was the custom of Jesus in his public ministry.

In the life of the church, the Word's home is in the eucharistic *ordo*. By the 4th century, the shape of the liturgy grew into a continuous conversation between the performed (usually sung) scriptural and historic texts of the ordinary of the mass (*kyrie*, *gloria*, *credo*, *sanctus*, and *agnus dei*) and a cycle of scriptural lessons, spoken/chanted and heard, that become the scaffolding of the doxological catechism that comes to us in the liturgical year. It should not be a surprise to us that our reverence for the witness of the Holy Scriptures was born and nurtured in a doxological frame through which the Holy Spirit binds the people to the Word incarnate. Using a model of Eucharistic praying as far back as *Apostolic Tradition*, we hear, "Remembering, then, his death and resurrection, we lift (*offerimus tibi est*) this bread and cup before you, giving you thanks that you have made us worthy to stand before you and to serve you as your priestly people. And we ask you: Send your Spirit upon these gifts of your church; gather into one all who share this bread and wine; fill us

with your Holy Spirit to establish our faith in truth, that we may praise and glorify you through your Son Jesus Christ" (Eucharistic Prayer IV, LBW). Such a sacrifice of praise is how the assembly responds to God's self-giving.

For Christians, this unity of Word and Sacrament continually reinforces the identity of the gathered assembly in defining who they are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the created world. Such ritual enactment also tells the participants how they will be guided as they journey through any and every wilderness. This journey is now marked by an eschatological sense of direction that connects the baptized as the body of Christ to the marriage supper of the Lamb, when joy will lead us from promise to its glorious fulfillment. Such a vision has the power to shape our attitudes towards a common liturgical life. With the Risen Christ ever present ("Join our prayers with those of our servants of every time and everyplace and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes again"), we are moved again and again from death to life. The Word of the Lord coming to us through the appointed lections, preaching, prayers, and hymnody, as ordered through the Mass and professed in the assembly's acclamation that "Christ has died, Christ is risen. Christ will come again," is how God, who is ever-present, is making Himself known for us.

The language of the scriptures (for the writers of the New Testament authors, the Old Testament was their scripture) and the ritual and calendar of synagogue and temple shaped how the church sought to express and receive God's presence. The assembly, gathered in the name of the Holy One who ruled the universe, was the place (think *Gnadenstuhl*/mercy seat) from which they received the language of the Lord God, the language of doxology that formed their doxologies. Through the sounding of the Word of the One, whose mercy and presence knew no end, the yet fragmentary scriptures were received through the vocalizing of chant, song, and speech of humans made in the image and likeness of God. When they prayed and sang and danced…and loved in memory of Christ's command to "Do this," they endured through occupying forces, terror, imprisonment, and at last, martyrdom. Death has no dominion over this community, a community that has been converted, not in the triumphalist way that conversion is now spoken of as when a Jew comes to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but in an existential conversion from violence to suffering love, like Paul on the road to Damascus (Act 9: 1-22). This community is now being gathered in the name of the One who, risen from the dead, lives and rules eternally.

The ritualizing that forms the ordinary of the mass, seasonal propers, growth of appointed lectionaries, and hymnody carry us through the church year as a doxological catechism, which is imbued with the power to give us strength to walk into every new day. We cry for mercy in the *kyrie* in solidarity with all those who live in fear, guilt, isolation, or shame. From the echo of the prophet Isaiah in the face of the Assyrians (Is 33:2), and King David, whose sins are now known to all (Psalm 51:1), and the lepers on the road, who had no earthly hope of living with the larger

human community (Luke 17:11-19), we cry out in the *kyrie* for that mercy which only God can fully give. We sing with the angels of every age in the *gloria*, praising the God who laid the foundations of the earth (Job 38:7) as we simultaneously praise God for the birth of the Emmanuel (Luke 2:13). We lift our eyes with the psalmist as we confess a historic yet living *credo*, recalling the One who created heaven and earth (Ps. 121:1) and the Son of God, crucified and Risen, and the breath of the Spirit (John 20:19-22;26-28) along with the works of the Spirit in whom we are formed as we were cleansed in the baptismal waters (Mt. 28:19-20). We bow deeply, just as Isaiah had taught us to do in the *sanctus*, through which our whole bodies receive again the resonance of the *gloria* as we confess the true name of the Triune God, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isaiah 6:3). Only then, as our eyes are opened in the breaking of bread, do we come to understand a ram in the thicket (Genesis 22:13) as John the Baptist had understood it (John 1:29) when we sing the *agnus dei*. It's all there for us, week after week, Sunday after Sunday. God, through the doxological performance of his Word, makes himself known to every generation.

Between the *sursum corda*, in which even the voices of Boaz and Ruth are remembered (Ruth 2:4), and the *sanctus*, which gives us multiple to reasons to bow (as in a dance move) before the LORD not only through Isaiah but also Psalm 118 and its later appearance in Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we come to the proper preface. The preface directly relates to a liturgical season or festival day, explicitly giving us a biblical text that sounds the performative doxological eucharistic hermeneutic that helps us understand the appointed texts that have been proclaimed. This is done in the same manner by which Jesus told of all that happened in Jerusalem in that holiest of weeks. Just as the with the Prayer of the Day (the "Collect"), which precedes the texts, collects the thoughts of our hearts and calls us to attention to the proclamation of the biblical texts soon to be heard, the preface links that which has been proclaimed to the breaking of bread by which our hearts will also be broken open to receive the presence of the One who is right where He has promised to be.

Each preface opens with an expansion of the last versicle of the *sursum corda*: "It is right to give [Him/our] thanks and praise" in such a way that the assembly is led to give thanks and praise when its voices are joined to the seraphim and cherubim in the *sanctus*. The preface will echo and expand the congregation's response, whether "it is indeed right and salutary" or "it is our duty and delight," for those who want to hear a little law/gospel dialectic before we are given the words of a particular witness to a foundational *event* recorded in the scriptures. Through the prefaces, we are repeatedly grafted into the salvific events that are witnessed to in the written scriptures, which are, in so many ways, the holy residue of the speaking of God.

In his "Sermon on Christmas Day," John Donne once wrote that "His birth and death but were one continual act, and his Christmas-Day and Good Friday are but the evening and morning of the one and same day." If we examine the prefaces, we

are woven into this unified thread that carries us from conception to ascension and then to the Holy Spirit alive in the whole earth. Every preface is woven through with connected threads, both implicitly and explicitly, which tie us to the confession of faith in the historic creeds.

In the words of Prosper of Aquitaine, who, in his argument against the semi-Pelagians in the 5th century took 1 Timothy 2:1 for his inspiration of *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, we learn that what is prayed is what is and what has been believed. These prefaces date back to the Gregorian and/or Gelasian Sacramentaries that were codified in the 6th and 7th centuries. The following five prefaces for festival days, some of which are also used seasonally, come into English through Cranmer's translation, with a bit of editing. Each preface is addressed to the Father, then is centered by showing forth by the Son, and, while not named explicitly, is emboldened to be sung in the power of the Spirit. Each one opens in the same manner: "It is indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and places offer thanks and praise to you, O Lord, holy Father, through Christ our Lord." Here, they are presented together so we can hear what John Donne bequeathed to the church in defining all that has happened to our Lord as evening and morning of the one and same day.

Christmas

…In the wonder and mystery of the Word made flesh you have opened the eyes of faith to a new and radiant vision of your glory; that, beholding the God made visible, we may be drawn to love the God whom we cannot see…

Easter

…But chiefly we are bound to praise you for the glorious resurrection of our Lord; for he is the true passover Lamb who gave himself to take away our sin, who by his death has destroyed death, and by his rising has brought us to eternal life. And so with Mary Magdalene…

Ascension

…who, after his resurrection, appeared openly to his disciples and, in their sight, was taken up into heaven, that he might make us partners in his divine nature…

Pentecost

…who rose beyond the bounds of death and [on this day] as he had promised, poured out your Spirit of life and power upon the chosen disciples. At this the whole earth exults in boundless joy…

The Holy Trinity

…You have revealed your glory as the glory also of your Son and of the Holy Spirit: three persons, equal in majesty, undivided in splendor, yet one Lord, on God, ever to be adored in your everlasting glory…

Afterwards, depending on the season, we are led with simplicity or elaboration to the sanctus to praise God's name and join the unending song of the church on earth and in heaven.

The Ascension, since like all holy days that fall on a Thursday, can often be overlooked, so it entails further consideration. Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus is taken up into the heavens, and the preface, in the words of 2 Peter 1:4, tells us why—*so that he might make us partakers of His divine nature*. On Ascension Day we celebrate the completion of His work of salvation for the sake of whole world. As we hear and believe the promise of His Ascension, we understand that our own lives are now lived leaning into kingdom time, eternal time, the time where God's glory has no end. All that we are and all that we do is to give God glory, for this is what we are created to be—creaturely partakers of His divine nature. The doxological proclamation of the Biblical text is the key to experiencing the unity of scripture and liturgy.

Now we know that there is also much singing of scripture through the hymns that is integral to the liturgy. Processional, *de tempore*, offertory, distribution, and recessional hymns have carried the faith from the gathered assembly into homes, fields, hospitals, prisons, campgrounds, nursing homes, and even pubs. Their portability and memorability, either in strophic or cyclic form, has filled out the scaffolding of the *ordo*. Christian communities were singing before the New Testament was written. "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus" quotes St. Paul in Philippians 2. He will also urge us to sing hymns, chants, and spiritual songs in Colossians, as will the writer of Ephesians.

In some ways, just as much of the New Testament is *midrashic* with regard to the Old Testament, so Christian hymnody continues the same *midrashic* pattern, a pattern that grows out of the history of conversation between the written *Torah* (*Torah Shebiktav*) and the oral *Torah* (*Torah Sheb'al Peh*) in which the later narrative opens up older, often succinct, scriptural verses, connecting the written teachings to how people are called to live faithfully in ever-new circumstances. The *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is much of the basis of the written *Mishnah* (c. 200 CE) and *Jerusalem (Palestinian) Talmud* c. 350-400 CE and the *Babylonian Talmud* (c. 500-550 CE). Our singing of hymns, especially strophic hymns, within the *ordo* continues this pattern as it grows ever more reflective as both kerygma and anamnesis, opening up the life of God among his people. Unfortunately, when the church has privileged texts over tunes without understanding that the text and tune exegete each other or, we could simply say, read each other in the event of singing, we have missed how truly essential a musical/textual fittingness is to the joy that God intends for us in receiving His Word.

Music, as a non-discursive language, holds the possibility and power to open up our understandings of the written text as well as being capable of gifting the human heart with surprising power, releasing joy and healing sorrows. There may not be just one right tune and text that match, but some tunes and texts become

wedded to each other in delightful ways, though some will always be out of sorts with each other in ways that do justice to neither partner. The fittingness of the text and tune happens as text (discursive language) and music (non-discursive language) interpret and enhance each other as equal partners. Different tunes and texts can be paired in ways that run the gamut from sublime to absurd. The music, itself sung as vocalization (i.e., without text), has the power to reveal many layers of a hymnal text. Take Luther's ERHALT UNS HERR / "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word." Try pairing Luther's text with DEO GRACIAS / "O Love, How Deep" (LBW 88), or DET KILMER NU TIL JULEFEST / "The Bells of Christmas (LBW 62). *How* something is done becomes *what* is done.

With the written scriptures in hand, hymnody will develop from the non-metrical singing or chanting (a form of sung speech) of texts—from the psalms that evolve into the Gregorian Chants of the medieval church and centuries later come to new life in Anglican Chant, the metrical settings of the psalms as in the Genevan Psalter and Luther's earliest compositions, to a dutiful yet reflective use of scriptural texts, then a thematic use of scripture, and finally to the free composition that is generally Christological and often quite homiletic. The *de tempore* hymn of the day within the structure of the *ordo* is a way for the whole assembly to preach/proclaim in the power of the Holy Spirit what is the bedrock of their faith. (These musical developments do not always happen in a straight line for cross-pollination and the creativity that comes from the breath of the Holy Spirit is ever at work.) Think of the myriad ways that we are given to sing Psalm 23, for example, be it single line chant, Anglican Chant, metrical hymn ("The Lord's My Shepherd"), reflectively with Christological interpretation ("The King of Love My Shepherd Is"), imitated in the language of the New Testament (My Shepherd, You Supply My Need), mingling with Johannine texts ("Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us"), or finally with a refrain alternating between the straight biblical text and free composition ("Shepherd Me O God, beyond my thoughts, beyond my fears, from death into life").

We become the body of Christ through the baptismal waters and ever more so as we receive his very life into ours when we eat and drink His body and blood. However, our identity is also given emphatically in the form of collectively singing of what God has done for us, both in directly quoting scripture and in joining with the church through the ages as new hymns have continued to be composed. Through the centuries of singing hymns, we are bound to one another on the journey, the destination of which is the heart of God. Communal singing of the church's hymns embeds the scriptural witness in our bodies. We may be capable of knowing a philosophical assertion or theological proposition without saying it is our own, but the ritual performance of hymn singing, of breath, rhythm, pitch, and words issuing forth from our bodies—particularly in the sacramental context of the eucharistic *ordo*—engages our humanity in such a way that it takes on personal significance while also creating new relationships with others with whom we join in song, with the saints who have gone before us, and with the One to whom we direct our singing.

In such singing where the music and text are of equal importance, the text and tune are reading and exegeting each other. Through this doxological hermeneutic, our lives are also being interpreted. God, who is the primary audience of our hymn singing, simultaneously reads the human heart as he is continually creating us anew as we engage in acts of praise and thanksgiving in his name. *Ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*. This mutual reading is also true when our laments fill our sanctuaries (e.g. "O God our Lord of heav'n and earth, your living fingers never wrote that life should be an endless mote, a deathward drift from futile birth…).[1] Our singing is an act of trust in the One who made us for such singing. In this act of performing our faith, we become what we perform. We become the freedom that we sing, for we become what we sing, a living vessel of God's word.

Here might I stay and sing-
No story so divine!
Never was love dear King,
Never was grief like thine.
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend!
I all my days could gladly spend![2]

As the psalmist continually calls us to "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Ps. 29:2; 96:9), we become *partakers in His divine nature* through this beauty. This a beauty that is heard even more than it is seen, for "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have to believe" (John 20:29). Voices that in other times could be heard hurling threats at neighbors or whispering gossip are being transformed as the church joins the beauty of the whole creation, the work of God that has been singing since the beginning of time. The place where God's glory dwells (Ps. 26:8) comes to us filled with the sound of women's, men's, and children's voices. "We are God's house of living stones built for his own habituation"[3] (1Peter 2:4-5). This life comes from the breath of God. Our breath now made into song is the sound that is yet a sign of God's glorious and holy presence. We are alive. We are alive in Christ. We are, like Miriam, who he has made us to be, *homo adorans*.

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1. "O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth" / WITTENBERG NEW, LBW 396.
2. "My Song is Love Unknown"/ RHOSYMEDRE, LBW 94.
3. "Built on a Rock"/ KIRKEN DEN ER ET GAMMELT HUS, LBW 365.

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