

Pandemic Myopia and Liturgical Time

by Sean Daenzer

*Dominus vobiscum.
Et cum spiritu tuo.
Sursum corda.
Habemus ad Dominum.
Gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro.
Dignum et iustum est.*

(the *Sursum Corda*, after
2 Timothy 4:22; Colossians 3:1,
and Psalm 136)

The Lord be with you.
And with thy spirit.
Lift up your hearts.
We lift them up unto the Lord.
Let us give thanks unto the Lord, our God.
It is meet and right so to do.

(*TLH*, p. 24; *LSB*, p. 194)

By now, Holy Week and Easter are distant and forgotten memories—and I mean that in more ways than one. Where did Easter go in 2020? Lutherans should ask ourselves whether the atoning death of Christ and his resurrection from the dead still rule our hearts and minds, or whether the fear of sin and death in the face of COVID-19 has brought us back into bondage. After that essential question of repentance and faith has been considered, we will be better able to ask how the church responds liturgically to this temporal interruption.

Lift Up Your Hearts

The pandemic has been global, yet our response has often lacked focus and insight: it may be appropriately characterized as myopic. Safety precautions and stay-at-home measures—as well as



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enforcement of such measures—vary substantially from location to location. (Time will tell if such approaches were themselves wise or myopic.) Yet the true dangers of the pandemic are myriad: in addition to the virus itself, hysterics, groupthink, trusted and false science, and more have assaulted us in narrow, anecdotal, and frenetic ways. Social and news media continually manage to reinforce the narrowing of our perspectives on everything. Christians, on the other hand, hear the *sursum corda*, the call to “set [our] minds on things that are



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above” (Colossians 3:2; NRSV). The liturgy sings these and all Scriptures into Christians not so that we can recite them on cue in corporate worship but, far more, to believe and to live. The church’s perspective must be raised, the church’s heart *lifted up* unto the Lord.

Thus, this was an especially fitting year to mark the Ascension of Our Lord. Some of the first reopening efforts coincided with this feast, aptly delivering the reality check we needed: Christ has “ascended on high” and “made captivity itself a captive” and now sits on the throne exalted “far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things” (Ephesians 4:8, 10). God reigns over all things for the good of the church. Panic and fear, just as certainly as death and chaos, lie subdued under God’s feet. And though on account of our present myopia “we do not yet see” (Hebrews 2:8) these foes in subjection under God’s feet, faith believes the promises that confidently assert otherwise. Sight remains blind to the future (and plenty of the present) and forever fearful of it; faith, however, grasps the promises of Christ’s accomplished salvation and delights in the hope set before it: *expecto resurrectionem mortuorum*—we *expect* the resurrection of the dead.

As we confess in the creeds, the church has one foot in this world and one foot in the life of the world to come. We call it the communion of saints, the reality that the church is both militant on earth and triumphant with Christ in paradise. All of us—in the body or out of it, yet with the Lord—are expecting the resurrection. There is one holy catholic and apostolic church. Since this is true across the chasm of death, it is most certainly true around the globe also. This too we have by faith, not by sight, true enough. The church is visibly fractured and her unity hidden. But we do not confess our sight. We confess the faith. The church year is geared toward this confession.

Keeping Liturgical Time

In the region where I live, it all came crashing down in the week of Oculi (Third Sunday in Lent)—just about the time musicians and pastors were realizing that Holy Week was about a month away. As it became clear the stay-at-home orders would last and as circumstances around the country began to diversify, I think everyone was clamoring for unity and already mourning the thought of “missing” Easter. I began to hear the suggestion that Easter ought not be cancelled but rather rescheduled. “When this is over, we should have a denomination-wide Easter celebration to unite us as a church!”

I discouraged this approach for a few reasons. First, it’s worth recalling that the desire to unite around a common celebration of Easter has already eluded the church for almost 1,900 years. Eastern and Western Christians still celebrate Easter on different dates. Given that long historical difficulty, the notion that any pope, denominational president, or worship director would succeed now may be a delusion of grandeur (to which we are regrettably susceptible). Indeed, the “end” of the pandemic will not happen at once in every place, just as it did not begin all at once in every place. Each parish, state, and country will return to physical services when it can (if it ever fully gave them up). Rescheduling Easter would likely multiply the Easters even more. That would not endanger our salvation, of course, but nor would it contribute to any external unity either.

Second, and much more significant: the church throughout the world has not abandoned its usual course. We must remember and assert this for the sake of our sisters and brothers around the world. Some Christians, including Lutherans, still celebrated Easter (even having communion), using appropriate caution, abiding by local restrictions and best judgment. In our recognition of how “global” this pandemic is, we shouldn’t forget the “super-global” nature of Christ’s church. The word we use is “catholic” or “universal,” to include also the saints in eternity. It would be myopic to say that



because I have not observed Easter, no one has. The church continues to pray even when some miss a Sunday—or nine or nineteen. We jump back into the church’s rhythm as we are able—in this case, glad and grateful to return to “normal.”

Third, while most Protestants and secular calendar makers mark Easter as one of the few stand-alone days worth noting, Lutherans value the whole church year with it. The Triduum culminating in Easter is the undoubted central and high feast of the year, yet our pastors and church musicians do not have a “Christmas-and-Easter” mindset, nor do we wish to encourage such thought among our members. Easter stands out, but it doesn’t stand alone. The entire church year has been built around it. The result is not a flimsy structure held together as by a linchpin, but a beautiful dome where every season and day points forward to or springs from the death and resurrection of Christ. Many of us have felt a void this year, no doubt. I would encourage us to see how, nevertheless, the structure is still standing, still pointing us to Christ, our center. The rest of the weeks will not let us forget or overlook the Holy Three Days. Indeed, we have not lost the ancient understanding that each and every Sunday is a “little Easter.”

In fact, church year 2020 did not “go” anywhere, because the church is far greater than any individual point of view. Our risen and ascended Christ remains Lord of the church. This remains 2020 A+D (*anno Domini*), another year belonging to our Lord. God has missed nothing. The church year is designed to confess that conviction as it sets the Scriptures and Christ’s saving work before us in its course. Keeping the church year intact—like jump-roping double dutch, “jumping back in” with our fellow saints who have kept the rhythm going in our absence, praying for us all the while—is a way to raise our perspective just when we are tempted to put our heads down the most.

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Meet, Right, and Salutory

No matter the proper preface, the pastor always insists, “it is truly meet, right, and salutory that we should give thanks,” even “at all times and in all places.” We may have heard those words in a new and sobering sense as they came across the digital media to us on our couches. Lutherans aren’t satisfied with a “digital Supper.”¹ For Rome, the viewing of the priest alone at an altar remains a legitimate option; for the Protestants, the meal of distant memory is easily (and usually) omitted. But we say that Christ’s *verba* (“words”) “along with the bodily eating and drinking are the main thing in the Sacrament.”² It’s not Easter or any other singular occasion we’ve missed, but the constant and ongoing life of the *assembly*, i.e., the church. It’s the meeting together (Hebrews 10:25), being gathered in God’s name (Matthew 18:20), and devoting ourselves “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42) that we long to rejoin.

The world is beset with the prospect of an unknown “new normal.” We know better. Easter is our normal. Ascension is our normal. *Habemus ad Dominum*—we literally “have” (*habemus*) our hearts always to and with the Lord. Lord, have mercy where our hearts have strayed in great fear! Lord, preserve us steadfast, with hearts “fixed where true joys are to be found”! (Collect for Fifth Sunday of Easter, or “Cantate” Sunday).



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Let Us Give Thanks to the Lord Our God

That, chiefly, is what characterizes the church on the day of her “return”: thanksgiving. We are thankful always for the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and now—God grant it!—we shall have a particular cause of thanks in the end or improvement of the pandemic, in God’s mercy to spare us, and we will delight to gather again and to eat the Lord’s Supper, which perhaps we had to forgo for a time. Thanksgiving is called for. When this happens, the *Te Deum*, the ancient hymn of thanksgiving, is especially appropriate. We might also include “Now Thank We All Our God” (*ELW*

839–840; *LSB* 895; *CW* 610), which was itself written by a Lutheran pastor who suffered greatly during war and plague (Johann Crüger). Likewise, Psalm 116—a psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance and the basis for many familiar offertory canticles—answers plainly in response to the singer’s question “What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me?” (*LSB*, p. 159, 176): take the cup of salvation. As in a familiar Thanksgiving Day gospel (Luke 17:11–19), Christ praises the faith of the one who returns to him, eager to receive even more of God’s mercy.



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Notes

1. Note that the three largest Lutheran church bodies in the United States have all issued guidance that discourages “virtual” communion.
ELCA: https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns.pdf
LCMS: <https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/mercy/health-ministry/pandemic>
WELS: <https://wels.net/god-feeds-his-flock-in-a-time-of-crisis/>
2. Martin Luther, *Small Catechism* (*LSB*, p. 327). Another translation gives, “These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the Sacrament” (*ELW*, p. 1166).

