

## Choosing Music

*Have you ever wondered about the music that is chosen to be part of traditional services at St. Peter's? Who plans the songs? How do they get chosen? When are we going to sing my favorite? Can we please never sing that one again? Here's a window into the process.*

The rostered leaders of the church and I get together to plan hymns on a seasonal basis. In fact, we recently met to plan hymns from the first Sunday in September through Christ the King, 12 Sundays worth! We sit down together to plan hymns having looked at the readings for each Sunday and our primary goal is to find songs that draw out the themes found in these readings. Some resources, like [SundaysandSeasons.com](http://SundaysandSeasons.com), are invaluable to our planning time, but sometimes there's nothing quite as useful as cracking open the hymnal and leafing through it!

What about the actual songs we choose and where we place them? For each week, our primary hymn is the Hymn of the Day (HoD).

**As Lutherans, we view the centrally located hymn of the day as the people's proclamation of the gospel found in that day's readings.**

Yes, after the pastor proclaims the gospel, the assembly follows up with its own proclamation! The voice of one is juxtaposed with the voices of many. Such an important hymn often gets planned first with the goal of attempting to most closely match the messages in the readings for the day.

Next are the gathering and sending songs. For both of these songs, we try to relate to the readings for the day (hmmm...there seems to be a *theme* here). Here, though, we also try to capture the feeling of these two very different times in the service. For the gathering song we try to capture a quality of openness and willingness to receive the Word, whereas sending songs tend to embody some sort of call to action. After all, as we are sent out from the worship service, the real 'service' begins.

Finally, we take some time to plan songs to sing during communion. While obvious choices are many of the fine hymns found in the Communion section of the hymnal, sometimes we have found yet another hymn that relates to the day that we just couldn't let go of. We get really excited when there's a song in the Communion section that actually relates to the readings for the day. Ah, the life of a church nerd!

Of course, there are so many other considerations. Do we know this song? If we don't, is it easily learned and is it worth learning? Have we sung this recently enough? Have we sung this too recently? Are we gravitating toward this song because we like it or is it because we think it's the best fit? Did we pick 3 hymns with 17 stanzas each? Back to the drawing board!

So, that's a brief introduction to how we choose music for the traditional services at St. Peter's. Maybe you have more questions? Feel free to ask, but be warned, the answer might start with something about the readings for the day!

## Why Sing in Church?

*Maybe you've never thought about it before. Maybe you already have a concrete idea. Maybe it is a question you've always kept to yourself. Why DO we sing in church?*

Singing a text helps us remember it. Ask a child to recite their ABCs and they'll greet you with a song. We sing because often the words of a hymn can carry us through trying times, help us celebrate when we're feeling joyful, or open our eyes to realities within our world. The words we sing are poems set to music and the two are oftentimes so inextricably linked that trying to separate them is comical. For example, try singing the words for Amazing Grace to the tune for "Joy to the World" (Antioch). Here are the words in case you need them:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.

Was blind, but now I see.  
Was blind, was blind, but now I see.

Alternatively, those of a certain age will remember the TV show Gilligan's Island. You can sing the first 5 lines above to the tune of that show's theme song. Words set to music is obviously a powerful memory tool; one that we use to hand down the Christian story. So, we sing songs to remember important words for important times. We should not scoff at such a practical reason for singing, but what about the liturgical/theological reasons for why we sing? What happens when we sing?

### **By raising our voices collectively in song, we communally proclaim our faith.**

Each of our voices melds with the others around us, and together as the assembled people of God we proclaim the God's word of grace to each other and to the world. Such communal action is in direct contrast to a culture that idolizes the efforts of the individual. We proclaim this faith together because we must remind one another of the saving grace of God and, in the process, others remind us of this grace.

Also, you may have noticed that in our worship services, the spoken word and song are consistently juxtaposed. The next time you're in church, notice how we say and sing, say and sing. I like to think of it the same way we think about teaching. Not all are visual learners, not all are aural learners, not all are spatial learners. However, by combining symbol (communion, baptism), spoken word (readings, sermon), music (hymns, liturgical music) and liturgical action (coming up for communion, passing the peace) we create a space where all may encounter the message of Jesus saving death on the cross.

Finally, when we sing together, we become the body of Christ. This is of vital importance to who we are as a community. We do not point to ourselves; it is Christ whom we adore. It is Christ who forms us into a community of faith, and it is Christ who speaks the words of grace around us. As we sing, the good news we hear coming from the mouths of the people around us becomes the word from God, via the Spirit, through the body of Christ! Thus, during worship we who

have gathered are the primary musical instrument, having become the mouth, lips, tongue, vocal chords, resonating passages, and lungs of the God of the covenant who has promised to save us.

May the God who calls us, the Christ who redeems us, and the Spirit who sustains us enliven our singing.

## Mountaintop Experiences and Spiritual Plains

*Jesus continues his ministry this month and we get caught up in the spiritual highs and lows.*

This roller coaster ride is only a smaller version of Holy Week coming at the end of March, but the worship themes this month still offer a wide variety of entry points into the Gospel.

Jesus continues his ministry of healing which we began to see last month. On February 4<sup>th</sup> Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law then goes on to heal many and preach his message in the neighboring towns. The glorious vision of Jesus in dazzling white follows on February 11<sup>th</sup>, Transfiguration Sunday, but ends with Jesus' confusing warning not to tell anyone what they had seen. We repel down the mountainside with Ash Wednesday, landing in the spiritual plain that is the first Sunday of Lent on Sunday, February 18<sup>th</sup> when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. Peter tries to rebuke Jesus for speaking of his own suffering, but in turn Peter is rebuked on February 25<sup>th</sup> bringing us to the close of a wide-ranging month.

Similar to last month, the appointed psalms for these Sundays also follow the themes closely. We sing of God's healing the brokenhearted and binding up their wounds in Psalm 147 on the 4<sup>th</sup> and the Lord shines forth in glory in Psalm 50 on Transfiguration. We pray that God would give us clean hearts in Psalm 51 on Ash Wednesday and show us the way through the wilderness in Psalm 25 on the first Sunday of Lent. Finally, we pray Psalm 22 as Jesus speaks of his death. This psalm is often prayed on Maundy Thursday during the stripping of the altar and it's use early in Lent reminds us that Holy Week is not far off.

The first part of this month we will lift our spirits by singing "On Eagle's Wings" and on Transfiguration we break out "Oh, Wondrous Image, Vision Fair." Singing this ancient tune from the 15<sup>th</sup> century always makes me feel as if I've tapped into something much larger than myself and the text is hard to beat:

*With shining face and bright array, Christ deigns to manifest today what glory shall be theirs above who joy in God with perfect love.*

Having reached the plain, we turn to songs of comfort with Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service; Thy Holy Wings; and All My Hope on God Is Founded. Each of these reflects well the themes for their respective days and bear with them messages of hope and trust in the Lord's ability to supply sufficient grace for all who would rely upon it.

**This year, February is a month of ups and downs, but we know that God always comes to us in our times of need.**

Although we would like to spend our lives on the spiritual mountaintop of Transfiguration, Jesus bids us go down the mountain. Rather than keep Jesus' great love to ourselves, though, we are called to spread the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Consider the themes for this month as an invitation to let go of those things which keep you from Christ and to trust in the Lord's work of **salvation**.

## The Word of God on Sunday Morning

The word of God is a large part of why we gather on Sunday morning. Lutherans confess a faith grounded in word and sacrament and it's plain to see from a Sunday morning service that we are steeped in God's word. While we say a lot of words during Sunday morning services, our primary source is definitely the Bible. Of course, we read passages from the Bible every Sunday, but a lot of our liturgical songs, language, and prayers come straight from the Bible.

The Lutheran church largely makes use of the 3-year cycle called the Revised Common Lectionary (a lectionary is a prescribed group of readings). Each Sunday and Festival has 4 readings that set the themes for the day. Without going into gory detail, there are typically passages from the Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament (non-gospel), and a reading from the Gospel.

The reading from the Old Testament and the Gospel are chosen to go with one another. These two readings often inform one another and may help us discover a fresh interpretation that we might not see from reading only one of them. Take a look at the Old Testament reading from Habukkuk(Habukkuk 1:1-4;2:1-4) and the Gospel reading from Luke (Luke 17:5-10) for October 6 and see what relationship you find between the two.

The Psalm for each day of the church year becomes the people's (that would be all of us!) response to the Old Testament reading. In Habukkuk we hear the author's despair at the world around him and pleas for God's help; in the psalm which accompanies this reading (Psalm 37:1-9) we sing to each other in encouragement that all is not lost, that the wicked will fade away, and that we should commit ourselves to the Lord.

The remaining reading comes from one of the Epistles. Often we work through one of these books over the course of several Sundays. These readings offer an alternate topic for reflection, although to keep myself engaged on Sunday mornings I like to see if I can manage to find a way to fit it into the other readings thematically. Take a look at the Epistle for October 6 and see what you come up with!

These polarized times would have us believe that there can only be one right way to think about a given issue, or that once you've made up your mind, you can't change it. It's often said the word of God is a living document; I believe that means we are invited to come to it with fresh eyes and an open mind. The interplay of these four readings on a Sunday morning can change our beliefs about what God's will is for the world and show us that while facts are facts, there is rarely one side to an issue.

Our place in the world as God's children is to proclaim God's love for the world and to struggle together in community. Therefore, listening to passages read from the Bible on Sunday morning is a potent act of grace and witness that is not to be taken lightly. The Word of God enters into our midst through the voices of our community and we must be prepared to challenge our own thoughts by this very same almighty and everlasting God of love.

