

Encountering the Holy in Worship

You have chosen to come here. You have come to encounter the Holy.

Liturgy & Blessing

“Bless. Somebody once said that we have been blessed so that we might be a blessing.
Each day, make a decision: I’m going to live my life like a blessing.”

--Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, “Travelling the Way of Love” [Video – The Episcopal Church](#)

We approach the creative work of crafting liturgy and/or aspects of the church's liturgy for specific contexts as a ministry of the whole people of God. Liturgy, sometimes translated as "the work of the people", thrives upon the gifts of various artists. In this workshop we encourage the enlivening of worship with these gifts of the Spirit and holding enduring forms of our ancestors in faith.

Similarly, we will approach Blessings from an informal, formational standpoint. Our purposes are to understand the structure of liturgical blessings used in a worship service; appreciate blessings as gifts that may be informally bestowed, as prayers, to others; understand the poetic structure of blessings and their presence in many cultures and faith traditions.

ABOUT CRAFTING LITURGY

Liturgy conveys and unveils the mystery of divine presence to the gathered community. By participating as witnesses and actors in sacred ritual, we are drawn into the drama of faith, altered by the presence, and driven out to live a lively faith as the work of God unfurls in our enlightened lives.

The liturgical arts used to convey the mystery lean on the gifts of the whole people of God. Regular worship of the gathered assembly prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer and in other forms approved for use in the church leave considerable room for creative artistry in music, arts, oratory, prayers, and blessings. The prayerbook also offers skeletal frameworks for liturgies for special occasions where even greater leeway allows for liturgy to be especially contextual.

The following matters, intentionally stated briefly, may offer some traction in the art of holy encounter.

The Heart of the Matter

Crafters of liturgy would do well to hold in mind what is at the heart of liturgy: experiencing the holy. The experience of the holy happens in worship...all the time. People’s lives are changed by the experience. The most important thing to know is that this happens and that the liturgist's work is no small enterprise. While holy encounter cannot be manufactured or managed, there may be more (and less) effective ways to achieve this intention.

Intending to Encounter the Holy

How might you invite people to come to the liturgy already mindful and open-hearted to the possibility of experiencing divine presence? Preparation—helping people shape their intentions—may be half of the work. Then, how do you remind those who appear at the threshold? As one example, the first words of a Sunday bulletin read, “You have chosen to be here. You have come to encounter the Holy.”

The advance, psycho-spiritual preparation for holy encounter is the first condition for people’s profound experience, and the second is like unto it, providing a *setting* conducive to the experience of holiness.

Setting the Table (and everything else)

Consider the context of the setting that will best awaken holy encounter: who is gathering? Consider every dimension of the liturgical experience and the various ways of knowing/experiencing people possess (verbal, visual, auditory, tactile, etc.) Coax rather than force; invite don’t corral. Only use words when you have to, and then more narrative and poetry than treatise or dictation. People likely won’t do what you say any more than will the Spirit, so consider removing all “shoulds”, “musts” and other words that corner people against their wills and make them hate religion. Replace all needless yammering-on with silence. Consider the liturgy a feast for revered and welcomed guests and the holy will likely find a seat.

Contours of Experience

How do you lead people through the liturgy? How are people invited across the threshold, into sacred space, and what supports them throughout? Consider the flow of the liturgy. How might you alter the energy in the room? Do you want it to build, become intense, offer relief, release, build anew? Use the resources you have to provide this support and contour to the experience: movement, stillness, passionate expression, varied music, etc., in away that leads toward holy encounter and back.

Assembly

Remember: the whole gathered assembly plays a role in the liturgical drama. Many in the assembly—the uninitiated—may assume they are by-standers. It is a liturgical leader’s role to show them otherwise. But carefully. Craft liturgy that involves everyone, leaving ample room for the ones for whom, showing up, was a huge step.

Consider Sensuality

Taste and see, smell, sound, and touch. Make a multi-sensual experience possible. Smell is an under-appreciated trigger of memory, perhaps more than other senses. Welcome whiffs (if not clouds) of incense, flowers, baking bread. God is in your nose more than your understanding.

Weave

Weave sensual experiences. Sequential experiences are but one way. How can sight and sound, music and action, movement and attention, community prayer and underlying drone, in addition to one-thing-after-another, be woven into a rich tapestry of experience. For example, what permission do you give for someone to light a candle during another focused action? What about the assembly’s

singing of a chant during the prayers of the people, or during spoken prayers over a candidate for baptism?

Silence is Golden

Simply stated: build your community's capacity to sit in silence and you will build your community's capacity to encounter the holy.

Holiness of Beauty

Make worship spaces beautiful, as best you can. They say "the building always wins" in how much leeway the architecture allows for liturgical practice, but creative use of lighting, drawing the eye, seating space, using various spaces through the liturgy, and removal of distracting visuals can go a long way. Provide visually beautiful appointments, flowers, art, water (flowing or water) and change it up. Decide what is permanent, what could change seasonally, and what should be new every morning. Get many people involved. Be spare, take care.

Music

God is in the music. Let it move you and groove you. Know your context and match music to what moves people. Bring organs, bring banjos, add harmoniums and leave snobbery behind (that's so 20th Century worship wars!). Take care that the liturgy you create for your context is a work of authenticity, not artifice. And clergy...be in the work together with your musician/s. They will always have more power than you, so learn to be powerless together before the face of God.

Language

Something should probably be said. Something affirmed together. Let language waken the heart and guide and support the path of the liturgy. Let words impassion, soothe, nudge. Since we're including the whole body, include its genders. As liturgy provides form for Spirit and speaks for the whole assembly, language may best be more formal than colloquial.

Solemn Play

Consider the range of emotional experience when inhabiting the structures of divine presence. Approaching the presence **should** be fearsome *and* include delight. Joy, humor, lightness of being, anticipation, excitement along with solemnity are appropriate and appropriately modeled by liturgical leaders. Train servers to smile.

The Presidency

The presider holds the whole room. Presidency is an art that, when surrendered to, supports the whole assembly's ministry and the variety of leaders when each are the focus of attention, while always being visibly present.

Self-confidence and surrender. Being central while conferring attention to others. Being visibly human and vulnerable to the presence—delighted, aggrieved, joyful, solemn—permits the assembly its emotion and participation.

Power For the People

Liturgists play with fire. People are moved and changed and often hurt by the use of power. Always use caution. Don't venture beyond your wisdom. Use power to lift, raise, encourage, and enliven.

Who's It All About

Everyone can tell when you are pointing to yourself. Point to the holy. She's more likely to show and you will find your true place.

Kevin Pearson, Rector
St. Luke Church, Renton
kevindavidpearson@gmail.com

ABOUT BLESSINGS

Kimberly Long Cockroft
Minister for Faith Formation
Grace Episcopal Church
kim@gracehere.org

To write a blessing is to receive and proffer a profound gift. Writing blessings requires deep listening, both to the person or people for whom the blessing is being created, and to God, who is the source of all goodness. Blessings remind us of the inherent sacredness in all of creation, of the longing of our spirits, the needs of our bodies, and the reality that the Spirit is moving within and around us, seeking to sustain us every moment.

--

"Whenever we recite a blessing, no matter what the subject, we are reaffirming that our God, the being we worship as supreme, is the Lord, without whom there would be no existence."

--Entering Jewish Prayer, Rueven Hammer

- **Blessings:**

- Are present in many cultures and faith traditions (*see below*)
- Recognize the community of God-- "our God" instead of "my God"
- Use simple, concrete language people can easily understand
- Often speak of God as: a nurturer, king, father, mother, brother, etc.
- Affirm God's goodness and then petitions or predicts the work of the Spirit in some action going forth--"Glory be to God, whose power working in us can do more than we ask or imagine. The blessing of God be upon you and remain with you as go from this place, the love of Christ fill your mouths with rejoicing, and the power of the Spirit strengthen you with the knowledge that you are not alone. Amen."
 - Liturgical blessings in the Episcopal Church always invoke the Trinity and are used on special sacred occasions as well as to bless sacraments, people,

sometimes pets and things (like houses) and to *send*. Some come directly from Scripture.

- “There is a call to action and transformation, a reminder that we are called from despair into expectancy, and from fear and anxiety into trust and assurance, from uncertainty into a life of joy and meaning rooted in God’s love and grace.” --the Rev. Leslie Scoopmire, <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/blessing-and-expectation/>

- **Informal, Personal Blessings**

“Blessings shouldn’t be caged in churches and only doled out to those we feel who might be appropriate for such a thing. I have a feeling that if anyone came to Jesus and asked for a blessing, he’d give it. He certainly blessed a lot of people with healing, curing and teaching and not a single one of those was done to build himself up or to mark him as someone extraordinary. He wasn’t even a priest — well, a recognized member of the priestly caste and profession. I think he sort of expects us to bless and be blessed by other ordinary people, folks who might not recognize a blessing as such if it bit them on the nose but who could use some encouragement, compassion, or even just a recognition of their presence and their humanity.”

--Linda Ryan, https://www.episcopalcafe.com/the_acts_of_blessing/

- First, listen deeply. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you insight and discernment as you seek to bless another. Even though a blessing embodies love and grace in words, it is more a matter of the heart and imagination, not the intellect. For example, imagine lifting that person into God’s light. What is illuminated? (The head guides as the heart listens.)
- Use simple, concrete language, sometimes relying on a single metaphor
- Begin lines with “May” or “Let” to bestow a prayer of hope or prophecy on that person
- Even without the invocation of the Trinity, acknowledge or point to God/Higher Power, sometimes with a descriptor: “Goodness,” “Grace”
- Can be created for a group of people after reflective listening; I like to listen carefully to others, take notes, use the words and phrases of the folks themselves to craft a blessing. If you are still, if you listen, you can hear the Spirit in a place and in the words of others; as the crafter of the blessing, you are then simply creating a structure to hold what is already there, and by embodying that reality while naming God’s love and transforming power, very actively and collaboratively opening your hands to God’s presence.
- Affirm and recognize a person’s state of being before petitioning a higher power for goodness, strength, comfort (etc.) for that person. Then there is often some kind of movement forward, as in the following:

→ **For Sudden, Unwanted Change**

-www.eachholylhour.com- <https://eachholylhour.com/about/weekly-meditations/blessings/>

When winds you neither anticipate nor welcome
blow away familiar friends and places
and you find yourself unequipped in a lonely space—

Be still.

Refuse to let anxiety dictate a new map;
Do not let restlessness drive you.
Instead, here between *leave* and *arrive*
may you find a quiet space, removed and hallowed.

May you feel the earth solid below your feet,
the sky stretching above you.

May you listen to the rhythm of your breath.
Inhale mercy and rest.
Exhale, giving thanks for what was.

Now may you hear a voice that sings in you.
May you feel the ground beneath you, which is love.
Wherever you journey, may it pave a way for you.

And may you see the sky above you,
which is goodness.
May it never be a stranger to you.

And may flowers of mercy spring up at your feet.

→ **For Longing**

-John O'Donohue, To Bless This Space Between Us

Blessed be the longing that brought you here
And quickens your soul with wonder.

May you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire
That disturbs you when you have settled for something safe.

May you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease
To discover the new direction your longing wants you to take.

May the forms of your belonging—in love, creativity, and friendship—
Be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul.

May the one you long for long for you.

May your dreams gradually reveal the destination of your desire.

May a secret Providence guide your thought and nurture your feeling.

May your mind inhabit life with the sureness with which your body inhabits the world.

May your heart never be haunted by ghost-structures of old damage.

May you come to accept your longing as divine urgency.

May you know the urgency with which God longs for you.

→ **“Be swift to love. . .”**

-Marcus Borg, quoting from 19th Century Swiss philosopher & poet, Henri-Frédéric Amiel (trinitarian line added):

Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.

The blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, go with you this day and always.

→ **Blessings from around the world (just a few!):**

A Chinook Prayer

May all I say and all I think
be in harmony with thee,
God within me,
God beyond me,
maker of the trees.

- *Chinook prayer, Pacific Northwest Coast:*

<https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/native-american>

A Ghanaian Prayer

O God, creator of our land,
our earth, the trees, the animals and humans, all is for your honor.

The drums beat it out, and people sing about it,
and they dance with noisy joy that you are the Lord.

You also have pulled the other continents out of the sea.
What a wonderful world you have made out of wet mud,
and what beautiful men and women!
We thank you for all the beauty of this earth.

The grace of your creation is like a cool day between rainy seasons.
We drink in your creation with our eyes.
we listen to the bird's jubilee with our ears.

How strong and good and sure your earth smells,
and everything that grows there.

Be with us in our countries and in all Africa, and in the whole world
Prepare us for the service that we should render.

Traditional Buddhist Prayer

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness;

May all be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow;
 May all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is sorrowless;
 And may all live in equanimity, without too much attachment and too much aversion,
 And live believing in the equality of all that lives.
 - Author Unknown--www.jesuitresource.org

SOURCES FOR BLESSINGS

Sources for Liturgical Blessings include:

- Book of Common Prayer: <https://www.bcponline.org>
- Enriching Our Worship 1 (there are also additional volumes 2-5: <https://www.churchpublishing.org/siteassets/pdf/enriching-our-worship-1/enrichingourworship1.pdf>)
- The New Zealand Prayer Book: <http://anglicanprayerbook.nz>
- Daily Prayers for All Seasons (contains poetry, meditations, and prayers from a variety of faith traditions:)
https://episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/daily_prayer_all_seasons_eng_final_pages.pdf
- Others?

→ *What are some similarities you notice in the following blessings from “Enriching Our Worship 1?”*

Holy eternal Majesty,
 Holy incarnate Word,
 Holy abiding Spirit,
 Bless you for evermore. *Amen.*

--

May the blessing of the God of Abraham and Sarah, and of Jesus Christ born of our sister Mary, and of the Holy Spirit, who broods over the world as a mother over her children, be upon you and remain with you always. *Amen.*

--

God’s Blessing be with you,
 Christ’s peace be with you,
 the Spirit’s outpouring be with you,
 now and always. *Amen.(source: Celtic)*

--

The Wisdom of God the Love of God
 and the Grace of God strengthen you
 to be Christ’s hands and heart in this world,
 in the name of the Holy Trinity. *Amen.(source: Celtic)*

--

Live without fear: your Creator has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you as a mother. Go in peace to follow the good road and may God’s blessing be with you always.
Amen. (source: from Saint Clare)

Other Sources for Blessings Include:

- To Bless this Space Between Us (John O’Donohue)
- An African Prayerbook (Desmond Tutu)
- The Painted PrayerBook (Jan Richardson): <https://paintedprayerbook.com>

- [Unfolding Light](https://www.unfoldinglight.net) (Steve Garnaas Holmes): <https://www.unfoldinglight.net>
- Prayers and Liturgy from the Iona Community: <https://www.ionabooks.com/>
- *A Year of Blessings* (Amelia Richardson Dress)-great formation and intergenerational ideas: <http://www.ameliadress.com/category/a-year-of-blessings/>
- “Living the Spiritual Practices of the The Beauty Way,” (Rev. Cornelia Eaton, Canon to the Ordinary, Episcopal Church in Navajoland), seminar given at Forma Conference, Jan 2021: <https://vimeo.com/membershipvision> --profound embodied prayers, embodying ritual
- Textweek.com A clearinghouse site for all things liturgical
- *Earth Prayers From Around the World: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations for Honoring the Earth* by Elizabeth Roberts

Sources from your facilitators today include:

- Kevin Pearson: *Re:Turn, a liturgy for the Autumn Equinox*, created by St. Luke’s (Renton, WA); Saint Andrew’s by-the-Sea, (San Diego, CA), and St. Andrew’s (New London, NH): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8wQCFD1kKQ>
- Kim Cockroft: A series of blessings, <https://eachholyyhour.com/about/weekly-meditations/blessings/>

WRITING BLESSINGS

*There are several templates here for you to explore if they are helpful; feel free to depart from them as well! Remember, enjoy **using metaphor** (and please keep one metaphor consistent throughout the blessing); try to **avoid passive verbs**; and as in poetry, **stick to concrete, simple images** and words. **Finally, remember the context** of the entire service or event (refer often to the Scripture(s) for the day). For example, if the Scripture is Psalm 121 (attached), you will want to read and brainstorm that Psalm to find images to make your blessings coherent and conversant with the Psalm.*

→ *Ideas, Images, Phrases and Words from Psalm 121:*

- **Gathering Blessing**

Original:

God, you have brought us here from many paths. Let us now cease restlessness to find our home in you. Open our hands that we may receive the gifts of your Spirit. Open our ears to your wisdom and our eyes to wonder. Let us dwell here together in peace until you send us out in the world again. **Amen.**

Template:

God, you have _____.

Let us now _____.

[Open or other verb] _____.

[Open or other verb] _____.

Let us _____.

Amen.

• **Sending Blessing**

Original:

May God be your sun and shield and guide you in ways of wholeness and peace. And may the blessing of God, who was, and is, and is to come, rest upon you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Template:

May God be your _____ and _____ and

_____ you in ways of _____

and _____. And may the blessing of God, who was, and is, and is to come, rest upon you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

• **Blessing for Donated Goods:**

Original:

Mothering One, who holds us close and warms us with your love, we give thanks for these prayer shawls, for the hands that lovingly made them, and we ask that they would give comfort and solace to those who receive them. **Amen.**

Template:

_____ One, who _____ and

_____, we give thanks for _____, for the

_____, and we ask that they would

_____ to those that receive them. **Amen.**

Psalm 121

A song of ascents.

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—

where does my help come from?

My help comes from the Lord,

the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip—

he who watches over you will not slumber;

indeed, he who watches over Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord watches over you—

the Lord is your shade at your right hand;

the sun will not harm you by day,

nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all harm—

he will watch over your life;

the Lord will watch over your coming and going

both now and forevermore.

I love to share resources! If you have a resource to add to the lists in this packet, please let me know: kim@gracehere.org. Thank you, friends. May God's peace go with you today!