

LET OUR WORDS BECOME FLESH

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LET OUR WORDS BECOME FLESH

TERRY W. YORK

**Words for Worship:
A Collection of Prayers, Litanies,
Benedictions, and Poems**


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*To the congregations who have shaped me,
each in their own way,
across seven decades*

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And the Word became flesh and lived among us.

John 1:14 (NRSV)

But be doers of the word.

James 1:22 (NRSV)



ALWAYS SUNDAY

Oh, the saints,
not the statues,
the ones whose fragrance
my nose remembers as incense,
whose voices my ears remember as music.

Oh, the saints
whose reverence for daily life
made the aura around them
a cathedral lighted by pulsating stained glass,
moments of holy hush;
the presence of God wrapped around their souls
like shawls in a vast coolness.

Oh, the saints
who carried their bibles
and their prayers
like they carried the blood in their veins
and the air in their lungs.

These, these are the priests,
these are the saints
who close the gap,
who remind us and show us,
who pray smooth stones,
whose flesh is the word.

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INTRODUCTION

How, when, where shall we bow before You?
How, when, where shall we stand with the martyrs?
Give us the words of weeping.
Give us the words of protest.
Let our "Yes" be yes, and our "No" be no,
no matter the cost.
Bring forth, from within us, the prayer.
Bring forth, from within us, the preaching.
Bring forth, from within us, the testimony that
Jesus is Lord,
no matter the cost.
Creator, Christ, and Comforter,
Way, Truth, Life,
Three-In-One,
hear our prayer,
it is our worship:
let our words become flesh.

We worship God because God is God. That is not a redundant tongue-twister. It is human communication (in this case printed English prose) trying to describe the Divine. One step beyond the first sentence is silence. One step back from the first sentence is this attempt: We worship God because the Creator created all that is, because the Redeemer is the agent of creation's salvation, and because the Holy Spirit comforts all of creation in its suffering and turmoil.

The worldview of individuals and congregations is shaped in worship. Thus shaped, we live. We flesh out the words of our worship. If the Church is to rise with courage and action, declaring “Jesus is Lord,” it must first kneel in humble worship. Humility and courage are coupled as the worshiper is transformed by prayer and praise. Triumphalism is not the worship of the Christ-follower. Neither are nationalism or patriotism in Christian worship. The worship of Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter, three-in-one, transforms our response to influences and influencers. Transformation toward Christ-likeness is often measured in small steps that show significant change over time. On occasion, the transformation takes place in larger, more stunning segments. Whatever the pace, the words of our worship are in the process of becoming flesh, our flesh, in a transformed and transforming worldview. If the transformation is not toward Christ-likeness, the worship was, and is, misshapen and misguided.

It is the Holy Spirit who awakens us to worship, draws us toward worship, guides our worship planning, leading, and participation. Having worshiped, it is the Holy Spirit who keeps our sight and hearing to recognize and resist the incipient idolatry that would woo us.

Worship that uses written, spoken and sung language as its vehicle of expression, begins with a silent thought. The trajectory, from that point, circles back around to silence: thought to prose, prose to lyric, lyric to poetry, poetry to silence. Propaganda tries to enter this sequence, but it cannot. Propaganda will always be found out for the imposter that it is.

Words have limits, although we seldom explore their outer reaches. Words do their best work when they are chosen for their capacity to present truth at the surface of their gathering, and, at the same time, combine to create images that point to deeper truth, still.

The words of our worship become flesh even as the Word became Flesh in John 1. The Holy Spirit comes upon us and places inspired words within us. A period of incubation begins. The words stir within us. Their meaning and implications begin to grow and develop. We see the world differently. We see ourselves differently. There is a transformation of what matters to us. Then, a birth, as the words become flesh; become the motivation of our living and being. Faith and imagination and creativity are born. We see issues and other people in the light of what has been born to us. This is the result of worship that is to, for, and about God. Transformation is birthed. Our words become flesh in the Way of Christ. The words of our worship live with us, and we with them.

Words for worship come to us from the Bible, from life experience, and from the whispers of the Holy Spirit. In our worship, the prose of our daily living and the poetry of our faith and hope mingle with groanings that dwell deep beneath our words. Worship deepens as it becomes flesh. Come poets and playwrights, come essayists and novelists, come lyricists and liturgists: your art, your words, your worship offered to God in Spirit and in Truth, is called to the front of fleshed-out, daily, spiritual warfare.

Words fashioned into the scripture and prayer of our worship also become our refuge. We ask and declare with Peter and the other remaining disciples, “Lord, where else would we go? To whom would we turn? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Alive in homily, lyric, and hymn, alive in testimony, litany, and creed, the words of our worship breathe the breath of God Incarnate and call us home, even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37).

The need to freshen and deepen our expressions of worship will always be with us, whether we embrace an ancient liturgy or a recently fashioned “free” approach that is imagined to be original and spontaneous. God is to be worshiped, and our ruthless, oppressed and oppressing world must be drenched by that worship’s overflow. Jesus wept (John 11:35) and weeps. Jesus joins us in our weeping. Let us, in our worship-become-flesh, join him in his weeping. We must never cease the study of worship, nor the exploration of worship. Yet, we must never let the study of worship replace the humility of actual worship. To become satisfied with how we relate to what God has revealed would be to ignore, even fear, on-going exploration of the mystery of God and the further understanding of the worship of God. Leaving such exploration to professional theologians, alone, is to settle for virtual commitment of the local congregation. Liturgy performed in the sanctuary, and made flesh throughout the week, is, indeed, the work of the people, as is any revolution.

Indeed, it is the people who worship, and, over time, develop and refine Christian worship by the words they refuse to say and sing, and the words they are determined to say and sing, at any risk. Therefore, this collection of spoken moments is presented first and foremost to the people who do the work of worship; the congregations, and then to those who have been called to lead them into the spiritual battle of living the gospel.

Our aim here is to teach (more likely remind) a bit about worship as well as to provide some crafted words to illustrate or facilitate the specific facet of

worship under consideration. It is not necessary to read this book from front cover to back as you would a novel. Still, it is hoped that such an approach would make some sequential sense and that it would be a satisfying endeavor.

These words and the worship they attend, are not meant to help you “enter into God’s presence,” for we cannot escape God’s presence. We do, however, as liturgical theologian Harold Best suggests in his book *Unceasing Worship* (InterVarsity Press, 2003), continuously make choices throughout the day, every day, to focus our worship toward the one true God, or toward some lesser “god” of our choosing or crafting. It is hoped that the writings you are about to encounter will be found portable, lodged in your mind and heart for the purpose of traveling with you, coming to your aid in the proper focus of worship, coming to you with inherent courage, “for the living of these days.”

Many in the know about such things suggest that we have moved from words to visual images as the main vehicle for our liturgical expression. Given their report, we suggest here that words, at their best, do, indeed, create images in the mind of the reader/hearer. Our prayer is that the images created will be compelling and enriching, stirring humble courage.

To the extent that words can carry our worship, they must do so with eloquence, authenticity, truth, and a bit of mystery; mystery because it is, indeed, a mystery that God would encourage, hear, and accept our worship. Eloquence, because we want to present to God the best we have at every offering. Authenticity, because our worship must be, in fact, ours. Truth, because our words must confess who we are and who we pray to become as we transform toward Christ-likeness.

The ministry potential of images, visual or mental, is their capacity to invite, rather than to manipulate. The safeguard is to be found in the understanding that worship is to be art, not propaganda. The difference between those two encounters is to be found in the intent . . . manipulation or exploration. How does one know the difference? Art refuses to manipulate. Propaganda, on the other hand, exists to manipulate, and considers art to be naïve, weak, and inefficient. Art trusts the Holy Spirit and the worshiper. Propaganda has grown impatient with both.

Freed from the heavy and oppressive demands of producing propaganda, the worship planner/leader worships before, and with, the congregation. Then, as a member of the congregation, disperses to live words-become-flesh, to live “the liturgy after the liturgy.” The words on the following pages are offered

humbly and hopefully, even as the congregation is invited into a Spirit-crafted image of opportunity on Sunday morning.

Images, not prescriptions; invitation, rather than manipulation; co-worshippers, not entertainer and audience; humble invocation and encounter, rather than conjuring; this is the aim of the small offering you hold in your hands. Let worship, itself, observe sabbath by falling into the arms of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is Lord. Thanks be to God.

Peace,
Terry W. York
Baylor University's
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Waco, Texas

PRAYERS



Introduction

Many consider prayer to be synonymous with worship. Prayer is conversation with God; simple enough, clear enough. Later in life we learn that listening to the other person is part of mature conversation. We also learn that being comfortably quiet with someone over lengths of time is evidence of a deep relationship. So, too, the development of prayer and worship in our life seems to move from speaking, to listening, to simply “being” in focused silence.

There is an idea afloat that prayer must be, or must appear to be, spontaneous to be authentic. If that were the case, when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He would have had to say, “I can’t, that would be programming and stifling your future prayer, rendering your prayers inauthentic.” Instead, He gave them, and us, the Model Prayer, the Our Father. In doing so, He gave us not only specific words, but, indeed, this model: when you pray, let your prayers be inspired and shaped by God. It is, after all, God who invites (Hebrews 4:16), interprets (Romans 8:26), accepts and answers our prayer (2 Corinthians 7:14). Worship, too, is to be inspired and shaped by God.

To pray is to acknowledge the presence and attention of God. At times, it may seem prayer is shouting into the silence (even absence) of God; speaking our heart-words into the space where God should be, has been. Either way, in prayer, the existence of God and God’s love is assumed.

Sometimes our prayer (so, too, our worship) is protest, protest dared in front of the Creator, for we know the Creator to be good. The fact that we are not struck down is testimony to God’s love for us. Sometimes our very human prayer is the equally audacious (but not without biblical precedent) act of negotiation

a moment of vulnerability and honesty, indeed. It is a moment of deep faith, as well.

“Shall we pray.” “Will you pray with me?” “Let us pray.” These are expressions of fair warning. With these words we knowingly expose our hearts to God, risking God’s silence, submitting to God’s will. Yet, God is love, and we know it. Our loving God receives praise and protest, love and lament, faint hearted and broken-hearted prayer.

LIKE RAIN

Prayer has come like rain to me;
to sit and think and listen with me,
to clear the air, to shrink the world and draw it in
closer, ever closer, to where we sit
and think and listen.

Prayer has come like rain to me;
to sit and think, and whisper to me,
to filter sound, to still the world and draw it in
closer, ever quieter, to where we sit
and think and listen.

Prayer has come to rescue me;
to sit and think, and breathe into me;
to moisten thought, baptize the world and draw it in
closer, ever holier, to where we sit
and think and listen.

A FRAGILE BUTTERFLY

A fragile butterfly
on a hot day,
bright color struggling,
the search for flowers
amid weeds,
a full life
in a short span.
Temporal praise
to the eternal God,
being, as prayer.

BLESSINGS



Introduction

Blessings, spoken in a moment, echo throughout time.

One Christ-follower speaking God's blessing on another is a special moment and special function. It doesn't matter if the one pronouncing the blessing is clergy or laity. Either way, a human being, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, serves as a priest. Indeed, a congregation can voice blessing upon itself, or upon an individual. The dynamic part of a blessing, of course, is God's participation. The words of a blessing would be hollow and ineffective if God were not present, originating, encouraging, and endorsing.

Therefore, our blessings need to be biblical and based on what we know of how God works in us and among us. In pronouncing a blessing, we do not tell God what to do. Rather, we remind ourselves of God's promises and what God does. We remember how God works among us. We remember what God has done and is doing in the world. We remember God's love and provision for us. Then we use words to focus that remembering, aiming it toward the one or ones to be enriched, encouraged, and shaped by the blessing. We trust that God hears our blessing as a prayer.

One of the subtle, but important, facets of a blessing is that it is outwardly focused. We certainly can ask God's blessing on our self. There is nothing wrong with that. Blessing others, acting if even for a moment as their priest, aligns our hearts with God and humbles our perspective. We ask that the blessing bypass us, or at most, flow through us, but the end focus is the individual or the group being blessed. It is a humbling thing to have blessings flow through us.

As Free as the Spirit

May you be blessed to love as Jesus loves, embrace creation as the Creator embraces, and be as free to do so as Holy Spirit is free, so that your life might glow with Heaven's light in this world's present darkness. Amen.

Glimpses and Whispers of God

Be blessed this day with a thousand glimpses and whispers of the ever-present, nearby God, the indwelling Christ, and the guiding and comforting Spirit. Be blessed this day by an unusual sense that God is with you. Be blessed this day with glimpses and whispers of God. Amen.

Eternal God Redeems Time

Be blessed by minutes slowed to hours. Be blessed by early and late stretched into a full day of being, at home. Be blessed by silence that has been waiting to sooth you. The Eternal God fits easily into minutes, hours, and days. This is the day that the Lord has made, be present in it, even as God is present in it. Amen.

He Comes to Us

Jesus comes to us, not once but always. Be blessed by being aware. See Jesus in every face, perhaps smiling, perhaps weeping, but present so that you might see His love for all of us, for each of us; so that you might be blessed to see His love for you. Amen.

The Least of These

Be blessed by pain. Feel the hurt of hunger, of sickness, of poverty, of aloneness, in others and within yourself. The blessing is in the deeper and fuller embrace of The Way, The Truth, and The Life. The blessings of birth and resurrection await. Amen.

CHILD DEDICATION



Introduction

The lifting up of a child before God is a holy moment for the entire congregation: ministers, congregants, parents, and children. Like all blessings, the child is a gift from God, a gift that requires our dedicated stewardship. The focus of the moment gathers the congregation (past, present, and future) into the huddled embrace of new life, fragile life, eternal life. All the congregation's faith and doubts, joy and fear, memories and hopes, agreements and disagreements, business meetings and baptisms, high holy services and parking lot conversations are drawn back to the starting point, the very point of Church itself. It's all drawn back to a miraculous "zero" where the counting of whatever your congregation counts starts all over again. New life bursts into the congregation's old life, kicking and crying in protest of human need ignored. "Be reminded," reads the note that the baby brings with it, "Every human being is a person who needs love, food, water, and shelter." It's a note straight from heaven, straight from the Man who was born in Bethlehem. The mothers are the first to understand and to translate the baby's message into determined action. The child dedication ceremony is the moment of stark recalibration of what really matters in life. Now, as always, it takes a baby to carry such an important message. We have child dedication services to properly receive and honor the divine word. Every baby, under every steeple, under every star, brings the message. Here are the basics. Remember. Start again. Do not reject the message. Do not reject the messenger. Receiving and acknowledging the message causes us to ask, "Who or what, exactly, is being dedicated?"

lives and decision making. Our mature editing of the teachings of Christ is forced to plead its case against the backdrop of lessons of which children are our most effective teachers. The paradox can become a Spirit-blessed dynamic tension. We are God's children. We are to approach Jesus, his teachings, and his kingdom as a child. These metaphors call us back from our ways to His Way, The Way.

When we dedicate a child, we reorient, once again, our relationship to God. We are called again to humility before the Divine Parent whom we worship. Earthly parenthood does not make us equal to God or God equal to us. Hold the child. Know, anew, that you are a child of God. We move from "milk to meat" in our Christian maturity. We are brothers and sisters of, and in, Christ. We never cease to be children of God. Indeed, all persons in all places are children of God. Worship reminds us of the blanket of mercy, tightly wrapped around us.

Hear Our Humble Cry

We lift this child to you, God, even as we bow before you. What you have given us, we accept as a precious gift. But this gift humbles us like nothing else in life. We dedicate this child, and ourselves, to you, the Giver of all life. Lift us up, even as we lift this child to you. Hear our humble cry. You are the only God. Attend to this life through us. Shape our congregation through the life of this child, even as you shape this child through us. Amen.

Each Baby's Cry

Leader: Each baby's cry

People: is a call from home, a message from God.

Leader: Each time a child asks, "Why,"

People: it is a call to return to the basics of life.

Leader: Each time a child scrapes a knee

People: it is an occasion to feel the pain of children and parents around the world.

Leader: Each discovery by our children

People: is a call for us to renew our wonder of creation.

Leader: Here, today, at this dedication

People: we embrace, again, our humility before Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

LITANIES



Introduction

Let us remember the importance of saying the right words at the right time: the courageous words at the dangerous time, the comforting words at the heart-breaking time, the words of Christ at the crucial time. This readiness is the result and one of the functions of ritual. Litanies are structured to facilitate this important discipline. Litanies, like congregational song, plant truths deep into our proactive and reactive hearts.

Worship is a dialogue initiated by God and entered into by persons who hear and choose to respond to God's invitation in obedience and love. Litanies are built on the pattern of invitation and response; they cause the worshiper to rehearse the exchange. Litanies teach us to listen and to do so in rhythm, the rhythm of the Holy Spirit. Litanies teach us to say "please" and "thank you," "yes ma'am" and "yes sir," on a Heavenly scale.

It is important that we hear ourselves saying the right words at the right time, even if we don't always mean them with all our heart at the time. It is important that we encounter the right words at the right time, even if we don't believe those words at the time. This may sound inauthentic and empty, but the technique is used in home settings as children are raised and formed. This bit of formative, if at times merely rote, rehearsal has been experienced by all of us many times. God can handle the truth of our sporadic and inconsistent engagement with the words. Can we? The short rituals that we call litanies are not moments of brainwashing or indoctrination. Rather, they are the planting of seeds in prepared rows, seeds of truth that will blossom into beautiful fruit and flowers, even in seasons and gardens of lies.

It Is Christmas

Leader: It is Christmas! God has given us the gift of a baby.

People: God is the gracious giver of all good gifts. Babies are precious. Babies are also demanding.

Leader: The baby Jesus calls us to humility.

People: We will focus on life's basic needs and speak the simple language of Jesus.

Leader: The baby Jesus calls us to newly born love for the homeless.

People: We are surprised, and our hearts are warmed by this new capacity to love.

Leader: The baby Jesus calls us to consider the world He has entered.

People: He makes us aware of babies who are hungry, babies who are sick, babies who are mistreated, babies who are separated from their families.

Leader: The baby Jesus calls us to Sabbath.

People: We have a renewed appreciation for rest and quietness.

Leader: The baby Jesus calls us to new depths of joy.

People: We are reminded that laughter and singing and dancing and gentleness are the best ways to stimulate life and growth.

All: Let us show the world these baby pictures.

We Send the Magi

Leader: We send the Magi to seek a baby.

People: They find a toddler exploring His world.

Leader: We send the Magi to seek a king.

People: They find a little boy who needs His mother.

Leader: We send the Magi to validate our wisdom.

People: They find a child intrigued by nature.

Leader: We send the Magi to interpret the star.

People: They find a child fascinated and overjoyed by light.

Leader: We send the Magi to give Jesus gifts.

People: They find God's Gift who would give us life.

BENEDICTIONS



Introduction

Benedictions sound a bit like prayers, but in their basic form, they are more like blessings. Benedictions send us from a feast out into a famine. We go out to live and share witness to the gospel that nourishes us. Benedictions transition us from the liturgy just ended to the longer liturgy just begun; both are the work of the people who are believers. A benediction is a connection. Sunday is connected to the six days that follow. Words heard and said and sung are connected to words lived. Imagination is connected to implementation. The Kingdom of God is infused into the assumptions of the Kingdom of this World. Worldview is transformed. Benedictions turn an ending into a beginning.

Benedictions cause us to think differently about worship. Benedictions will not allow us to close the door on worship after an hour: no containing, storing, or hoarding. The Dove in the sanctuary in worship is freed to soar and nest in places of every sort and location. The God who can still be visited in the sanctuary is understood, now, to visit each and everyone in their places of refuge or struggle. Three-in-One soars and nests, pursues and waits, speaks and remains silent. All these couplings and encounters have the potential of being launched by the same benedictions. Benedictions are to be savored and internalized. They are a gentle clasp of the hand by the One who says, "Follow me." God does not wave good-bye during the benediction, rather, God beckons us to follow out into the world to join the work already underway. The benediction says, "Do you think this morning was something special? Wait until you see God at work tomorrow and throughout the week."

What Others Pass By

Now, God goes with you to remind you, to point out to you what others pass by, to reveal to you what is not seen on the surface, to whisper to you what is not heard in the noise. May God heighten all your senses so that you may see Jesus in others, so that Jesus may be seen in you. Amen

Oh, What a Day

What a blessed day it is when we realize that we do not walk alone. Although friends and loved ones die and leave us, we do not walk alone. The One who has always walked with us, even when ignored, walks with us still, unconditionally. Oh, what a day when we realize that. Oh, what a day when we accept it, when we lean into the day and days ahead because God walks with us. Amen and amen. From the heights to the depths, Amen.

Advent Benediction

Go, now, aware that the homeless sleep in the foyer of a mansion, their mansion under construction in Heaven. Jesus, their marginalized brother, builds it. Know that to walk around and over the homeless is to pass by the Savior, Himself. Jesus of the stable, so dependent on the hospitality of others for a house to sleep in at night, forgive our misunderstanding of house and home and mansion. Abide in us. We pray in your name, Amen.

Exit/Entrance

The doors through which you entered this morning should not now be seen as exits. They are, once again, entrances. Reenter the world which God the Parent of All created, the world for which Christ, the Brother of All, died and rose again, the world in which Holy Spirit, the Comforter of All, moves in the wind. Walk from presence into presence, holy space into holy space. Enter. We always enter. There is no exiting from God, Amen.

POETRY



Introduction

Prose and poetry are not enemies. Yet, it is fair to say that hymn texts and anthem lyrics are the results of prose and poetry holding each other accountable in the context of worship.

When, in our worship, we set ourselves to the tasks of speaking about God, declaring our love for God, even simply thinking about God, we will of necessity either shrink God to fit our prose, or we will find a way to expand our language to explore the immensity of God. That expanded language is called poetry. Eventually, even poetry must bow to silence as the language of our awe. We need not fear silence, for the Holy Spirit understands silence as language and is eager to translate for us. If we insist on prose exclusively in our worship, we will eventually serve a smaller God. Poetry allows our words to pursue, receive, and embrace both the revelation and the mystery of God.

Often, words serve us best by pointing to a truth rather than trying to adequately state that truth. Words have limitations, but when they are grouped together to create an image, a stunning synergy is created. Something more than the sum of its parts is revealed; something more than prose could have stated is seen. Further, poetry functions as a mirror to our souls, a mirror that could not be held up by any other means. Poetry respects the insights, experience, and intelligence of the reader/hearer. The poet, like any other artist, relinquishes control. In the poet's case, this is control over how their words will be heard, processed, and applied. So, too, the worship planner must give up control as to how the worshiper will hear, process, and apply what the planner and the Spirit have crafted.

Poems on Listening: in Worship, as Worship

DIFFERENT MUSIC

Each of us
is both infant and young mother.
It is life that flows;
music is life only when it flows.

Who is proud?
Who is needy?

The young and the old
hear different music.

A WORD AND A NOTE

Were the words and the notes aware of each other
before the song was composed,
or were they two snow-capped mountain peaks
many miles apart?

Forever they have existed
in high and distant sight of each other,
yet in their own worlds
until that moment
when they were called to a point in the valley
by the first listener.

Their two small snows melt
in the listener's soul,
tears of the mountains
written, played, sung, remembered:
a word and a note.

IN EVERY WORDLESS SONG

In every wordless song,
a shadow stalks each note.
It is a poem seeking light,
it is the heart in search of words
that know.

The poem is drawn to the light,
but sees the risk
in the shining.
So, there it hides
in shadow,
as shadows
behind the music.

The composer claims to know.
The conductor has a hint.
Each player feels the longing love.
But it is the listener,
the listener who sighs a "Yes,"
yet bids the words stay hidden
until the light can laugh and say,
"Come Love,
come know my life and words.
Come Truth,
come poem full bidden."