God's words and liturgy's echo

"I love you," says God. "We love you, too," our prayers reply.

by Lauren F. Winner in the August 30, 2017 issue

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The historian of liturgy Hughes Oliphant Old once observed that “prayer, particularly Christian prayer, uses biblical language. . . . The Bible contains a vast number of paradigms for prayer and a thesaurus of words to handle the unique experience of prayer.” The Book of Common Prayer is a paradigmatic instance of the use of biblical language in prayer. If you are familiar with that tradition of prayers, you know more Bible than you realize.

Indeed, at a Sunday Eucharist in the Episcopal Church, words of scripture are almost the first words we say. After an opening hymn, the priest and the congregation exchange a greeting. During the season of Lent, that greeting is “Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins. His mercy endures forever.” During the season of Easter, it’s “Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.” During the rest of the year, the greeting is “Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever. Amen.”

Each of those formulations has its roots in scripture. “Blessed be God” is a phrase proclaimed in several places in the Old Testament; when I open the service with those words, I like to think they are especially attached to the psalmist’s use of them in Psalm 66. There the psalmist says, “Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me” (v. 20). This feels like a wonderful note on which to start our service—an affirmation and a reminder, as we begin to pray, that God does not reject our prayers.

The penitential words with which we begin the service during Lent are also drawn from the Psalms; they echo Psalm 103:2–3 (“Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who forgives all your iniquity”). Finally, during the Easter season, we quote the Gospel of Luke’s account of what the disciples said to one another, on the first Easter, as they were beginning to make sense of the rumors that Jesus was alive: “The Lord has risen indeed,” they said to one another.

After this opening acclamation, we say the collect for purity, which echoes Psalm 51. Then, in many of our churches, we sing or recite the prayer known as “the Gloria,” a prayer of praise that dates to the fourth century. Its first line—“glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth”—is drawn from the Christmas story, from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Right after Mary gives birth, an angel appears to a group of shepherds. The angel proclaims that the Messiah has been born and tells the shepherds they’ll know they’ve found the Messiah when they come upon “a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And then, suddenly, a large batch of additional angels appears, and all those angels together proclaim the words we say on Sunday mornings: “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.” It is perhaps the hearing of those holy words that allowed the shepherds to recognize God in the form of an unregistered, undocumented newborn in a barn, and reciting them on Sundays may help us recognize Jesus in one another and in the bread and wine. Before we get to the official reading of the Bible, we’ve already been saturated in the words of scripture.

Similarly, the section of the Eucharist that follows the scripture readings is stitched together from biblical phrases. We begin turning our attention fully to the Eucharist when the bread and wine are brought forward to the altar or table (donations of money might also be collected and brought forward). Just before the bread and wine are brought forward, the priest says a sentence taken from scripture—the sentence might be “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God” (from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians); or it might be “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (from Ps. 96); or some other biblical verse that encapsulates something of what is happening in the Eucharist.

When we stitch our prayers with biblical phrases, we offer God’s words back to God.

And then we enter the long prayers over the bread and wine. The arc of these prayers is scriptural, echoing and retelling the Bible’s account of the Last Supper (found in Matt. 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and 1 Cor. 11). They also include the congregation’s praying the Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus gives to his followers, as recorded in Matthew 6 and Luke 11. The major pieces of the eucharistic liturgies, then, are either direct quotations from the Bible (as in the Lord’s Prayer) or paraphrases of biblical texts.

So much of what we say when we gather together on Sunday morning is drawn from the Bible that it might be accurate to say *Christian communal worship is people getting together and returning to God the words that God has given us in the Bible*. For Episcopalians (and for some other members of the larger Christian family, like Roman Catholics), scripture is not one element among many in communal worship; scripture is the fundamental element of worship.

Why does so much of our communal worship comprise the recitation of scripture? The biblical book 1 Chronicles depicts the people of Israel bringing gold, silver, and precious stones to be used in the building of the temple. King David surveys these offerings, and says to God: “For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. . . . O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own” (1 Chron. 29:14, 16).

“All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.” In earlier editions of the Episcopal prayer book (maddeningly lost from our current edition), that sentence is included in the list of biblical sentences that a priest might say just

before the bread and wine are brought to the table. The prayer book included that sentence because it recognized that at the Eucharist, we offer to God something that God first gave us. We didn't create the wheat or the grapes; God made them, and now we give to God bread and wine that we made from the stores God gave us.

The centrality of biblical words and biblical phrases in worship is just like bread and wine; when we stitch our prayers together from biblical phrases, we are offering God's own words back to God, and we're acknowledging, in a sense, that no words we could offer God are fully ours—they're always words we've received first from God, and, just as we make wine from grapes, we've managed to make some prayers with words God authored.

The Bible itself shows us that one good thing to do with the words of the Bible is offer them back to God in prayer. For example, in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Mary offers a stunning prayer, praising God for the strange thing God has done in making her pregnant with the Messiah. Mary is not making this prayer up out of whole cloth. She draws on a prayer she would have known from reading 1 Samuel, a prayer of thanksgiving Hannah prayed after she became pregnant. Even Jesus did not concoct all his prayers from whole cloth. As he was being put to death, Jesus himself offered the words of Psalm 22 to God the Father.

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To be sure, there are plenty of words in our communal prayers that don't come directly from scripture. Some of the words were written by Christians in the third century or the 16th century or the 20th century. Those extrabiblical words are, to use a culinary metaphor, binding agents: they are like tapioca in a blueberry pie. The blueberries are the point of the pie, but the tapioca thickens the berries and holds them together.

Sometimes it strikes me as odd that so much of our communal worship consists of reciting words of scripture back to God. It strikes me as odd, I think, because simply reciting God's words back to God doesn't seem to leave much room for my personal, individual prayers.

Of course, a life of prayer does include each of us simply talking to God—about our feelings, about our questions. I tend to do that kind of praying while I'm walking to work, or when I can't sleep at night. Even there, however, I find I don't always have very good words for my own deep emotions; when I'm angry, I often find that

praying Psalm 109 is as direct a way of taking that anger to God as venting the specifics of my fury at my sister, who yet again managed to elide my whole adulthood in a single phrase.

I am increasingly trying to allow the liturgy's reliance on scriptural language to shape my understanding of what scripture and prayer are. If the church's worship consists largely of reciting scripture, then scripture in part is the text Christians pray together. And if the church's worship consists largely of reciting scripture, then prayer isn't foremost about carrying my individual concerns to God. Prayer, rather, is about offering to God something—some sentences, some odes—we've made from words God first gave us.

There's no perfect analogy here, but perhaps speaking to God from God's own store of scriptural words is a bit like the beloved who, upon hearing her lover declare "I love you," says "I love you too." She doesn't feel compelled to come up with an original response; she simply wants to return the ardor.

Or perhaps speaking to God from God's own store of scriptural words is a bit like the kind of conversation you have when you get together with your siblings, whom you only see twice a year. You always tell the same anecdotes, and you slip into old family idioms you never use with anyone else—but when you're with your sisters, those turns of phrase seem so natural that you barely notice what you're saying. This exchange of family clichés is comfortable and a little boring; the clichés knit you together, and they need to be said.

Or perhaps speaking to God from God's own store of scriptural words is a bit like actors performing a play in front of the playwright. My favorite playwright is Sarah Ruhl. In a 2007 interview, Ruhl talked about watching a recent production of her play *The Clean House*:

> It was exactly the play and yet more so, because there were elements I would never have thought of that were so sublime. For instance, there's a scene where Lane, a doctor married to a doctor, imagines her husband kissing the breast of his new lover, who is one of his patients. The stage direction says, "Ana wears a gown. Is it a hospital gown or a ballroom gown?" Well, Marilyn Dodds Frank, who plays Ana, walked out in a renaissance ball gown made of lavender hospital-gown material. It had a train that was about 20 yards long. So she begins walking out in this

> purple gown, and it just keeps coming and coming and coming. I would never have thought of that. That was a high point of my life really, watching that production and thinking: They really read my mind.

I wonder if God ever experiences our worship that way— like we've taken the script of scripture and thrown in an insane lavender gown that God didn't think of, and in so doing, we've somehow gotten to the essence of the script and delighted the playwright.

Elsewhere in the same interview, Ruhl says that although she's always pleased and impressed by the productions of her plays, she'd "like to discover what would happen if I worked with the same actors and designers over and over in a concentrated way. If the actor and I were able to know exactly what we meant if I said, 'Give this line a little more space.' As opposed to one actor who thinks space is a subtext and another who thinks space is a technical pause."

This seems like a good way to think about what we do as a church community, week in and week out. I doubt I'll ever know "exactly" what God means when God asks us to give a line a bit more space. But it's nice to imagine that years from now, after many more years of working together on the scripts that are our scripture-saturated prayers, I and my church community might be able to more natively inhabit the script.

One more insight, culled from the theater, about why so much of our worship consists in returning words of the Bible to God: a book I recently read by voice coach Catherine Weate observes that when we're around people we're intimate with, we often unconsciously "shadow each other's words and rhythms." Indeed, among those we love, we sometimes lapse into what's called "allo-repetition," repeating back to someone what she has said first. We might, for example, use a word our friend has just used, or we might repeat her entire sentence with tiny modifications of diction or punctuation (when your friend says "Do you want to know what happened to me today?" you don't reply "yes"; you reply "I *do* want to know what happened to you today!"). When we allo-repeat, we are showing that we're paying attention to our friend; we're affirming that what she's said is important; and, ultimately, by borrowing her speech, we strengthen and cement our bond to her.

Our habit of borrowing God's words when speaking to God is not, therefore, a sign that our real selves are somehow not engaged in prayer; to the contrary, our use of

scripture in worship is precisely a sign, and an agent, of our intimacy with God.

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