The shape of liturgy when everything is changing

Even stones are constantly being transformed.

by Claire Miller Colombo in the August 26, 2020 issue

A mound of stones at Seminary of the Southwest, part of the Austin, Texas, school's Holy Week observance. (Photo by Christine Brunson)

As of mid-July, more than 650 cases of COVID-19 had been linked to US church gatherings. Many of these cases correlate with what we now know to have been a premature return to our prepandemic ways in June—a return boosted, in church contexts, by Donald Trump's May 22 declaration that houses of worship provide essential services. The resulting spike in infection persists at the time of this writing, and many of the reopened churches have since reclosed.

Back in May—at the height of the church reopening debate, before we fully comprehended how unsafe it would be—the pro-reopening argument hinged on the

claim that worship provides spiritual solace to churchgoers. In this equation, church services sit contagiously close to commercial ones. Spiritual health and comfort are the deliverables. Worship becomes a transactional event that requires the presence of consumers seeking their own consolation.

This argument was muted when the killing of George Floyd changed the national conversation. The centuries-old transaction wherein white comfort is purchased by black bodies was exposed in a ghastly way. And as statistics continue to confirm that COVID-19 death rates are higher among black bodies than white ones, white demands for a brand of spiritual comfort that can only be gotten in close worship quarters smack of white Christian privilege.

The whole church reopening debacle has effectively exposed as false two key premises upon which North American Christians have long based their beliefs about worship: that its main purpose is to deliver spiritual comfort and that a safe version of it must always be made available. Without them we're left standing awkwardly like emperors with no clothes. Before we hastily re-robe for what one Episcopal bishop has called our idolatry—our worship of worship itself—we should perhaps pause to remember that worship is a ritual act not of self-preservation but of self-sacrifice and conversion. We liturgical Christians call this self-sacrificial conversion "Eucharist," and we understand it as a leavening: a yeasty and troubling process that happens across time.

We've all noticed by now the ubiquity of home-baked bread. (Although the *pan-* in *pandemic* is the Greek root for "all," it might just as well be the similar Latin root for the loaves we love.) As I've scrolled past bread posts in my newsfeed and savored slices served up by my new-to-bread-baking husband, I've wondered whether our sudden preoccupation with bread—our hunger for rustic versions of it—relates in any way to our banishment from worship services.

A whiff of an answer came to me in the results of a recent survey *America* magazine did, asking readers what they missed most about Sunday worship. Many responses were predictable: people pined for a favorite pew, a familiar community, the contemplative silence, the singing of songs, the adorable acolytes.

Do we dare to remember that we ourselves are called into an ongoing process of change?

One response caught my attention. A woman in Waukesha, Wisconsin, sorrowed that Sunday no longer felt special. The remedy? “We now bake bread on Saturday evening,” she said, so that on Sunday, “we wake up to a different breakfast.”

But is that homey breakfast really all that different from the comforting thing it stands in for? “Bread baking is a thing we do in crisis,” writes *Vox* culture critic Emily VanDerWerff, “perhaps because bread is one of the foundations of civilization, and perhaps because it has been marketed to us as life-giving.” Bread baking also gives us a sense of agency in the midst of uncertainty, she says; it gives us “a sense of optimism.”

Or, in religious terms, a sense of hope. Even as it focuses us in the present, bread baking orients us toward the future. It comes into being through a transformative process of mixing, kneading, rising, heating—and pulls us through time along with it.

This is why, I suspect, the Waukesha family finds bread baking a fitting locum tenens for the Eucharist. Both remind us, or should, of the eschatological character of being human—a sense of ourselves as transubstantiating through time toward greater integrity, wholeness, and fullness. They remind us of our restless being-in-hope.

During times of spatial luxury, it’s easy to forget that this is who we are. We seek solace through things quickly gotten in space—food, clothes, toys, trips in airplanes, trips to church—rather than dwell upon our individual and collective telos, the extension of ourselves through time toward the infinite.

It seems that when our spatial freedom contracts, as it has been doing since early March, we reawaken to our temporal identity. We remember that we are connected to those who came before and will come after us, that we are members not only of the 10 a.m. congregation but also of the communion of saints. We remember that we embody Christ not only in space but also across time.

In a recent *New Yorker* article, Kim Stanley Robinson expresses a similar sense of things. Some of us pandemic people, he notes, have decided to sacrifice certain freedoms so that in the future, others will suffer less. “In this case, the time horizon is so short that we are the future people,” he observes. But a much longer global crisis looms. “If we can find [a new sense of solidarity] in this crisis, to save ourselves, then maybe we can find it in the big crisis, to save our children and theirs.”

Robinson worries that we might not have the grit to keep our eyes trained on the horizon of the future. It asks much of us—including that we look backward, too, and that we "get in good trouble," as Representative John Lewis urged, in order to redress the evils we see there. These are tall orders. We prefer spatial freedom and temporal myopia because they relieve us of responsibility to our unknown neighbors past and future; they relieve us of the ethical imperative to take uncomfortable risks.

The pining of Christians for our usual ways of worship is one manifestation of these preferences. At worst, it echoes other calls for a return to a romanticized past—both contemporary political calls and those of our religious ancestors who, liberated from slavery but wearied by desert life, wondered if it would be better to go back to Egypt (Deuteronomy 1:3). At best, it expresses a deep love for what once gave us life. We are like Mary Oliver's clams, which "have a muscle that loves being alive. They pull away from the light. They pull down. They hold themselves together. They refuse to open."

As the body of Christ, though, it is our telling and our telos not to hold ourselves together in space but to be broken open in and beyond time. For liturgical churches both low and high, Christian worship is a microcosm of this ongoing macro-breaking. "The liturgy doesn't mean something," says liturgical theologian Nathan Jennings, "it does something." Liturgy performs anamnesis and looks to eschaton: it enacts the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and it is a remembering forward, a discipling, of our beginnings as creatures and our ultimate end in God.

None of this promises spiritual comfort. Instead, it offers an ongoing paschal cycle of coming together, breaking down, and rising again in a new and different form—a cycle of transformation. "Do not hold on to me," the risen Jesus says to Mary Magdalene; "I am ascending to my Father and your Father" (John 20:16). *I'm not the old entity to which you can cling. I am rising into something new.*

Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus prefigures his own transformational identity as life-giving bread (6:35–51). He uses the image of bread to describe what happens when we actively partake of the total Jesus story: we become a part of him, which is to say that we die to one kind of life and rise to another, one that we creatures-in-time can't yet imagine and so can only describe as eternal. With metaphorical energy that draws the unknown into the known, Jesus reveals reality itself as a process of integration, disintegration, and renewal—of coming together, breaking down, and

building up.

Over the course of 36 hours, a makeshift burial mound materialized as if from the earth itself.

This is how bread works, chemically speaking. When the single-celled organisms known as yeast combine with flour and water, they consume the glucose molecules in the mixture, metabolize them, and release them as carbon dioxide and ethyl alcohol—gases that cause the dough to rise. These gases also rearrange the proteins in the dough so they bond into a stable network. *You are what you eat,* Jesus seems to be saying, *which is me—metabolization and transformation toward and within the unity in which "all things hold together"* (Colossians 1:17).

According to theologian Mayra Rivera, this is precisely why Jesus uses the word *flesh* self-referentially in this discourse and elsewhere in John. Flesh, she argues, is a more appropriate word than *body* for the reality of Jesus because it connotes fluidity, connection, and regeneration within a larger order. Fleshiness is a process of "always becoming," as "air, water, food, sunlight, and even societies of microorganisms enter our bodies to weave the delicate tissue" that make us who we are.

After two millennia, scientists too have begun to verify Jesus' teaching that reality is a transformative process. Physicist Carlo Rovelli, for one, maintains that what we perceive as objects are in fact illusions. "We can think of the world as made up of *things*. Of *substances*. Of *entities*," he writes. "Of something that *is*. Or we can think of it as made up of *events*. Of *happenings*. Of *processes*. Of something that *occurs*. Something that . . . undergoes continual transformation."

Even the things we perceive to be most "thing-like"—such as a stone or a loaf of bread—are, Rovelli writes, more like a kiss, "a complex vibration of quantum fields, a momentary interaction of forces, a process that for a brief moment manages to keep its shape, to hold itself in equilibrium before disintegrating again into dust."

If reality is a process, and Christ is reality, and we as church embody Christ, then we too must be in process toward and within the eternal.

To be the body of Christ at this and every moment in history is to let change happen, to sacrifice the preference we have for the comfortable norm. The other option—waiting it out before a return to the old ways—may not be viable. "Fear of

the proximity of others may linger for many people long after the pandemic fades," writes Elizabeth Anderson in *Earth and Altar*, "and it may not be easy to return again to older practices, which might come to be seen as recklessly infectious." The irony is sharp: worship services that once promoted a holy, life-giving metabolism have become feeding grounds for a shadowy, death-dealing one.

"Liturgies can either serve to keep us alienated from or, at best oblivious to created matter," writes Catherine Vincie in her 2014 book *Worship and the New Cosmology*, "or they can engender new patterns of relationship between ourselves and creation that are life-giving for all concerned. It is past time they did the latter."

OK. But how?

There's no easy answer to this question, because implicit in transformation is surrender to the unknown. "The things we want are transformative," writes essayist Rebecca Solnit, "and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation."

Naturally, artists lead the way. It's their job, Solnit continues, "to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar." Countless models of this kind of door opening have arisen in the so-called secular world. Groups of poets create renga poems to process the pandemic. Musicians, dancers, and actors perform in isolation to produce unified works. Colorful creations are displayed in windows to encourage essential workers.

Artists' attitudes toward these necessary shifts are summed up by the neo-soul singer Erykah Badu, who has been live-streaming interactive shows from her Dallas home since March in order to maintain an income and support her crew. "I miss that synergy and energy between me and the audience," she told the *New York Times*. "But I found a new way to express that, and it doesn't take its place. It just evolved it to another place."

With the best of intentions, churches have tried to evolve in similar ways, offering weekly and sometimes daily worship services in virtual formats. But after a spike in online attendance in the early weeks of lockdown, more than half of churches surveyed in June reported that virtual attendance had since leveled off or declined. "I'm running out of creative energy," one pastor said. "The novelty of online has definitely worn off."

One of my Facebook friends echoed this sentiment. “Having eschewed the well-intentioned but (to me) unmoving virtual church service for the third week in a row, I finally asked myself: ‘Do you think you’ll go back? Has it, the world, and you changed too much for it to assume the same place in your life? Will it feel forced, irrelevant, unsatisfying, or inauthentic?’”

I’ve had two authentic and transformative worship experiences in recent months. Neither was digital.

The first was an Easter liturgy conjured by the dean of our seminary, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, who is not only a priest and a biblical scholar but also a poet and a painter—a devotee of rudiments, of raw materials, and a practitioner of making new things from them. As Easter approached, she acknowledged that we Christians “have a powerful longing to celebrate in a corporate way the holy days that are the origin of our faith” but that quarantine had made gathering impossible. She reminded us that the basic components of liturgy are not only space but also time, people, and simple natural elements.

She then proposed a minimalist liturgical observance of the Triduum that would engage those elements, but in surprising measures: a long span of time, a small plot of space, a diaspora of people, and the natural element of stones.

We would each choose a rock from home, wash it on Maundy Thursday, convey it to campus on Good Friday, and lay it in a small clearing. On Easter morning, we would return to campus and take a different stone away. Through these modest economic actions we would collectively create, in her words, “a tomb, a grave, a temple” that would then dissipate into the “community of the risen Christ.”

And so, at the appointed times and in the quiet company of only ourselves, dozens of us crisscrossed the hollow hours and empty streets to a low-lit campus lawn and home again. Over the course of 36 hours, a makeshift burial mound materialized as if from the earth itself. And by Easter afternoon, the grave was empty, the tomb had dissolved, and the temple had indeed become us: the body of the risen Christ, a fleshy family held together primarily in time.

Despite our solitude, or maybe because of it, we felt intensely connected. It was impossible not to encounter the silent assemblage of rocks—more colorful and more lovingly curated than we expected—as an icon of us and of the many comings together and goings apart that make us the community we are.

At the same time, it was impossible not to experience the ritual as deeply entangled with the story we were commemorating, that of Jesus' death and resurrection. As our dean had reminded us in her proposal for the liturgy, the events of those days most likely transpired in silence punctuated only by hushed exchanges and rustles of movement. Through rustling movements and hushed exchanges of our own, we had "remembered forward" the Jesus story. We had made something new, and something new had risen among us.

The second transformative worship service I experienced was initiated by three of our MDiv students—all black women—to commemorate George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. On the evening of June 3, rising seniors Megan Allen, Lindsey Ardrey, and Toni Belhu welcomed 81 other members of the community back to campus for the first time since March for a prayer vigil. The service was held outdoors, on the same grassy lawn where our mound of Easter rocks had grown and dwindled.

In our masks, on our blankets and camp chairs, we stretched ourselves out and set our griefs down. As daylight fell, each small group lit a candle brought from home. During and after a period of song and invocation, members of the gathering moved quietly to a table where slips of paper and pens rested like bread and wine. We wrote down our commitments—the small acts we pledged to take in the coming months as members of a body invested in racial justice. We queued up outside the chapel in a sprawling litany of bodies and were slowly admitted, person by person or group by group, to an interior space that we loved. Illuminated by shafts of shifting light, we dropped our slips of paper into a woven basket placed on the altar.

For a few seconds, I stood in the empty silence with my husband and breathed deeply of the chapel's air. I had missed its smell. I noticed the energy of those humans who had gone before and would come after.

Then we circled back outdoors by another route.

Later, the slips of paper were clipped to the grate separating the sacristy from the nave. They remain there as an installation of our promises, as a reminder that church, and its calling to us as a community, has changed—and has changed us, too. "I expect that our changing will grow in the days to come," said Dean Kittredge.

What is worship for? And how might it engender new patterns of life-giving relationship? Reflecting on the event, the three student leaders offered some

answers. Worship, said Ardrey, is a collective act. “When I heard everybody together,” she remembered, “I almost had tears, because I realized how much I had missed being part of a collective praying body.”

But collectivity does not require old patterns, added Allen. “We didn’t want it to be a regular, go-to-the-church, sit-in-the-pew, stand-up-when-you’re-supposed-to” kind of experience, she said. “I was glad we invited people to walk to the front and write their commitments when the moment struck them. People actually took to it.”

Nor does collectivity require the occupation of a given space at a given time. “People who couldn’t be present emailed their prayers,” said Belhu. “All over, people were with us, even if they weren’t physically present.”

And as for evidence that new patterns—stretched across new frameworks of time and space—can be life-giving? “The day after the vigil,” says Ardrey, “I woke up so refreshed and so renewed, in a way I hadn’t in a while. These kinds of things don’t always have words for them, but what I found there was 100 percent needed. My whole body was relaxed.”

And so here we have a surprise ending. Spiritual comfort and health may be exactly what communal worship offers us after all. But not as their own ends, and certainly not in the service of the old practices themselves.

“This is where we start,” said Allen, for whom the grassroots vigil was a church door opening into the future. “This is where we change our hearts, and then we take it out into the world. Then we come back for the rejuvenation, for the energy of the collective.”

That’s what it means to wake up to a new breakfast. That’s what it means to be bread for a new world, rising out of the things we thought were stones but were kisses all along.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Rising from stones.”