



NEW SCANDINAVIA LUTHERAN CHURCH MARCH NEWSLETTER 2024

It was a Wednesday during the 2015 season of Lent. I, along with my seminary classmates, gathered in the Wilhelm Loehe Chapel at Wartburg Seminary for our weekday worship service. I remember it was Wednesday because services that day included Holy Communion and always saw a professor, not just preaching, but overseeing the whole worship service *including the selection of hymns*. (Know that I am giving you this information because it is important for what will happen next.)

We were moving through worship with no problems. Rev. Dr. Nathan Frambach preached, and we began to sing the hymn of the day- a song personally selected by Nate himself. Some of us saw it coming but Nate was clueless. Then it happened:

*To be your presence is our mission here,
to show compassion's face and listening ear,
to be your heart of mercy ever near,
Alleluia!*

Nate gasped loudly and we all burst into laughter. We, students, most faculty, and musicians, were laughing hard enough that even the organist had to stop to compose himself as we managed to sing through the rest of the song; though it was difficult because every verse ended with the same word- Alleluia! All the while, poor Dr. Frambach was squirming in his seat and shaking his head.

What was wrong with any of that? Why were we laughing so hard that worship had to pause for a moment? Simple. There is a rule, or maybe I should say an expectation, that we eliminate all the alleluias from worship during the season of Lent. Why? I am going to let an ELCA document explain why:

Based on the Hebrew word, hallelu yah, meaning "Praise the Lord," alleluia has been a word of great praise to God in the life of the church and was prominent in early Christian liturgies. Because of the [repentant] character of the season of Lent in the Western church, singing or saying the word "alleluia" has historically been suspended during Lent's forty days. This period of individual and congregational reflection on the quality of our baptismal faith and life suggests that the joyful nature of alleluia is more appropriately reserved for our Easter celebrations when it is given full and jubilant voice.

The omission of alleluia during Lent goes back at least to the fifth century in the western church. The custom of actually bidding it farewell, however, developed in the Middle Ages. The hymn "Alleluia, song of gladness" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship #318) contains a translation of an 11th century Latin text that compares an alleluia-less Lent to the exile of the Israelites in

Babylon. The text then anticipates the joy of Easter when glad alleluias will return in all their heavenly splendor.

All of that to say that during a season of reflection on us and the desire to work on the brokenness within us, throwing around a word like Alleluia isn't the most appropriate. It's like shouting "yippee" during a funeral: it just feels out of place.

We as students knew that, and Dr. Frambach knew that too. But when the service was being planned, Nate was more focused on the song that he loved so much and less consideration for the exact words. Obviously, he forgot he was in the season of Lent and wasn't looking for the restricted word.

I was lucky enough to have class with Nate immediately following chapel and he was still shaking his head about the whole thing. We had to remind Nate that he wouldn't be struck down by lightning and that sometimes we need a little alleluia in the middle of Lent. He agreed and we dropped the issue, except the occasional razzing him during class.

The idea of dropping the alleluias for Lent goes way back; long enough that even Martin Luther had something to say about it. When asked, Luther commented that alleluias should never be removed from Sunday worship because "every Sunday is a mini (little) Easter" and it is appropriate to celebrate God with all the joy and reverence that God deserves, even during the reflective time of Lent. Luther would also point out that when we count the 40 days of Lent, it is actually 46 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. Those additional six days are the six Sundays within the Lenten season. These six days are set aside and as Luther would say, we praise God with all the excitement of a little Easter.

It may happen this season of Lent. There may be a day when we slip and shout praises to God. I think that is just fine. But here is what I take from it. This idea of removing a word from our vocabulary for 46 days makes me look at that and other words a little closer.

Words have power. Alleluia has power but so does forgiveness, love, and hope. I think that we need all these words as we move through this Lenten season. We need alleluia to push us through these times when we acknowledge our wrongs because God makes us right. We need alleluia to see the darkness of sin has been washed clean through the waters of baptism. We need alleluia to remind us that even though we are in Lent and the cross is just up ahead, Jesus' death is not the end and that new life is just around the corner. And for that I say Alleluia (but don't tell anyone I said that).

Let us look forward to the day when we get to shout that beautiful word again.

Pastor Sara