

Occasional Reflections 1

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Psalms and Psalm Tones

The Psalms are the womb of the church's music. Of all the texts in the Bible, the Psalms are the ones most lodged in people's memories. As Luther said, they are a summary of the whole Bible. Or, as Bonhoeffer said, they are the vicarious prayer of Christ for the church into which we are invited. As the whole of life before God, from its greatest depths to its greatest heights, Psalms have been the center of the congregation's song from Old Testament times. It is hard to overstate their importance. But, as I discovered many years ago and have repeatedly discovered since then, some pastors won't let congregations sing the Psalms. At the beginning of a workshop I once led on Psalm singing, a church musician said to the class, "My pastor won't let us sing the Psalms." I asked why not. Without a moment's hesitation she said, "Because he says they take too long."

The Psalms as appointed for Sundays and Principal Festivals in the Revised Common Lectionary have between three and seventeen verses. (Two have more: one, for Lectionary 16, has eighteen verses, and Good Friday has thirty-one verses.) There are fifty appointed Psalms with eight verses, thirty-nine with nine verses, and thirty with ten (twenty-seven with twelve, twenty-four with six, and twenty-three with eleven). Psalm 46 has eleven verses, just above the average number. It can be sung to a Psalm tone in less than two minutes. Twelve of Psalm 72's verses are used. They can be sung in slightly more than two minutes. If you add a Refrain or use longer settings, you might add a minute or two. Getting to five minutes is rare. The norm in my church is between one and two minutes.

For a comparison I wondered how long announcements take, so I started timing them in the churches I visited. Five to ten minutes were not uncommon, especially in churches where Psalms were not sung. I thought I had reached a limit when announcements took twenty minutes in one church, but then another church I attended soon after that extended announcements to twenty-four minutes in a fifty-minute worship service.

One of my seminary professors told us that “the ancient expectancy is still there. People come to church to hear about God.” To his words I have now added, “not about bricks and mortar or committee meetings that concern very few of the people who are present.” Unlike most announcements, the Psalms are about all of life before God. What are our priorities when Psalms cannot be sung? At issue is not how much time they take – which is very little.

A few years ago an eighty year old man told me that his church had just started singing psalm tones. For the first time in his life he said was able to sing at worship. I had long realized that the congregational stratum of psalm tones, as in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or the *Lutheran Service Book*, is profoundly friendly to congregational song, but I had never before heard this kind of poignant testimony. It suddenly dawned on me that congregations who sing psalm tones, especially without the crutch of accompaniment, are able to sing all sorts of styles, whereas ones that do not sing psalm tones have more trouble singing anything. That seemed strange until I realized that psalm tones help congregations find their voice. They help them breathe and phrase together, perceive textual meanings together, jump vulnerably into the community of song, and discover that the water not only is fine but buoys them up and is life-giving.

Isn't speaking the Psalms as good as singing them? No. Communal breath, phrasing, and textual meaning are difficult if not impossible without the musical frame. It is no accident that Psalms have been sung: they are about the order of life before God which happens in time; music, like worship and life, takes time and is about the order between humanity and time.

Singing Psalms is no small matter. I commend it to you. ¹

¹ “For a substantial new resource promoting the singing of the Psalms, see David Christian’s review of *Psalms for All Seasons* in the “Discoveries” feature.”