



# lasting hope

## DEVOTIONS FOR LENT 2019

### Psalms Are for Singing

The song of the Christian assembly has its roots in the psalms of the Hebrew people, our forebears in faith. Jesus' own prayer relied on the psalms. The apostle Paul encouraged the faithful to sing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" (Col. 3:16). Christians through the centuries have sung them daily.

Martin Luther considered the psalms the summary of all scripture, speaking to many situations and allowing the expression of a wide range of human response, such as adoration, praise, thanksgiving, lament, confession, intercession, and teaching. The psalms proclaim hope and faith, yet make room also for deep distress and questioning.

The psalms are intended for singing, as their use in worship through the ages testifies. Their meaning can certainly be communicated when spoken or read silently; yet this ancient poetry is inherently musical.

A lively practice of psalm singing includes several principal methods.

1. Congregational singing of the psalm involves the assembly directly with the text. Typically, the assembly sings one or two verses at a time in alternation with verses sung by a cantor or choir. This alternation is best done by whole verses, not half-verses; that way each group or individual is allowed to complete a musical "sentence" before the other responds.

A simple system of "pointing" (marking the text of the psalm with symbols that show when to move from the single-note reciting tone) is employed to assist the assembly in singing the psalms. The psalm version in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is pointed simply for singing by a cantor, choir, or assembly. For guidance on singing pointed psalms using psalm tones, see *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 335–336.

Whether psalms sung in unison are accompanied depends on the assembly and the worship space. In an acoustically live room, an unaccompanied sound develops a rich resonance. When singers are more unsure or in a "dry" room, the foundation of accompaniment can help to sustain and support the sound.

Accompaniment need not be limited to keyboard instruments. Handbells can ring at intervals of the fifth or in tone clusters at or immediately following the middle and end cadences of each verse. Random ringing of bells also forms an effective backdrop, using intervals of the fourth, fifth, octave, and major second. A guitar can sound the chord changes in the tone. Other instruments can double the melody or play a simple descant.

2. Responsorial singing describes the practice of having the assembly sing a response (also called a refrain or antiphon), assigning the singing of psalm verses to a cantor or choir. The mechanics of singing an entire psalm can be daunting. Not every psalm, nor every worship context, lends itself to that kind of proclamation. The use of a repeated response, often metrical in nature, can unify the assembly around easily mastered melodies. Using a portion of the psalm as the response provides a lens by which the theme of the psalm appropriate for that day is brought to light.

The response is usually introduced by choir or cantor and repeated immediately by the assembly. All then join in the response at selected intervals during the psalm and at the end. Examples of this kind of responsorial psalm singing are presented in *Psalter for Worship: Evangelical Lutheran Worship Edition* (3 volumes, one for each year of the Revised Common Lectionary), and *Psalm Settings for the Church Year: Revised Common Lectionary* (2 volumes), published by Augsburg Fortress. Both of these resources provide permission to reprint the assembly's response in the worship folder. Assembly responses are also available for download with a subscription to [sundaysandseasons.com](http://sundaysandseasons.com).

3. Choral arrangements and hymn paraphrases of the psalms can be useful alternatives. There is a great wealth of choral literature based upon psalms and fragments of psalms. A careful study of the text in comparison to the verses appointed for the day and in the context of other readings and seasonal emphases will reveal whether a particular choral setting communicates the psalm's message for a given day.

Frequent choral replacements for the psalms may send the message that the assembly is not to be trusted with this element of the service, and thus defeat the goal of restoring the psalms as the people's song.

One limitation of the hymn paraphrase, or metrical psalm, is that it can sound like just another hymn. Squeezing the psalms into the structures of meter and rhyme also can result in a loss of the nuance and lyricism of the original text. Hymn paraphrases set to familiar tunes do unite the assembly in singing the psalms, and they are especially welcome when a choir or cantor is not available. *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* contains a complete list of psalm paraphrases in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (p. 266). Many more may be found in recent hymn collections of denominations that have a long tradition of singing metrical psalms. For example, *Glory to God*, the hymnal from the Presbyterian Church (USA), provides full settings of more than 100 psalms as metrical paraphrases set to new and well-known hymn tunes as well as responsorial versions.

Psalms are for singing. Careful attention to the ways they are prepared and presented will help make them beloved songs also for our time in God's world.