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Holy Saturday in Liturgical Tradition: Making Sacred Space in the Gap of Holy Saturday, and the Pastoral Impetus for Doing So

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HOLY SATURDAY IN LITURGICAL TRADITION: MAKING SACRED SPACE IN THE TRAGIC GAP OF HOLY SATURDAY, AND THE PASTORAL IMPETUS FOR DOING SO

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Abstract: While the Paschal Mystery is central to the Christian tradition, this article is concerned with the lack of robust liturgical focus on Holy Saturday, or Easter Saturday, and will articulate the immense pastoral value in strengthening the focus on this middle day of the Paschal Mystery. This pastoral value is especially salient in dealing with a shared human experience of trauma. Trauma is used here not only in reference to the traditional psychological and physiological understanding of trauma, but also encapsulates spiritual struggles of guilt, shortcomings, sin, and grief—in short, all that which pierces and lingers on our conscience and memory. This article weaves together liturgical, historical, and systematic perspectives to argue for a “theology of pause” regarding Easter Saturday, which can be a sacred space in which one acknowledges the trauma and memory of the human condition, instead of burying them in the rush to remember the joy of the Resurrection and all that it brings. Continuing with the lens of shared experience, this article also explores various Christian denominations’ narrative theologies regarding, and liturgies for, Holy Saturday, to the end of establishing an ecumenical liturgy of contemplation and healing.

Introduction

The Paschal Mystery is a series of events fundamental to the very fabric of the Christian faith, but the focus here will be Holy Saturday, or the day between Christ’s crucifixion/death and His Resurrection. This article is an examination of the liturgical elements of various Christian traditions because, as Maxwell Johnson puts it: “The paschal mystery, like all good theology, begins and ends in doxology. For it is in the liturgy above all that this mystery is most clearly revealed.”² By examining a denomination’s traditions and theology, one may understand how a liturgy takes shape in the vessel of an individual

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² Maxwell E. Johnson, “The Paschal Mystery: Reflections from a Lutheran Viewpoint,” *Worship* 57, no. 2 (March 1983): 134-150.

congregation, but is also connected to broader denominational traditions. More often than not, Holy Saturday is overlooked in the anticipation of Easter Sunday, becoming a placeholder in the theology and liturgical of many Christian churches. Thus, my first aim is to describe the immense pastoral and spiritual value in deliberately setting aside Holy Saturday as a day of worship and contemplation. To do so, I will examine the role of memory in liturgical theology, and the importance of memory in shaping narrative and sacramental encounters with the Divine through the liturgy.

My second goal is to discern a shared theology of Holy Saturday worship from the Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican (specifically, Methodist) branches of Christianity. My third and final goal will be to incorporate these findings—and that sense of pastoral responsibility for setting aside Holy Saturday—into an ecumenical, contemplative, daytime liturgy built on the Holy Saturday prayer service found in the Book of Common Prayer.³

Three Elements for Liturgical Analysis

Though there are many different ways to analyze Christian liturgies, I suggest we begin with considering three facets of the liturgy—narrative, sacramental encounter with the divine, and memory—to help elucidate a theology of Holy Saturday worship.

Narrative

David Stosur, a liturgical theologian at Cardinal Stritch University, has leaned on the ground-breaking work of Mark Searle to argue that narrative form is an inevitable result of religious interpretations of the world. This narrative approach may include re-enactments or praying upon the recounting of elements in question. In addition, Stosur has made a distinction between “mundane story” and “sacred story.”⁴ Mundane story refers to those elements of the narrative approach to liturgy that must be placed within our world. It is told, shared, and heard. With respect to Holy Saturday, this element of narrative is fraught with tension about *what* happened between Christ’s death and Resurrection. Because all that is provided in the Gospels is an account of Christ’s burial and, subsequently, Resurrection,

³ My reason for choosing this book of liturgies as a base for construction is that I am from the United Methodist Church, an offshoot of Anglicanism—an inheritance reflected in the Methodist Book of Worship’s carrying over of many of the same lectionary readings and prayers.

⁴ David A. Stosur, “Narrative Signification and the Paschal Mystery,” *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy* 96, no. 1-2 (2015): 42.

different Christian traditions have constructed the spiritual narrative about this day in conflicting ways. Indeed, some denominations mythologize the descent as an active Harrowing of Hell, in which Christ is a liberator of the souls stuck in that place. Other theologies, like those of Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar,⁵ insist that the mythologized interpretation “of the descent into Hell, which considers it as the ‘foundation’ of a new existential dimension in the radical depths of cosmic being, is neither biblically justified, nor theologically sufficient.”⁶ So, Von Balthasar and Barth reject the notion of Christ being active in Hades, or Sheol, because they articulate an interpretation of Jesus’s death that boldly affirms His saving of humanity from our sins by dying in our place, and that the death of Christ is the completion of salvation and “in need of nothing further to make it efficacious for human reconciliation and redemption.”⁷

This narrative tension about Holy Saturday will not be resolved here. Consequently, in order to move forward with a liturgy that is truly ecumenical, finding common ground will be key. Within the Christian tradition, there are two shared elements of the Triduum upon which we can draw: Christ’s death (fulfilling the ultimate human experience), and Easter Saturday’s role as the pivotal point in the story of human redemption. With these foundational understandings, the way one receives this story of redemption, this sacred story, implicates feeling and experience. Indeed, theologian Alan Lewis has remarked, “What keeps the heart of the Christian church beating, and its blood circulating, if not the story of those days, so endlessly rehearsed, with such infinite variety and such steadfast unalterableness?”⁸ Sacred story awakens and evokes. Through it, we find ourselves discerning and reliving the perennial elements of important narratives in our faith.

⁵ Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his book *Mysterium Paschale*, reflects on the death and resurrection of Christ and especially the descent into death on Holy Saturday. Von Balthasar’s work is foundational to the concepts in the current essay, because he discusses in depth the questions of separation from God, abandonment from the divine, and death. A key piece of his book emphasizes Jesus as self-surrendering, not sacrificed. Another significant claim in von Balthasar’s piece is the rejection of the notion that Christ entered the place of the dead as an active victor, but as a truly dead man in solidarity with every human in death. Von Balthasar also does not concern himself with harmonizing the Gospel accounts, but draws out theological meaning from them separately, a move which will pair nicely with the description below of the tendency of different Christian denominations to read from a particular Gospel or another during the Easter Triduum.

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: Theology of the Easter Mystery*, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), 147.

⁷ David Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell: God, Atonement and the Christian Life* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 4.

⁸ Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 4.

Sacramental Encounter with the Divine

The concept of sacred story asks us which stories sustain our living faith and spiritual connection to God, thus tying directly to the second metric I propose for assessing liturgy: authentic encounter with the divine. We try to encounter God through the sacramental and ritual elements of liturgy. These include litanies, hymns, antiphons, and, of course, Communion. For Karl Rahner, the celebration of the sacraments revives and “makes explicit the cosmic proportions of the on-going relationship to all creation of the God who is its source, sustainer, and goal.”⁹ For Rahner, then, divine involvement in the liturgy is fundamental. Stosur posits that the liturgy of the church “are interpretations of human life and history, of that primordial liturgy which God has been celebrating since the dawn of creation and which has made its clearest manifestation in the saving Paschal Mystery.”¹⁰ With the inextricable sacramental elements of liturgy, one is able to reconnect to the beating heart of Christianity and reorient oneself to the image of Christ we are all charged with embodying. The Christian also uses the ritual and sacraments to *remember* the Mystery, to relive it over and over again, which provides one not only with eschatological hope, but perhaps, in the case of Holy Saturday, a space to deal with what one wishes *not* to remember.

Memory

As a theological category, memory has been essential to theological reasoning for millennia. Participation in liturgy, for instance, as in funeral rites, vivifies the memory of the deceased in such a way that revives the memory of the Passover of Christ, the Paschal Mystery.¹¹ While I identify three elements as interwoven facets of liturgical analysis, memory is perhaps the most fundamental for establishing the pastoral significance of Holy Saturday.

I agree with Alan Lewis’s position that the three-day narrative is the Christian faith’s supreme drama, and yet, “ironically, the center of the drama itself is an empty space. All the action and emotion, it seems, belong to two days only: despair and joy, dark and light, defeat and victory, the end and the beginning, evenly distributed in vivid contrast between what

⁹ Stosur, “Narrative Signification,” 42.

¹⁰ Stosur, “Narrative Signification,” 42.

¹¹ Mariolle, Benedicte, “Funerals as Paschal Remembrance and Incorporation into the Risen Christ,” *Studia Liturgica* 50, no. 1 (May 2020): 69-85.

humanity did to Jesus on the first day and what God did for him on the third.”¹² Why do we not memorialize this middle day when it is the transformation point for the Christian tradition? Why do we not want to keep it at the forefront of our memory? The answer may be found in the dark depths of human experience. Rowan Williams offers a description of memory as more than just what we remember. It can be, in addition, an imprint and recollection of our “responsibility for rejection and injury, for diminution of self and others.”¹³ Memory, then, in a theological context, may necessitate the confrontation of what we mean to *forget*.

Memory is the remembrance of sin, denial, and trauma both imposed upon and by us. If one avoids memory, perhaps by diluting or rewriting it, he or she attempts to make it more bearable. A prime example in the Gospels comes in John 21. Peter, after having denied Christ three times, returned to his initial profession, fishing, far from the scene of his shortcoming in Jerusalem. From his boat, he does not recognize Jesus, and there is a sense that Peter has already pushed away the trauma and guilt of the last few days, longing to simply return to his life before the risen Christ returns to greet him. However, after recognizing and meeting the Lord, 21:15-23 tell us that Peter’s trauma is healed, his guilt somewhat relieved after he undergoes a spiritual rehabilitation that replaces his threefold denial of Jesus with a threefold recommitment to Jesus. Christ’s pastoral care for Peter reignited his purpose and potential to build up the early church, but it required a reckoning with the wounds in Peter’s memory first.

The Pastoral Potential of Holy Saturday in the Context of Trauma

The denial of memory leads to a rejection of context and history, making any “liberation” from the present and future ineffective. In the United States, for example, the way teachers attempt to help students understand our painful history of slavery and subjugation of Black Americans has come under extreme criticism; so much so, in fact, that it has forced us to confront the concept of societal memory perhaps more concretely than ever. Indeed, the Southern Poverty Law Center maintains that we have a preference for

¹² Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection*, 1.

¹³ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2014), 23.

romanticism and nostalgia, not the difficult history and the collective sins of our past.¹⁴ This translates into the way we teach about slavery, in some cases minimizing “slavery’s significance so much that we render its impact—on people and on the nation—inconsequential.”¹⁵ Erasing or misrepresenting the nature of slavery prevents a full and honest reckoning with its ongoing cost in America and prevents an understanding of racial oppression as a systemic issue. One can see how the failure to address that memory, and our desire to rush into a post-Civil Rights Movement narrative—to insist that we are in a post-racism reality and should forget about the past—leaves much unresolved. Though just one example, the way Americans confront the history of slavery demonstrates the importance of historical memory.

Next, we must confront the relationship between memory and trauma. Shelly Rambo leans heavily on Alan Lewis and other theologians who focus on Easter Saturday, but she sees a gap in their scholarship: trauma.¹⁶ Specifically, she posits that these thinkers do not “question the fundamental trajectory of the narrative—that death is behind and life ahead.”¹⁷ In other words, Rambo protests the linear progression of these existing theologies of Holy Saturday, rejecting the simple path from “end to beginning, death to life.”¹⁸ She urges that Christians reduce their anticipation of life on Easter Sunday, because one otherwise ignores “death’s persistent intrusion into life” and fails to deal with the trauma of memory and spirit.¹⁹ The popular adage *time heals all wounds* is problematic because trauma lingers long after the event that caused it and can continue to disrupt one’s life. In the case of life and death, death persists, unwelcome, into the afterlife one hopes for in this post-Resurrection reality.

Rambo stakes her claim on the necessity of acknowledging that our wounds have a place, much like Christ’s wounds lingered after His resurrection. Our trauma has a place, and that place is Holy Saturday. It would be unwise to deny the gravity of death or the weight

¹⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, 2018. <https://www.splcenter.org/20180131/teaching-hard-history>.

¹⁵ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Teaching Hard History*, 5.

¹⁶ Shelly Rambo is a theologian whose work is deeply entrenched in trauma studies, and several of her works lay the background for this essay’s current discussion, but particularly *Saturday in New Orleans*, which urges the reader to appreciate the rich theological meaning of Holy Saturday within the framework of death, grief, and trauma.

¹⁷ Shelly Rambo, “Saturday in New Orleans: Rethinking the Holy Spirit in the Aftermath of Trauma,” *Review & Expositor* 105, no. 2 (May 2008): 235.

¹⁸ Shelly Rambo, “Saturday in New Orleans,” 236.

¹⁹ Shelly Rambo, “Saturday in New Orleans,” 235.

of guilt in the rushed anticipation of a new life, or of the final resurrection. This is where the pastoral value of a Holy Saturday worship service starts to become conspicuous. Though we do indeed live in the lasting light of the first Resurrection, we still live in a world of sin and hurt. The urge to ignore it in the hope of the coming resurrection, the desire to push past the stain of sin and death lingering within our very human condition, will end only in disappointment and the intrusion of death into life that Rambo describes. Death *does* have a sting. All humans have experienced grief and loss, including Jesus Christ Himself. Perhaps this knowledge is what may encourage on Holy Saturday a confrontation of that which causes one's spirit desolation and despair. In light of this analysis of Rambo, I am attempting to add a liturgical application to her theology by deliberately turning Holy Saturday into a day of pause.

The brief contemplation of one Methodist writer is something I have found immensely poignant regarding this spiritual potential of Holy Saturday. This reflection is contextualized by the account of the earthquake following Jesus's death in the Gospel of Matthew, and reads as follows:

What a valley of tears continues to separate the old creation from the new. What perverse resiliency resides in all that harms, separates, angers, or saddens us. How tragic a gap yawns between glimpses of all that we hope for and the luminous fulfillment of our hope.

When familiar contours disappear and the earth moves beneath our feet, where can we stand? We can stand in the tragic gap. This is Holy Saturday ground, the ground we occupy between the virtue we see to be possible and its actual flourishing throughout the land. It is holy ground because the unanticipated, painful, incomprehensible loss of cherished landmarks offers an Opportunity to see alternate perspectives, different paths, fresh horizons. It is holy ground because we stake our lives on it, holding fast to truth we know and holding out for truth yet to be revealed. It is holy ground because it holds within its soil the seeds of courage and the possibility of renewal.²⁰

Christians ought to know that this tragic gap is a sacred space, that there is *time* on the church's calendar for a special opportunity of vulnerability—and that their guilt, sin, trauma, and hurt be addressed during the most significant period of the Christian tradition.

²⁰ "Holy Saturday: Standing in the Tragic Gap," UMC Discipleship Ministries, January 22, 2015, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/holy-saturday-standing-in-the-tragic-gap>.

The constructed liturgy I will offer below not only accommodates but prioritizes sacred time for confession and contemplation.

Holy Saturday in Liturgical Tradition: Theologies and Examples

Lutheranism

The Lutheran liturgy tends to use the Johannine account of the Passion in Good Friday services, because, as Johnson notes, it is John above the other Gospel writers “who narrates Jesus’s crucifixion and death from the perspective of the Easter faith.”²¹ Matthew and Mark “clearly place more emphasis on the human reality of Jesus’s suffering and death,”²² and while Johnson is careful not to minimize these accounts, he does propose the importance of having a narrative of Jesus as both Victor and Victim at the same time, a paradox that “must be held in dialectical tension.”²³ Moreover, Johnson explains, “The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the one, unified, and central mystery of the Christian faith. Without the cross the resurrection would be little more than a myth of life after death, with Jesus not much different from other divine or immortal figures in the history of religions. Similarly, without the resurrection the cross would mean tragic defeat and the ultimate frustration of God’s salvific will, rather than the divine victory over sin, death, and the reality of evil.”²⁴

Given this dual theology of the Passion and Resurrection, there is a blank space on Easter Saturday, but not without concern from within the Lutheran church. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is among those who lament the rush over Holy Saturday in anticipation of Easter Sunday. She writes that parishioners are “occupied with busy anticipation” of Easter. Eaton realizes that the Lutheran perspective holds dear the idea that all Christians are living in the aftermath of the first Easter—the story is known, and commemorating Holy Saturday without any premonition about the joy of Easter would be difficult. However, Eaton urges, this holy space of Saturday might be used as a day to pause and grieve, “to be empty, to realize that life, as we know it, is over.”²⁵ This

²¹ Johnson, “The Paschal Mystery,” 137.

²² Johnson, “The Paschal Mystery,” 137.

²³ Johnson, “The Paschal Mystery,” 137.

²⁴ Johnson, “The Paschal Mystery,” 135.

²⁵ Elizabeth Eaton, “Holy Saturday,” *Living Lutheran*, February 24, 2016, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2016/02/holy-saturday/>.

is uncomfortable, of course, as demonstrated by the urgency to seek closure immediately after a tragedy or loss, in an attempt to lessen the pain. “There is danger in moving too quickly from grief,” Eaton warns, concurring with Shelly Rambo.²⁶

As for existing worship opportunities for Holy Saturday, the Lutheran liturgical calendar accommodates an Easter Vigil, with shared scriptural elements but varied supplemental litanies. Benjamin M. Stewart describes how the night of Easter Saturday into Sunday creates “a hole, a gap in the Easter story where the crucial event takes place.”²⁷ This is, first of all, another concurrence with the idea that Saturday is *the* turning point in the Salvation story. The vigil he describes, carried out at a seminary in the countryside, includes the ritual passing of an outdoor fire to a large paschal candle, which is then carried inside to burn while Old Testament selections are read. The prayer reads: “Bless this new fire, and increase in us a desire to shine forth with the brightness of Christ’s rising, until we feast at the banquet of eternal light.”²⁸

In contrast to the presence of light, Stewart beautifully emphasizes the sacramental, narrative, and memorializing significance of darkness to the vigil: “Under the cover of darkness, slaves cross rivers into freedom; dry bones rise up to live; the fiery furnace of the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar goes dark; and long before any human eyes have opened, a blue-green world is given light and a sheltering dome of air, while the land, sea and sky are filled with fruitful creatures of every shape and kind. From the beginning, God has called new life out of darkness, often against great odds.”²⁹

These stories from Scripture, particularly the valley of dry bones, the parting of the Red Sea, and the fiery furnace, are included in the vigil elements of another Lutheran church (St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in New York City), demonstrating the significance of these narratives to remembering God’s restoration of hope after a dark time. Thomas Schmidt recounts Holy Saturday at this Manhattan parish, where the Easter Vigil has similar ritual and narrative elements to the one described by Stewart (though the urban setting makes for an unpredictable spin on the outdoor portion of the vigil). There is one element that Schmidt

²⁶ Elizabeth Eaton, “Holy Saturday,” *Living Lutheran*, February 24, 2016, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2016/02/holy-saturday/>.

²⁷ Benjamin M. Stewart, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century/Living by the Word* 130, no. 6 (March 20, 2013): 23.

²⁸ Stewart, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” 23.

²⁹ Stewart, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” 23.

details that will be helpful in finding a common foundation with Orthodox liturgies in the next section. The vigil ends in the renewal of baptismal vows, which is commemorated by the sprinkling of the people gathered around. There is too a greeting of peace and a procession forms behind the Paschal candle out the door to the surrounding plaza. Stanzas of “I bind unto myself today” from the Lutheran Book of Worship 188, and “Holy God, we praise your name,” found in Lutheran Book of Worship 535, are sung, and the journey around the city block is interrupted six times for prayers. Worshippers return to a brightly lit, flower-adorned sanctuary in the church.³⁰

It was Schmidt’s fleeting mention of a contemplative daytime labyrinth that especially caught my attention as an element of pause before Easter and a potential element for the synthesized liturgy I will recommend at the end of the essay. On Holy Saturday, the parishioners borrow “a large canvas labyrinth from some nuns uptown and lay it out on that now empty granite floor in the sanctuary. From noon until 6:00 people are invited to come and walk the labyrinth and experience its spiritual, meditative qualities. A guide for using the labyrinth for meditation is provided.”³¹ This contemplative element is certainly compatible with the positions of Rambo, Lewis, and Williams, and has value as a daytime worship element for looking inward. It encourages worshippers to turn inwards and discern points of spiritual trouble, primarily by simply making deliberate and guided time for this sort of reflection.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Resurrection is inseparable from the death of Christ, because the “descent into Hell is the image of our present age. The Resurrection of Christ is the sign and guarantee of the final victory. For nothing is more absurd or contradictory than the entry of Life into death. Yet this is precisely what our faith proposes,”³² writes Jerry Ryan, a prolific journalist and writer who belongs to the Russian Orthodox tradition. However, the contemplation of Holy Saturday—which is commemorated as Great Saturday³³ is much more salient in Orthodox traditions than in the

³⁰ Thomas Schmidt, “Holy Week in the City,” *Cross Accent* 14, no. 1 (2006): 22.

³¹ Schmidt, “Holy Week in the City,” 22.

³² Jerry Ryan, “The Descent Into Hell,” *Commonwealth* (April 11, 1997): 18.

³³ “Great and Holy Saturday - Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America,” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.goarch.org/holysaturday>.

Lutheran tradition. Where the Lutheran theological perspective emphasizes looking at one salvific event from two sides, Orthodox liturgy highlights a third dimension—the intense Harrowing of Hell on Holy Saturday.

Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev refers to the Eastern patristic fathers to establish a vivid picture of Christ and Holy Saturday. This is where narrative as an evaluating element comes to the analytical forefront. Christ is the hero, pictured as liberator, as chain-breaker, as vindicator. In a homily titled “On the Soul, Body, and Passions of Our Lord,” attributed to St. Athanasius of Alexandria, “the descent into Sheol is presented in expressions redolent of particular liturgical texts from the ancient church.”³⁴ The homily reads: “He burst open the gates of brass, he broke through the bolts of iron, and he took the souls that were in Amente [Hell] and carried them to his Father. When the Lord had broken up Amente, and had gained the victory over death, he set the enemy under restraint. Now the souls he brought out of Amente, but the bodies he raised up on the earth.”³⁵ This homily relies upon the Gospel of Matthew, which recounts, “tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming forth from their tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many.”³⁶

There is a focus on the Tomb of Christ, but it is important to emphasize that this is no ordinary grave. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America summarizes its theology: “Great Saturday is the day of the pre-eminent rest. Christ observes a Sabbath rest in the tomb. His rest, however, is not inactivity but the fulfillment of the divine will and plan for the salvation of humankind and the cosmos.”³⁷ The American leaders of this tradition urge a “solemn observance of Great Saturday” to help members remember that “despite the daily vicissitudes and contradictions of history and the abiding presence of hell within the human heart and human society, life has been liberated! Christ has broken the power of death.”³⁸

The focus in this tradition’s liturgy for Holy Saturday is on the present, taking time in it and gradually moving into the celebration of Easter. In this theology, sorrow cannot simply be replaced by joy. It is *transformed* into joy. Saturday is a day of *transformation*, a

³⁴ Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 54.

³⁵ Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 54.

³⁶ Matthew 27:52-53 (New American Bible, Revised Addition)

³⁷ Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, “Great and Holy Saturday.”

³⁸ Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, “Great and Holy Saturday.”

transition from sorrow to joy—and in the Orthodox liturgy, the transition is slow and deliberate, not rushed. There is plenty of time to connect with our own grief (or trauma or painful memory) in the Eastern liturgy.

Reverend Alexander Schmemmann explains that from the Saturday morning service to the evening vigil, worshippers experience on a yearly basis the “liturgical commemoration which becomes for us a saving and transforming present.”³⁹ Lamenting the death of Jesus Christ is a deliberate pause point for Orthodox Christians on Saturday morning. The death of Christ is considered the ultimate proof of His love for the will of God and of His obedience to His Father—and therefore necessary to contemplate as a significant point in our redemption story. Here is that common ground with those Christians and theologians who reject the highly charged image of Christ on Holy Saturday. All of the presented traditions can agree that, at the core, Saturday, the day of Christ’s burial, is the focus point. I suggest that the two perspectives—one which embraces a mythologized theology of Holy Saturday, and the other which rejects it—could indeed work well together if ritualized accordingly.

So how is Holy Saturday ritualized in Eastern Orthodox traditions? The Matins of Saturday starts in the morning, and is a funeral service, a lamentation over the Epitaphios (the icon of Christ in His tomb). Schmemmann explains that “after the singing of the funeral troparia of Friday and a slow censuring of the church, the celebrants approach the Epitaphios. We stand at the grave of our Lord, we contemplate His death, His defeat. Psalm 119 is sung and to each verse we add a special ‘praise,’ which expresses the horror of men and of the whole creation before the death of Jesus.”⁴⁰ What is interesting about Psalm 119 is that in the Orthodox liturgical practice, this psalm is used only at funeral services.⁴¹

The Epitaphios is sprinkled with rosewater and myrrh, and ancient funeral hymns played or sung. The process is repeated twice or three times, and worshippers are also sprinkled with the rosewater and myrrh. Near the end of the service, worshipers engage in a procession reminiscent of a funeral procession, proceeding with the Epitaphios around the Church chanting the Thrice-Holy hymn and holding candles to symbolize the victory of

³⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, “This Is the Blessed Sabbath: (Matins of Great Saturday),” *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1958): 2.

⁴⁰ Schmemmann, “This Is the Blessed Sabbath,” 3.

⁴¹ Schmemmann, “This is the Blessed Sabbath,” 3.

Christ over death.⁴² There is a striking resemblance to the liturgy that St. Peter's Lutheran Church practices for Holy Saturday, especially in the procession and sprinkling of parishioners—a sensory and ritual element which brings the worshippers together in fellowship not only with each other, but with Jesus Christ.

Methodist Liturgy

Though extensive scholarship on the Methodist's liturgical theology is limited, paying attention to and analyzing the premise and spiritual theology of Methodism, as well as the commonly used Gospel accounts for Holy Saturday in particular, can yield an adequate analysis for liturgy. As mentioned earlier, Maxwell Johnson purports that the reason for using the Johannine Gospel in the Lutheran Church is the Resurrection-focused lens of the account. In the Methodist Church, Matthew's account is key—especially the mention of the earthquake in Matthew 28:2. There is no warning before the violent disruption of the earth, before the faults scar the surface of the ground. Matthew frames Jesus's passion and death with earthquakes, suggesting a cosmic breaking-in by God into human history. Saturday is, once again, considered the day of transformation, this time marked by a tumultuous event. This transformation is far more abrupt than the one posited by Orthodox theology, but there is still an encouragement within the Methodist Church to understand the change that is happening, and not to rush past it.

There is a spiritual advisory here to not expect one's sins (or trauma or guilt or painful memories) to be washed clean from them with the dawn of the Resurrection. John Wesley, the founder of the Wesleyan and subsequent traditions, in his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," implores his parishioners not to put hope in the idea that sin was washed away from this world: "How naturally do those who experience such a change imagine that all sin is gone; that it is utterly rooted out of their heart, and has no more any place therein! ... But it is seldom long before they are undeceived, finding sin was only suspended, not destroyed. Temptations return, and sin revives; showing it was but stunned before, not dead."⁴³

⁴² Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, "Great and Holy Saturday."

⁴³ John Wesley, "Sermon 43: The Scripture Way of Salvation," in *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: New Chapel, City Road, 1788), 5-6.

This acknowledgement that sin continues post-Resurrection, along with a sense of individual spirituality between God and believer, prompts the Methodist confession model. Confession is not a sacrament, but one is prompted to confess sins before God and one another. This means confessing sins and temptations to those who are a source of strength. It is about spiritual growth through the act of confession. Given this, I have identified room for a confessional element in the creative liturgy I propose in the next section, especially for those who lean on the strength and fellowship of other Christians in their lifelong spiritual journey.

What about liturgies within the Methodist tradition? While it is difficult to identify a specific example today, I detail here the advice provided by the official worship planning guide from the United Methodist Church.⁴⁴ The daytime service (not a vigil, as that is a separate accommodation in the evening, as with the previous two traditions) is mostly a quiet one, not characterized by hymns or long litanies of any kind. As for the atmosphere: “Simplicity, even starkness, continues for this service. No flowers, no paraments, no banners or other decorations anywhere. Consider using little music and no musical instruments—and no projection, if possible.”⁴⁵ Interestingly, this quiet service is directly opposite the active liturgy of the vigil in the other two traditions, a similar one that a Methodist church may carry out in the evening time as well.

The Construction of an Ecumenical Liturgy

It is the hushed simplicity of this daytime service that may be the most conducive to that contemplation and spirituality of Holy Saturday. I will not focus on revising an Easter Vigil at this time, though I am intrigued by the similarities in processions and rites between traditions that have different underlying theologies. I believe the vigil is indeed a good transition point from a day of quiet contemplation and mourning to astonished joy, and the ritual, narrative, and memorializing aspects of the vigil is a part of Christian history that should not be removed. As such, I would like to construct here an ecumenical liturgy for a morning or early afternoon Saturday service.

⁴⁴ “Worship Planning Helps for Holy Saturday Morning or Early Afternoon,” UMC Discipleship Ministries, February 18, 2016. <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/worship-planning-helps-for-holy-saturday-2016-morning-or-early-afternoon#notes>.

⁴⁵ UMC Discipleship Ministries, “Worship Planning Helps for Holy Saturday Morning or Early Afternoon.”

Looking back at the separate analyses of these Christian traditions' activities on Holy Saturday, there are several elements that seem to have emerged either as points of similarity, or points of potential ecumenical worship in keeping with "a theology of pause" for this day. These elements, which consider the initial three metrics of assessment I have proposed, include: (i) A silent meditative, personal activity—such as the labyrinth walk, which would center the individual spiritually in the quietude of Holy Saturday and in the silence of Christ's tomb; (ii) A confessional and/or counseling opportunity—both of which may be carried out in silence, under guidance of a minister, in the prayer service, or in small groups—which will provide time to acknowledge the heaviness of sin and hurt on one's heart and mind; (iii) A ritual prayer or litany, with Scripture readings reflecting the solemnity and void of Holy Saturday. This prayer can be a revision of a common liturgy specifically for this day, or perhaps even a shortened and revised funeral liturgy might be used. With all of these pieces in mind, we will soon encounter an ecumenical, noontime Holy Saturday liturgy. It is my hope that this can be a framework for setting aside this middle day as a day of solemn contemplation, as a space to deal with trauma.

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1. As congregants enter the quiet space of the church, they are encouraged to embark on a silent walk of the floor labyrinth to center their minds and hearts on this Easter Saturday morning. There are many intricate guides for walking a labyrinth, but popular steps include:⁴⁶

- a. Removing heavy or noisy personal items—such as watches, shoes, or large jewelry—before entering the labyrinth.
- b. Walking the inward path with a focus on the things standing in the way of one's spiritual flourishing.



⁴⁶ "How to Walk a Labyrinth," Randy Johnson, (July 16, 2015), Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit in Verona, New Jersey. <http://holyspiritverona.org/content/how-walk-labyrinth>

* Image from: St. Andrew by the Lake Anglican Church in Toronto. <http://www.standrewbythelake.com/labryinth.html>

Holy Saturday

There is no celebration of the Eucharist on this day.

When there is a Liturgy of the Word, the Celebrant begins with the Collect of the Day

O God, Creator of heaven and earth: Grant that, as the crucified body of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, so we may await with him the coming of the third day, and rise with him to newness of life; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament Job 14:1-14

Psalms 130, or 31:1-5

Epistle 1 Peter 4:1-8

Gospel Matthew 27:57-66, or John 19:38-42

After the Gospel (and homily), in place of the Prayers of the People, the Anthem "In the midst of life" (page 484 or 492) is sung or said.

The service then concludes with the Lord's Prayer and the Grace.

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- c. Spending time in the center, in any comfortable position, and engaging in silent prayer or contemplation.
- d. Walking the return path with a special focus on the things that you wish to bring back to the center of your life. Perhaps these are things you must address, or the things which you have taken for granted and wish to remember. Release your memory. Remember your encounter with Christ, good and bad. What do you wish to change?

2. As we move to our seats prior to the prayer service, take this time for confession. You may find yourself contemplating in silence, or perhaps you prefer the pastoral element of fellowship. As we move into the prayer service, center your heart on where we are in Christ's story.

3. The Holy Saturday collect is from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (reproduced here).

- a. The opening prayer is optionally spoken as written in the collect, or as produced in the Methodist Book of Prayer: "Merciful and everliving God, Creator of heaven and earth, the crucified body of your Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy day. Grant that we may await with him the dawning of the third day and rise in newness of life, through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen."
- b. The Scripture readings for the collect are significant. The selection from Job is a lament on the finality of death. After this reading, there is silence.
- c. After the reading of Psalm 130 as indicated in the Book of Common Prayer, time may be taken to remember departed loved ones, either aloud or in the silence of hearts.
- d. The Gospel reading preferred is Matthew 27:57-66, as it brings us to the "present" of the story. This is where we are left, this is *when* we are left—in the wake of Christ's burial.

- e. Silence, punctuated by voices, is what is preferred, and no music. This absence of music at the daytime service may well end up making the musical elements at the Easter Vigil and procession much more powerful.

Conclusion

The theology of pause underlying this liturgy is one of great pastoral value that can extend beyond Holy Saturday, but this space between Christ's death and Resurrection also holds spiritual value. While we lack a clear narration from the Gospel regarding the events of this "middle day," all Christian traditions share some elements—namely, that Christ had died, fulfilling a universal human experience, and that this day was pivotal in the redemption of humanity. Precisely because of this shared reality, Holy Saturday may be the perfect moment to pause and reflect on other distinctly human experiences. In the Gospels, there is little indication of what is happening. We are left, in the tragic gap, to wait with grief, loss, sin, trauma, hardship looming over our human condition as we look forward to what is to come.

Instead of acquiescing in this reality, I suggest we pause, deliberately, and seek those liturgical elements which help us re-encounter God even in the darkest of our memories, to work through all the times we denied Christ, all the times we hurt our neighbor, all the times we have felt the stain of sin, all the times we have felt the sting of death. This is where elements of confession, contemplation, hymns and prayers of mourning, and a Gospel account which leaves us in the wake of a burial fits in. These elements empower us to repent and turn back to God. In rejecting the urgency to seek "closure" about our human condition by pushing through to the Resurrection, and in instead slowing down and confronting what it means to overcome sin and suffering, we may find the healing transformation of the Resurrection far more vivid, and God's liberation all the more fulfilling.

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