



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What are baptismal festivals?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Background

In Holy Baptism, we are welcomed into the body of Christ and the mission we share as Christ's body in the world (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 231). How do we mark this entrance into the Christian life? Do the ways we celebrate Baptism convey its centrality? The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's set of priorities for the practices of word and sacrament, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, paraphrases Luther:

We seek to celebrate Baptism in such a way that the celebration is a true and complete sign of the things which Baptism signifies" (Principle 25, Paraphrasing Luther's Works, 35:29).

In our time, congregations are rediscovering the centrality of baptism ([See "How can the centrality of baptism be renewed?"](#)) and understanding it as formation into discipleship. Rather than be seen as one more thing to be added to a worship service, it is viewed as an occasion for rejoicing. The baptisms of adults and children into the Christian community are significant not only for those being baptized, but also for the whole assembly as they recall that they, too, have been washed and welcomed into the body of Christ.

One way that congregations convey the significance of baptism is by celebrating many baptisms at designated times in the church year. By marking these occasions as festivals, many elements of worship can highlight the centrality of baptism and its connection to the church year. The rite of Holy Baptism can be fully celebrated and other aspects of worship such as music, preaching, art and prayer can surround and rejoice in this sacrament.

Baptismal festivals underscore the communal nature of the baptized life. Although baptism welcomes each child of God into the fellowship of believers, it is a communal event that "vividly expresses God present in the midst of God's people, bringing life and salvation in and through this gathering of believers" (*The Christian Life*, p. 48). This communal understanding will shape the practice of baptism in a congregation.

Practice

When and how do congregations celebrate baptismal festivals?

Evangelical Lutheran Worship recommends holding baptismal festivals on:

- The Vigil Easter,
- The Day of Pentecost
- All Saints Day
- Baptism of Our Lord

Other possible times include Easter Day and the Second or Third Sunday of Advent. (See *The Christian Life*, p. 53) Congregations may find other days as well, but the lectionary and themes of those noted above allow for strong linkage between the baptized life and the story of salvation (See *The Use of the Means of Grace*, Application 25 B).

If it is your congregation's practice to schedule baptisms by family request, moving toward a vibrant practice of regularly scheduled baptismal festivals will require time and careful teaching. It is counter-cultural to regard the communal aspects of baptism before individual preference. Some may fear that baptizing many people at once makes the event less special. Parents may fear waiting a month or more for the next festival. The congregation will need to carefully teach about baptism as a "genuine welcome into a supportive Christian community and not as insurance against being condemned by God" (*The Christian Life*, p. 54).

What are the initial steps in a gradual move to this practice? Consider this beginning list of suggestions:

- Lift up the centrality of baptism in every teaching opportunity such as newsletter articles, on-line material, youth and adult educational forums and sermons.
- Prepare printed materials on baptismal practice in your congregation. Make sure these list the dates of each baptismal festival for the coming year. (for an example, see <http://firstlutheranlorain.org/worship/baptisms.html>)
- If your church recognizes birthdays in a newsletter or in some other format, add to this a list of baptismal anniversaries.
- Surround baptismal festivals with hymns, songs and other music that will connect the baptismal themes to the season of the church year.
- Begin an Easter Vigil, including a time for Baptisms or Affirmation of Baptism (See "[What are the practices for remembering and affirming baptism?](#)") Celebrate the newly baptized with a reception after each baptismal festival.
- Recognize that there will always be exceptions to the new norm. A few baptisms will always occur outside the festival cycle for whatever reason, yet at the same time, baptismal candidates and the congregation will become comfortable with and look forward to a regular pattern of baptismal festivals.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ↻ How can the centrality of baptism be renewed in our congregation?
- ↻ What are the practices for remembering and affirming baptism?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Print version published annually by church year.
 - 📄 Also available as an online subscription at www.sundaysandseasons.com.

Revised January 2013

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