



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Why don't we use alleluias during Lent?

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

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 penitential 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. An alternate gospel acclamation for Lent that omits the alleluia is provided for in Settings One through Ten of Holy Communion in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Additional settings can be found in the Service Music portion (ELW #176-77) and in additional resources.

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.

Along with a sung farewell to alleluia, some congregations have embraced the practice of physically “burying” the alleluia. A banner or other visual presentation of the alleluia is crafted and then “buried” (see below). This ritual practice is can be especially delightful and meaningful for children.

Practice

When do we bury the alleluia?

Alleluia is appropriately bid farewell on the Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday (the Transfiguration of Our Lord, also called the last Sunday after the Epiphany in the Lutheran liturgical calendar). This is the last Sunday when alleluia will be used until the

Vigil of Easter, or Easter Sunday for those congregations not holding a Vigil. The burial of the alleluia could otherwise be the culminating activity at a congregational Carnival (also known as Mardi Gras or Shrove Tuesday) celebration just before Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

How do we make an alleluia to bury?

A Sunday school, confirmation class or children's choir might be invited to construct an alleluia using a long sheet of good quality paper. Pairs of students could be responsible for designing and creating each of the word's eight letters.

Alternately, a congregational sewing group might consider creating a fabric alleluia banner. Such a creation might be carried in procession, but might just as effectively be designed to resemble a table runner in length and width so that it could be rolled rather than folded when put away.



How do we bury the alleluia?

If a simple suspension of the alleluia during Lent is all that is desired, the "burial," or farewell might simply consist of singing "Alleluia, song of gladness" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #318) as the Sending hymn on the Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday. If a fuller ritual is desired, consider:

- Carrying an Alleluia banner as part of the Sending rite. If a physical burying of the alleluia is desired, the recessional would move to that location outdoors. Otherwise, the banner could be placed in a suitable container inside the worship space.
- If you are burying the alleluia outdoors, the banner/poster could be placed in a sturdy box. If the banner can be rolled, a sturdy decorated cardboard mailing tube wrapped in protective plastic makes a fine container.
- Remember that if this is a new practice for your congregation, you will need to introduce this with careful teaching in newsletters, websites or in the worship folder.

When and how do we "resurrect" the alleluia?

- If the alleluia was buried as part of worship on the last Sunday after the Epiphany, the resurrected alleluia may appropriately be carried in a festive procession during the hymn of praise or as part of the gospel procession (if used) at the Vigil of Easter or on Easter Sunday. Accompany this by joyful singing of hymns/songs replete with Alleluias.
- If the congregation buried the alleluia during a parish Carnival or Mardi Gras celebration, the congregation's Easter breakfast (if it holds one) might provide the best parallel venue for resurrecting it. Several youth could be enlisted to carry the resurrected alleluia among the breakfasters as those gathered sing a familiar Easter hymn containing multiple alleluias such as "Jesus Christ is risen today" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #365).
- If the alleluia was physically buried in the ground, provision should be made to have the burial container unearthed a day or two in advance so that the alleluia itself can be easily removed when needed.

Is it appropriate to use alleluias at funerals during Lent?

The decision to use alleluias at funerals during lent will need to be made in an informed and intentional manner by local congregations. The historic practice of most western liturgical churches is to fast from alleluias even at funerals during Lent. However, Christian funerals properly recall and celebrate our death and resurrection with Christ in baptism. The paschal candle is lighted at all funerals to remind us of the presence of the risen Christ with us. Christian funerals always proclaim the resurrection, pointing us toward Easter and toward the promise of eternal life with God. Because of their Easter orientation, it seems reasonable and pastoral to conclude that funerals may appropriately suspend the "rule" against using alleluias during Lent.

RESOURCES

[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:](#)

- 📖 Pfatteicher, Philip. *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990. pp. 140, 222, 288.
- 📖 VanLoon, Ralph R. and S. Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook: A Practical Guide for Parish Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.
- 📖 *Music Sourcebook for Lent and the Three Days.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010.
- 📖 *Worship Guidebook for Lent and the Three Days.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.

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