

ADAPTING OUR "SINGING THROUGH THE WILDERNESS" HOLY WEEK SERVICE

BY GUEST CONTRIBUTOR, SLATS TOOLE

In light of COVID-19, this addendum offers suggestions for adapting our ["Singing Through the Wilderness" liturgy](#) for online worship. For how to adapt congregational singing for online worship, read this [blog post](#).

In this time of pandemic, we are facing challenges we never could have predicted as we move toward Holy Week and Easter. I myself am working in a state whose numbers of confirmed positive cases are in the five digits, with hundreds of deaths at this point. We have moved from discouraging gatherings to living under a "stay at home" order. Many faith leaders are now streaming or pre-recording worship.

This addendum to ["Singing Through the Wilderness"](#) is designed to help you adapt this service for online use, knowing that the reality of online worship looks different throughout the country. Most of these adaptations are possible whether you pre-record your service or live stream (*including platforms like Zoom*).

HANDWASHING

The plan for this service involves hand washing as a symbol for foot washing. It's deeply appropriate to spend some time thinking about washing in this moment when we are being encouraged to wash our hands frequently, and as such, I invite you to begin your services with this new poem, "it is the simple things":

*it is the simple things
that save us.*

*we run toward harsh chemicals
because if it burns and dries
it must kill, right?
but we are told
time and time again
that the best thing we can do
is wash.*

HANDWASHING (cont.)

*to take our time.
to wash our hands with care.
to let everything else pause
as we trace our fingers along our palms
and swirl and twist our wrists in this dance
that is one of the only things
that can wash away this danger.*

*and now something that was once done
in haste
a means to an end—
the wearing down of the grime of work
the destruction of the evidence of
playing in the dirt
before you are allowed to sit down
for dinner—
now, this is a slow and thorough ritual
of survival
of persistence
of care
for ourselves and for others.
this is how we keep each other safe.*

*warm water and soap and care,
lathered over hands that are becoming
dry and chapped
it is too simple to trust*

*much like it is too simple to trust a Savior
who kneels before us to wash our feet
with the same care and deliberateness
that we now wash our hands.
this is not the harsh conqueror
that will kill our enemies.
this is not what we think we need.*

*but we are saved
through simple things.
through water and dust
and bread and cup
and love.
love.
love poured out like blood
love poured out like water
that cleanses and protects us.*

—by Slats Toole

As people gather, have the "you are made"¹ poem on the screen or printed for worshipers to read at home. After everyone has arrived, read the poem, "it is the simple things." Then invite people to participate by either washing their hands in a basin at home, or simply by going to their sinks to wash their hands as we have been doing throughout this time. Please adapt this language as you see fit:

"Jesus began the final days of his earthly life by washing the feet of his disciples. You are invited to take a moment to wash your hands where you are at home. As you feel the coolness of the water, may it be like a spring in the wilderness, a reminder of baptism, the assurance that no matter what happens, God will provide what you need. As you feel the touch of your hands, pray that your hands might be the hands of Christ—comforting, healing, and supporting all those you meet."

¹ Full poem included in the "Singing Through the Wilderness" liturgy:
<https://sanctifiedart.org/creative-written-liturgy/singing-through-the-wilderness-holy-week-liturgy>.

HOLY COMMUNION

Different denominations have different policies on whether Communion can be offered in an online church service. If online Communion is permissible in your context and appropriate for your community, no change is needed. If you will not be celebrating Communion at this service, consider framing the Communion portion of the service by calling us to remember the story of how the Lord's Supper came to be on this night of betrayal.

Whether or not you serve Communion, another option for this service (*particularly if you are splitting it up over multiple days*) is to share in a meal together. This is particularly appropriate for video conferencing services. Invite households to have their dinner ready, and come together for a time of eating and fellowship. "Agape meals" or "love feasts" are ancient Christian traditions (*giving birth to the church potluck!*), and it is not uncommon for churches to come together for agape meals on Wednesday or Thursday of Holy Week. Participating in this together highlights the grace that the poem, "it begins with grace,"² speaks to, and brings us together for fellowship.

CONNECTING THROUGHOUT THE WEEK

Part of the inspiration for this service was to offer a single Holy Week service for those of us for whom having a Maundy Thursday service and a Good Friday service is not effective or sustainable. However, many of us are moving to having more points of contact throughout the week in order to combat isolation and promote a lived sense of community. (Some people also find that their community has less of an attention span on screens). One of the advantages of having multiple points of connection through Holy Week is to help us all ground ourselves in time. In these days when our routines are interrupted, it's easy to lose track of days. Our lives in the church continue to move forward, and leaning into our liturgical seasons helps us feel connected to something larger—the story of resurrection that is our center. Leaning into Holy Week may also help Easter still feel like Easter, even when we are celebrating from afar.

If this is effective in your context, you could split up the service in these ways:

Maundy Thursday: Hand washing through Communion, ending with a community meal.

Good Friday: Begin with "A Prayer to Keep Awake" poem and continue through the end (*consider repeating the Call to Worship on Friday as well to lend a sense of continuity*).

² Full poem included in the "Singing Through the Wilderness" liturgy:
<https://sanctifiedart.org/creative-written-liturgy/singing-through-the-wilderness-holy-week-liturgy>.

CONNECTING THROUGHOUT THE WEEK (cont.)

Or, if your community is craving a daily connection throughout the week:³

Monday: Hand washing through Communion.

Tuesday: "A Prayer to Keep Awake" poem, sung response, John 18:1-12, sung response.

Spy Wednesday: Sung response, John 18:13-27, sung response.

Maundy Thursday: Sung response, John 18:28-19:16a, sung response.

Good Friday: "this is the breaking" poem, John 19:16b-30, sustained moment of silence or tolling of a bell.

Holy Saturday: John 19:31-43, "the night weeps" poem, closing song.

INVOLVE MANY PEOPLE

Just because it is not possible for all of us to physically worship together safely does not mean we cannot engage a number of different voices in our services. This is a service with a lot of different readings, prayers, and poems, all of which could be done by different people. If you're using a video conferencing platform (*like Zoom or FreeConferenceCall*), participants can unmute and lead their portion of the service in a similar way as they might in person. If you are pre-recording your services, you can invite people to film their portion on their phone or computer and send them in so they can be edited together. Being able to see each other's faces and hear each other's voices is a gift in these times—not to mention that in a service that handles a lot of scripture like this one, hearing it in different voices helps hold attention.

A NOTE ON HOPE

The end of this service suggests either silence or a song that points towards hope. Those who know me know that my theology loves to sit in the difficult questions and the times that hope seems lost. Job and Ecclesiastes are two of my favorite books of the Bible. But at this time, I would strongly suggest moving the end of this service toward hope. This is a heavy service and we are living in heavy times. It is easy for us to feel the despair of Good Friday. It is easy for us to feel the absence of God. In this moment, we need to remember this story not because we have forgotten the weight of this kind of suffering, but because we need to know that God has felt suffering too. The songs at the end of this service are options to point us toward that reality and remind us that it is when it is the most bleak that Easter morning comes.

BOOKLETS

If there are people in your community that do not have access to the internet, consider printing out booklets with the scriptures, a short prayer, and meditation questions that people can follow throughout the week. Prayers and poems from this service can be used for that!

³ With this option, you could set a daily time for prayer and singing via a video conference, or you could pre-record each segment to email out to your congregation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Slats Toole (they/them/theirs) is a writer, musician, theater artist and preacher, whose work has been published in *Call to Worship*, *Sacramental Life*, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, *Fidelia Magazine*, and Discipleship Ministries' "History of Hymns" column. They are the author of the poetry collection *Queering Lent*. They are a Deborah Carlton Loftis Ambassador for the Center for Congregational Song, a member of the NEXT Church Advisory Team, secretary of their town's Human Relations Commission and a frequent presenter on queer/trans issues in the church. Recently, Slats served on the team that compiled "Songs for the Holy Other: Hymns Affirming the LGBTQIA2S+ Community" with the Hymn Society—they also have a hymn published in that collection. They are the resident sound designer for The In[heir]itance Project and their multidisciplinary piece about difficult Biblical texts, *Who Do You Say That I Am?* was recently developed with Undiscovered Countries' "Blast Off!" development lab. Slats holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drama from New York University and a Master of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary. www.slatsite.com

A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshipping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God. Learn more about their work at sanctifiedart.org.

