# Magnifying the Mystery

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At its Churchwide Assembly in August 2019, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) adopted the social statement "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action," which especially in section 27 advocates widening and deepening the language with which we address and describe God. I have been asked (1) to explain why this is a worthy goal and (2) to offer some suggestions for how to expand our language to and about God.

All three of the world's monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, teach their faithful that God is beyond human speech. Yet in each religion, words become important, even in some cases canonically required, in address to God. Thus all three world religions situate themselves within a linguistic paradox: God is beyond speech, but believers are to adopt certain forms of speech to approach and describe God. It is as if in each religion one set of words is said to work well enough—or at least the community prays that in mercy God will receive these songs, these prayers, this babble. We magnify the God of mystery—that is, we offer our words of praise to the One who is beyond words.

One of the debatable issues within each of these religions is precisely which words are required, which appropriate, and which forbidden. How long is the list of acceptable words? How restrictive are the rules for proper worship? In our time, practicing Christians do not agree with one another about which language best serves the faith. For example, some will say that "Father" is the only doctrinally acceptable title of divine address; others, that as the traditional and blessed title, it demands our continuing respectful use; still others, the title having arisen in a patriarchal society, in our society it deserves only periodic usage; while a few maintain that "Father" ought to be deleted from our speech. In the midst of this worldwide conversation, the ELCA has aligned itself with those Christians who wish both (1) faithfully to continue use of the core language of Christian tradition and (2) devoutly to expand our list of nouns and adjectives for God, especially by finding in the scriptures more ways to address and describe God. Since the days of Martin Luther's composing of congregational hymnody, many Lutherans hope that the beloved language from the past encourages creativity in the present toward the future. Already in 2002 the ELCA document *Principles for Worship* spoke of the value of such expansiveness in language for God.[1] Relying on the other meaning of the verb "magnify," we can say that we magnify the God of mystery—that is, we expand and enhance the language to and about the One who is beyond words.

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## Historical developments

Much of the language that Christians have used when describing and addressing God was formed during a time of cultural patriarchy. In the Roman Empire, men legally owned their wives and property and had the power of life or death over any children born in their household. It was generally believed that male sperm contained all that was human for conception, with the female providing only an empty womb for gestation. Given this worldview, it made sense that the high god was named Jupiter, "Zeus-pater," the Father of Fathers. It was also popularly believed that the earth had three tiers, the lowest for the dead, the middle for the living, and the highest for the gods, and so it logically followed to speak as if God reigned from up above the sky. The early church attracted both Gentiles who had worshipped Jupiter and Jews who were influenced by the culture of the Roman Empire, and so it is not surprising that Christians spoke of God as the great Father in the skies. This language both reflected their worldview and inculcated its values within the praying community; it can be said that God blessed this language, giving it success when conveying the gospel around the world.

But having met God in Christ, believers came to modify the stark patriarchy of first-century religious speech. The eminent scholar of religious language, Ian T. Ramsey, described Christian speech in this way: there is first the "model," such as "father," but

1. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Principles for Worship*, 2002. Available online www.elca.org. See for example "Language and the Christian Assembly," L-4E, L-5B, L-8F, L-8G, L-9F.

it is corrected by a "qualifier," for example, "loving."[2] You may be sure that Jupiter was not a "loving" deity, but the God whom Jesus revealed did love the world. Christians utilized the language they had been given, but they emended it, expanding those words, to express more fully the merciful God whom they encountered at the font and the table. The church's most profound "qualifier" of classic God language is encountered in the mystery of the Trinity. In trinitarian language, the one God is three, and the divinity of God contains also the humanity of Jesus and the vitality of the faithful community. God is up, and there, and here.

When Christians talk to and about God, they are like J. R. R. Tolkien's Treebeard, who explained to the hobbits why the speech of the Ents cannot be hasty. Ents, he said, have "a lovely language, but it takes a very long time to say anything in it, because we do not say anything in it, unless it is worth taking a long time to say, and to listen to."[3] So Christians came to disseminate apostolic writings, canonize four Gospels, instruct the catechumens, develop philosophical theology, honor mystics, and preach every Sunday, so as to have enough time to say what ought to be said about God, employing old and new models and providing at least some of the appropriate qualifiers.

But Christians had not only to amend Jupiter, but also to chant the psalms, in which the unspeakable name of God was supplanted with metaphors. Let us consider Psalm 18. In this one poem, God is strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, shield, horn of my salvation, temple-dweller, volcano, sky-flier, a god covered with darkness yet shining with brightness, thunder, support, law-maker, light warrior, commander of armies. Lutherans are accustomed to speaking of God as our "mighty fortress," as does Psalm 18 in verse 2. But on occasion we beg for the opposite: our enclosure is too tight, and, like the psalmist in verse 29, we ask for divine assistance in leaping over a wall. We might think about classical language for God as a comforting stronghold in the faith, but many contemporary Christians now believe that we were being fenced in from too much, even some of the truth of God. What we may need now is some leaping over the wall.

Especially cloistered medieval Christians continued the psalter's tradition of addressing and describing God with expansive metaphors. Hildegard of Bingen wrote of God's greenness. In her Homily 19 on Matthew 8:1-13, she elaborated on the centurion's request by his asking Jesus to "kiss my flesh with your greenness," and in her Homily 25 on the prodigal son, the father is inspired to host the feast because "the greenness of the Holy Spirit has blossomed again in him."[4] Thus Hildegard's twelfth-century convent named the full Trinity as green: ought we resurrect this

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divine qualifier? In the fourteenth century, Catherine of Siena praised the Trinity as her table, her food, and her waiter.[5] Is this sacramental imagery to praise God useful at our eucharists?[6] Sometimes, in searching for ways to magnify our God, we can find in the past stunning speech that for some reason has been forgotten.

## Renewing and enriching our language for God

Reflecting together on the language of our worship raises many questions. Since we no longer grant the husband ultimate power over the wife, nor do we think that sperm is a minute fetus, what besides Father is a faithful title when addressing God? Although we might still say that God is "up," just as we say that the sun "rises," we do not, in our time of space exploration, actually believe that God reigns from a throne room situated above the sky. Rather, God pervades the entire universe. Thus the presider at the eucharist no longer faces the outside wall, as if God is out up there, but faces the community of the baptized, among whom is the presence of God. It is well if both our ritual behavior and its attendant language accord with our worldview. God saved not only our ancestors in past generations, lovingly recalled with archaic speech, but God saves us now, in our words and phrases. Thus, from the first century on, Christians have repeatedly retranslated the word of God, so as to speak of God in their own tongue.

Our openness to continuing renewal and reformation of our language presents a weekly challenge to those who design and lead assembly worship. We can think of one example pertinent to our new social statement "Faith, Sexism, and Justice." Over the last several decades, immense effort was expended altering the texts of hymns and prayers to replace "men" and "mankind" with references to both men and women. Yet we have now arrived at a time when the binary distinctions of male and female are rejected

2. Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 65-66.

3. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), 68.

4. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, trans. and ed., *Hildegard of Bingen: Homilies on the Gospels* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 92, 120. Also see Gail Ramshaw, *Saints on Sunday: Voices from Our Past Enlivening Our Worship* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2018), 145.

5. Suzanne Noffke, ed., *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 102.

6. See "For Trinity Sunday: Triple Praise," in Gail Ramshaw, *Pray, Praise, and Give Thanks: A Collection of Litanies, Laments, and Thanksgiving at Font and Table* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), 56.

as too narrow, too restrictive, not true enough to describe the human creatures that God has made. So, once again, we are asking skilled writers to assist us in our Sunday speech.

I am among those who hope that this deepening of language to and about God be always a gift of plenty. We can always be about the challenge of offering more from the cornucopia of grace. The worldwide phenomenon of the three-year lectionaries does exactly this. In Matthew we hear Christ, the new Moses, saying "Be perfect." In Mark, the hidden Messiah announces, "Be prepared." In Luke, Jesus teaches us, "Be merciful." And in John, proclaimed during all three years, Christ calls out, "I AM." Thanks to this ecumenically shared lectionary, we receive four different handles to holiness, four avenues to travel for a deepening knowledge of Jesus Christ. Attentive use of the Revised Common Lectionary is perhaps step one in expanding our language for God.[7]

The biblical wealth of imagery for God is especially apparent during the readings of the Easter Vigil.[8] In this the first eucharist of Easter, restored to Christian use in the twentieth century, God is the creator of all things; the ark that saves us; the arm that stays our sacrifices; the liberator of our people; the host of the meal; Lady Wisdom reigning from the sky; a new spirit of life within; the wind enlivening our bones; the city of joy; the fish coughing us up onto land; the law-giver; and the one walking with us in the furnace of blazing fire. All those images of God in one evening? Amazing! Each of these images presents a way to speak of the empty tomb, one synonym after another. So, to expand your language to and about God, celebrate the Easter Vigil.

It is quite possible to use material from the 2006 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW) as if this publication is merely an addendum to the 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship*. However, the material advocated in the ELW represents several significant paradigm shifts that in the twenty-first century direct the assembly's worship with new directions. Briefly listed, the ELW paradigm shifts include the following: Assembly worship follows an ordo supported by multiple options, including new Thanksgivings at the font and at the table, as distinct from a single inviolate order of service. The Revised Common Lectionary undergirds all choices. The central festival of the year is the Three Days, traditionally called the Paschal Triduum.[9] Baptismal process replaces baptism as a single event. Lent focuses on baptismal formation. More global music is added to traditional hymnody. Strict ritual regulations are replaced with soft rubrics. And, for our purposes here, language to and about God is substantially enriched, by means of fuller biblical resonances and far more metaphors for the divine, in language that strives to be both faithful and innovative. Thus, here is another suggestion toward expanding your language for God: mine the treasures of the ELW for its layers of gold.

And the ELW is not the last word: during the fall of 2020 the church publishing house is releasing *All Creation Sings*, a supplement with worship materials that will include two liturgies of Holy Communion, more than fifty new prayers and approximately 200 hymns and songs. These resources will expand the language of worship, describing and addressing God and humankind in ways both biblical and innovative that mean to enrich our faith.

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## Concerning optional texts

According to the paradigm of the ELW, many parts of the liturgy are open to options. While we are asked to begin and to conclude our worship in the triune name—rather than with a cheery but wholly secular "Good Morning!"—we are encouraged to select a way to articulate the Trinity that accords best with the liturgy of the day. Thus the worship of the assembly can begin "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," or it can begin "Blessed be the holy Trinity, one God, who forgives all our sin, whose mercy endures forever." The annual and online publication *Sundays and Seasons* provides yet more options, such as "Blessed be the holy Trinity, one God, the fountain of living water, the rock who gave us birth, our light and our salvation."[10] In similar fashion, the final blessing can be the traditional "Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless you now and forever." Or it may be Martin Luther's preferred text, the Aaronic blessing, which alerts us to the face of God in Christ and to the Spirit giving us peace;

7. Listings of the Revised Common Lectionary are found in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 18-53.
8. See *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 269.
9. See *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 247-270.
10. This example taken from *Sundays and Seasons Year C* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2019), 172.

or a different trinitarian text that speaks of God's steadfastness, hope, and grace. Those standard parts of the liturgy need not be identical week in, week out, but themselves can open up wider the naming and praising of divine mystery. So, to expand your language to and about God, chose thoughtfully among options.

## Concerning the prayers of the day

The standard prayer of the day, traditionally called "the collect" since it collected into one sentence the petitions that had been prayed silently by the assembly—thus in the ELW, "a brief silence is kept before the prayer"—named God briefly, thanked God for past mercies, and asked for God to continue such blessings. In the ELW, many prayers of the day have been enhanced with metaphors for God that reflect that Sunday's readings. Thus we approach God as the radiance of all faithful people, source of every blessing, like a mother, like a father, our rock, liberator of your people, ground of our being, eternal majesty, defender, teacher and guide, Lord of the feast, merciful master, protector, our true life, and other such nouns and phrases that open our minds to the God whom we address. These images ready us for the petition that follows, a first course before the main meal. The ELW conclusion to prayer that names Jesus Christ as both "Savior and Lord" testifies to the Son of God in different yet complementary ways. So, to expand your language to and about God, engage your imagination when using these prayers.

## Concerning thanksgivings

The ELW encourages Christians always to begin everything with thanks to God. Thus, as we approach the font, we first thank God for the gift of water and through the ages for saving us through water. The Thanksgivings at the Font (ELW pp. 70-71) exemplify the biblical references that are possible for such thanksgivings. Thanksgiving V praises God for saving Hagar, who is the mother of Islam, and for healing Naaman, who was the army commander of Israel's enemy. These surprising stories of God's inclusive mercy are welcome ways for us to leap over one of our traditional walls, but they function well only if the assembly is clued into the biblical content and contemporary usefulness of these stories. The Thanksgivings at the Table (ELW pp. 65-69, 108-111) include many biblical references that bring the worshiping assembly into the presence of the immensity of God. Whether the African-American phrasing of "God of our weary years" or address to the opposites of God—"O God, most majestic, O God most motherly"—these thanksgivings draw on biblical images, some familiar but some rarely cited, that enlarge our capacity to receive the multifaceted mystery of God. So, to expand your language to and about God, proclaim these thanksgivings, regularly at the font, and every Sunday at the table.

## Concerning pronouns in the Psalms

One of the more challenging linguistic tasks for us all is to eliminate the habit of referring to God as a he. Of course, in the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, all nouns had grammatical gender, which except for archaic references to a city or a ship as a she, is wholly disregarded in our English translations. However, in most contemporary speech, God has remained a he, perhaps because most people actually do regard God as more masculine than other. Yet in recent centuries, Christians of various denominations have urged that we endeavor to end this historic practice, and the 150 psalms in the ELW provide a translation in which none of the psalms ever refers to God with masculine pronouns. This psalm translation has been chosen by the Presbyterian Church USA as the psalter in their 2018 *Book of Common Worship*.[11]

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I have encountered a faithful user of the ELW who after a decade of weekly use was surprised to discover that its psalter was crafted without a single male pronoun for God. This is thanks to the mastery of the Old Testament professors who labored on this liturgical translation. This gender-neutral language for God, on Sunday after Sunday—and for those who pray daily prayer, on day after day—has trained us to find all those uses of "he" and "his" in older translations as disconcerting, for we judge that the masculine speech is too narrow to convey the mystery of God. So, to expand your language to and about God, give to the assembly each week the psalm passage appointed in the lectionary.

Here is perhaps the place to urge all preachers and teachers to dedicate themselves to eliminate such masculine pronouns from their own speech. Give yourself a year to delete the divine "he" and "his": it will probably take less time than that. It may require

11. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 928-1077.

a genuine conversion on your part to move beyond God as a he, but such a reorientation of mind and heart can open also you, as preacher and teacher, to that more expansive God to whom we are inviting all Christians. So, to expand the church's language to and from God, begin with your own speech.

## Concerning hymns

Many hymns in the ELW include expansive language for God. Here is a short list: God is divine eternal lover (#326), victor (#366), mother, friend, father (#397), root of life (#399), tree of life (#447), ocean and river (#453), farmer and gardener (#508), sculptor and potter (#736), eagle (#791), guardian (#818), rock (#862). And while appointing one such newer hymn each Sunday, we ought not forget the classic hymns with expansive imagery for God: "Be Thou My Vision" (#793) from the eighth century calls God wisdom, word, shelter, tower, power, my inheritance, my treasure, light, sun, heart, vision, and ruler. Might the ubiquitous service folder list the images in such hymns, so that worshipers could meditate on them before or after the service? I admire the English rendering of *Seňor* in hymn #817 as "Sweet Lord," an oxymoron that expresses Christ's identity so well. But does your assembly know that the Morning Star of #308 is Christ? The Benedictine sister Delores Dufner composed a splendid hymn in which the biblical image of Christ as king is turned on its head to better proclaim the gospel (#431): be sure to sing it on the last Sunday of each church year. Furthermore, many hymn texts have been emended to reduce the masculine references. For example, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" (#858) has been emended (#859) to eliminate eleven masculine pronouns for God. So, to magnify our God language by lessening the repetition of God as a he, sing the emended version of this old hymn.

## Concerning the intercessions

As you craft each week's intercessions, you may on occasion head or conclude each petition with an appropriate image for God.[12] For example, the petition for the church might be addressed to God as Temple, for the earth to God as Rainbow of Promise, for the nations to God as Sovereign, for the sick to God as Healer, for the sorrowing to the Everlasting Arms. The remembrance of the dead can be addressed to God as our Homeland. It may be that the readings for the day or the appointed psalm provide imagery for God that can enhance the intercessions.

## Concerning the children

It is sometimes suggested that children ought to be handed only simplistic vocabulary with which to nurture their spirituality. However, the kind of children's books that win literary awards suggests quite the opposite: that children, perhaps better than adults, can readily receive and absorb symbolic speech.

A quite remarkable catechetical tool, the cards presented not only the expected–God as a hen (Matt 23:37), God as an eagle (Deut 32:11)–but also the surprising: God as dew (Hosea 14:5), God as lightning (Psalm 18:14), God as a bear (Lam 3:10).

Among the children's books that support the ELCA hope for expansive language for God, here are several of my favorites: Carol Wehrheim's board books *God Is Our Home* and *The Loving Shepherd* (as illustrated by Betsy James, the shepherd is a young girl); Megan Hoyt's *Hildegard's Gift*; Sandy Eisenberg Sasso's *In God's Name;* and Douglas Wood's *Old Turtle*. By utilizing forms of Godly Play, some Lutherans are discovering that our catechesis of children need not attempt to close down their imagination; rather, we can encourage their ability to wonder at the mystery of God.

I am not convinced that it is a productive exercise to ask children to draw pictures of God, especially if all that the children have been exposed to are depictions of grandfathers or shepherds in white floor-length robes. Some years ago a Christian publishing house in Denmark produced *Kort om Gud*, a deck of fifty-four colorful laminated cards, each one depicting a biblical image for God, along with its biblical citation. A quite remarkable catechetical tool, the cards presented not only the expected—God as a hen (Matt 23:37), God as an eagle (Deut 32:11)—but also the surprising: God as dew (Hosea 14:5), God as lightning (Psalm 18:14), God as a bear (Lam 3:10). For God as king, the picture is not of some archaic monarch, but rather of the familiar king card in a contemporary playing deck. The images went beyond traditional gender designations, so that the physician (Ezekiel 34:16) is shown as a woman, and father (Matt 6:9) is a man holding and talking endearingly with an infant.

## Concerning visuals projected or printed

The centuries of visuals adorning Christian worship spaces and illustrating catechetical materials feature immense variation. On one end are Orthodox churches, both historic and newly constructed, in which the entire interior space, walls and ceiling, are fully painted up with biblical stories and saints' lives. Fifteenth-century churches in Sweden, still used by Lutherans every Sunday, covered the interior walls with depictions of the life of Christ which were set adjacent to parallel stories from the Old Testament. On the opposite end of the spectrum are strict Calvinists, who decided that any visuals would distract from worshipers' attention to the black-robed preacher, and they consecrated nearly Quaker spaces, only white walls and clear glass windows. Where are the churches of the ELCA in this continuum?

12. Examples are given in Gail Ramshaw, *Praying for the Whole World: A Handbook for Intercessors* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 42-43.

To enhance those sanctuaries with white walls or screens, or for our ubiquitous service folders, there are now several excellent sources of projectable or printable visuals that are keyed to the three-year lectionary.[13] Using this imagery, Sunday worship can include not only the biblical readings, hymns that elaborate on those readings, and a sermon that preaches the readings, but also a visual that depicts the narrative or that focuses on a pertinent symbol. Thus if the reading is about God as our shepherd, we can offer to our assembly's imagination a painting of Rebekah watering her camels or a photo of contemporary shepherds tending their flocks by helicopter. One advantage of such weekly visuals is that they are present for only one Sunday: next week the lectionary will suggest a different image of God to enhance our worship.

## Concerning worship spaces

Most Western medieval church buildings embodied the commonplace notion that God was far up and outside the building, the clergy were closest to God, the royalty and nobility granted front-row places of honor, while the poor baptized folk stood around in the back. Permanent seating in the form of pews became standard only in the fourteenth century, at which time, to reflect cultural patterns, women and men sat on opposite sides of the main aisle. As architects like to say, the building wins: the building both reflects and reinforces social position. Where you stand or sit is who you are.

Thus, to adhere to our current understanding of the baptized community, the interior space of many churches has been reoriented, with the things of God inside the space, not outside, and with no great gulf fixed between the clergy and the laity. The font, no longer covered and positioned in some corner, is now central, and spacious, and filled with flowing water. Perhaps without fully realizing the effect of these renovations, the worshipers have undergone radical change in their image of God. The almighty and immortal God, before whom we knelt in fear, has come down to earth, gathering us here into a family cleansed and fed. The ancient model of the divine monarch has been qualified by the Gospels' narratives of brother Jesus in our midst.

Some congregations, where traditional architecture remains in force on most Sundays, are using the Easter Vigil to widen their sense of the presence of God. First, the worshipers gather in a circle around an outdoor firepit; next, the assembly processes into their building, singing of Christ as their light; for the readings they assemble in the lounge, with children sitting on the floor; at the thanksgiving for baptism, they encircle the font, marking one another with a watery cross of remembrance; and finally for holy communion they attend the table of life. Their moving from place to place has allowed them to experience the multivalence of our God: God speaking from the fire, God like the pillar of fire leading the people to the promised land; God telling us stories; God, like the womb of our rebirth, bearing us away from sin; God serving us bread and wine, thus embodied in the staple food and the celebrative drink of life. So, to expand your sense of who and what God is, design your Easter Vigil using this stational pattern.

Although we can never capture God in words, we call on one another to widen and deepen the speech of our worship.

## Concerning the bread of Holy Communion

Many Lutherans around the world are ordaining women for pastoral ministry. In the ELCA, we have already leapt over that wall, high and impenetrable though it seemed to many. The gospel can be preached by a woman; not only men can offer the sacraments. Thus, the inevitable link between a male God and male humans has been broken. God is more than we had imagined.

But there remains for many Lutherans another obstacle to a deeper God: the continuing use of prepackaged wafers for communion. In the Middle Ages, the Western church assigned monks the task of producing communion wafers, so as to ensure that no women touched the bread of the eucharist; and by linking the clergy with Old Testament priests and the people's annual communion with the matzah of Passover, the West standardized the use of unleavened bread. It seems to me that such wafers can suggest only a diminutive and churchy God. But real bread, genuine recognizable good-tasting bread, baked by the youth group or purchased from the grocery store or representing a global culture different from your own, can help us to see God not only as a tasteless anomaly, but rather as our daily sustenance, the source of our life, the food bonding us with one another. We receive this God in our hands, and we come to recognize more fully all our meals visited by divine grace.

## Conclusion

Although we can never capture God in words, we call on one another to widen and deepen the speech of our worship, by citing more Bible, rekindling our liturgies, praying enriched texts, chanting the psalms, singing inclusive hymns, sharing insightful imagery, "qualifying our models," and thus opening our assemblies to more of the mystery of God. Too narrow a God can slip through the cracks. One such expanding song is Mary's Magnificat. For centuries at evening prayer, Christians have joined in praising a God who alters our world by casting out the mighty and lifting up the lowly. Among the eight versions of the Magnificat in the ELW is hymn #573, which opens with these words: "My soul now magnifies the Lord; my spirit leaps, by joy possessed." May it be that as we magnify God with magnified language, we can leap right over those walls that have kept us from experiencing some of the mystery of God.

13. Several providers of lectionary visuals are sundaysandseasons.com/visuals and Day Resources, textweek.com/art, and lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu.