

Ideas for Midweek Evening Prayer Services for Lent

This resource was originally presented to the WELS AZ-CA District in January of 2005.

Midweek services during the season of Lent have been a regular part of the worship life of our WELS congregations (and most Lutheran congregations in America) for as long as any of us can remember. The practice of midweek devotional services focusing on the Savior's passion seems to have developed for practical reasons. In previous eras of the church's history, services on the Lord's passion were held only during Holy Week. In fact, there was a service each day of Holy Week: Monday's service told the story of our Lord's sufferings using Matthew's Gospel; Tuesday used Mark's account; Wednesday used Luke's record; Thursday naturally focused on the institution of Holy Communion; John's account of the passion was (and still is) appointed for Good Friday.

Lutheran churches in America have generally discarded the practice of daily services during Holy Week and replaced them with a series of weekly devotional services, typically held on Wednesday evenings. Ash Wednesday, previously a day that focused on confession and repentance, became the first in a series of six services that reviewed our Savior's sufferings and death. The Passion history was compiled together from all four Gospels and divided into seven parts: one for each of the six Wednesday evening services, with the final section read on Good Friday. This remains the common practice in many of our synod's congregations.

More recently, a number of factors have led our synod's worship leaders to reevaluate our midweek Lenten service practices and to encourage a different approach to Lent and Holy Week:

- There has been a desire to return to the traditional focus of confession and absolution for Ash Wednesday worship. The recently published *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* offers an Ash Wednesday service with that focus.
- The three-year lectionary, with its focus on one of the three synoptic Gospels for each year, lends itself well to using one of the synoptic Gospels for the Passion history reading rather than the compiled version from all four Gospels. The compiled readings resulted in very lengthy lessons in services that are generally intended to be shorter than a typical Sunday liturgical service.
- The seven-part compiled version of the passion history only reserved the story of Jesus' burial for Good Friday services. Assigning John's Gospel to Good Friday allows the far more significant event of Jesus' crucifixion to be proclaimed.

With these thoughts in mind, we would like to offer the following ideas that could be incorporated into your midweek Lenten services:

- Use the regular lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday and the services of Holy Week. In fact, you would not necessarily need to include those services into the same "theme" or "sermon series" as the other five midweek Lenten services.
- During the five midweek Lenten services, use the passion history from the synoptic Gospel that is primarily being used in the current year of the lectionary that you are using (Year A = Matthew; Year B = Mark; Year C = Luke). The synoptic Gospel accounts divide nicely into five sections. *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* has reprinted the accounts into five divisions for use during midweek Lenten services (see pages 152-179). *CW:OS* also has a compiled version of all four Gospels divided into five sections, although these readings may be longer than you prefer to use in a midweek evening service. Here are the divisions that may be used (remember that "Midweek Service #1" is the week after Ash Wednesday, not Ash Wednesday itself):

<u>Midweek Service</u>	<u>Year A</u>	<u>Year B</u>	<u>Year C</u>
#1	Matthew 26:1-35	Mark 14:1-26	Luke 22:1-38
#2	Matthew 26:36-56	Mark 14:27-42	Luke 22:39-54
#3	Matthew 26:57-75	Mark 14:43-65	Luke 22:54-71
#4	Matthew 26:1-26	Mark 14:66-15:15	Luke 23:1-25
#5	Matthew 27:27-66	Mark 15:16-4	Luke 23:26-56

- The service of Evening Prayer (*CW* page 52) is intended to be more meditative in nature. Rather than presiding with the “energy” we strive to exhibit on Sunday morning, consider how you can encourage a calm and contemplative atmosphere (e.g. slowing our speech; allowing for periods of silence such as after the psalm; fewer verbal instructions; judicious selection of quiet Lenten and evenings hymns; dimmed lighting in the nave and chancel).
- A different style for preaching may also be appropriate for Evening Prayer. The Lenten series published in our circles have generally included sermons that are 15-20 minutes in length and have utilized a typical theme-and-parts outline. Consider a more devotional style of preaching (no parts, just one central point); aim for a 10-12 minute sermon; use a text that includes only a verse or two.
- If you are not involved in a pulpit rotation during Lent, you have the advantage of being able to preach on the passion history in chronological order. In this case, you could simply choose a few select verses from each segment of the passion history for your sermons. Planning your series in advance may allow you to create a common theme for your midweek sermon series, which would be helpful, although not absolutely necessary. Another idea could be to preach on a selected verse from Isaiah’s great passion prophecy (52:13-52:12) and relate the verse you’ve chosen to the passion history reading in that night’s service. The same could be done with selected verses from the prophet Zechariah. Here is a possible midweek series based on Zechariah’s prophecies and Matthew’s Gospel:

SERIES THEME: Previews of the Passion of the Christ

Ash Wednesday (optional for this series)	Zechariah 1:1-6 (fits Ash Wed.’s repentance theme)
Midweek Service #1	Zechariah 11:8b-12 (& Matthew 26:14-16)
Midweek Service #2	Zechariah 13:7 (& Matthew 26:56b)
Midweek Service #3	Zechariah 6:12-13 (& Matthew 26:59-61)
Midweek Service #4	Zechariah 11:13 (& Matthew 27:3-10)
Midweek Service #5	Zechariah 3:8-9 (& Matthew 27:45,46,51)
Good Friday (optional for this series)	Zechariah 12:10 (& John 19:37)

Further discussion of some of these concepts can be found in the Winter 1999 edition of *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. An article by Prof. James Tiefel, a sample order of service, and a sermon by Prof. Forest Bivens give examples of Ash Wednesday’s distinct nature when compared to the remaining midweek Lenten services. *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* provides resources for all of the Lent and Holy Week services discussed above. If you have not yet purchased a copy for yourself or your congregation, we encourage you to do so and make use of the many helpful worship resources it provides.