

I was not always quite so traditional and liturgical as I am today. I was not always much of a confessional Lutheran. In fact, for a period time, I'm not sure I could have been considered Lutheran at all.

No, this wasn't some rebellious time during my pastoral ministry. It was well before that. During my high school and college year I was not really much of a Lutheran. Oh, I had been raised a Lutheran. Baptized as a Lutheran. Confirmed as a Lutheran. But my actual theology was the typical blend of Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal that most nondenominational, American Evangelicals have.

Because, like most evangelicals, I loved a good revival. The feeling of going into a crowded sanctuary filled with sound of electric guitars and drums and keyboard. Of being convinced that the Holy Spirit must be here because I felt so good and so warm and fuzzy and so excited. Of hearing a sermon that insisted that if I chose God and made a decision for Christ and dedicated my life to him, he would forgive me and I would stop sinning. Which if you're not aware, is absolutely terrible theology, but I can't tell you how many times I heard it and loved it.

Revivalism is a wonderfully attractive theology because it is centered around getting people excited about coming to church. And that, in and of itself, isn't a bad thing. You should be excited to come to church. But that can't be the only reason you come to church. Because, to be blunt, the excitement will always eventually end. And what happens then?

The Israelites were confronted by this dilemma after their exile in Babylon. After spending 70 years in Babylon, the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, releases the Israelites and allows them to rebuild Jerusalem. So several thousand of them return to the ruins of their former capital and set about to undertake this back-breaking task.

Initially, they are simply overwhelmed by the scale of the work and the troubles they face. But God sends them some amazing men to help them. Civil leaders, like Ezra and Nehemiah and Zerubbabel, who guide them in rebuilding the temple and constructing new city walls and returned Jerusalem to a place of safety and prosperity.

But more importantly, God also sent them spiritual leaders. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Who lead the people in what can only be described as a revival. The whole city is transformed. They rededicate themselves to the Lord. They restart the priesthood and sacrificial system. They begin reading God's Law and applying it to their lives.

Everything is great, until the revival ends. Because the revival always ends. The leaders God had sent to Israel – Ezra and Haggai and Zechariah – they grow old and die. And pretty soon the people forget. They become distracted. The harsh reality of daily life overwhelms them.

And the priesthood that had risen up with such enthusiasm becomes corrupt. The sacrifices they had so excitedly begun making again are ignored or done as merely a meaningless ritual. God's Word disappears from their lips and their hearts and their lives. And they begin saying to themselves, "Eh... what good is God anyway? He doesn't do anything. He doesn't help us. He's forgotten us. So why should we bother remembering him?"

I wonder if you can relate. I know I can relate. Because between all those revivals that I went to in high school and college, that was the question I always went back to. One moment, I would feel wonderful, praising God and committing to serve him. And the next moment, I would descend in to the depths of fatalism and doubt and despair.

Why bother? Why bother with church. Why both with prayer. Why bother with obeying God's Law. Why bother with... any of it. Why bother, if God's not going to do anything? Because that's what it felt like. It felt like I was doing everything and God was doing nothing. What was the point in serving a God like that?

And it's into this same spiritual doldrum of the Israelites that the prophet Malachi appears. And he tells them what we hear in our Old Testament lesson today, "No. God has not forgotten you. In fact, not only is he going to act, he's going to personally come down here. The Lord you are seeking will come into his temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.

"But are you sure that's what you really want? Because when he shows up he's going to come like fire. Burning away your impurities. Refining your impure silver into fine silver. Refining your 10 karat gold into 24 karat gold.

"He's going to come like soap. Fuller's soap, to be specific. Which was nothing like the gentle hand soaps that we have today. No, these were harsh, caustic detergents that gave you a chemical burns if you left it on your skin too long and stripped cloth of every bit of oil and dirt.

"In other words, He's not going to put up with your half-hearted offerings and your corrupt laws. He's not going to tolerate lip service to His Law while pagans practices are openly tolerated and the poor are flagrantly oppressed. And when he comes, the only warning that you'll have is a single messenger who will prepare the way before him.

"So you better be prepared. Because the Lord should give up on you. He should show up, judge you all, and hand you all over to the flames. He should forget about you, the way you've forgotten about him. But he won't. Because the Lord doesn't change. He didn't destroy you before, when he sent you into exile. He's not going to destroy you now."

The revival was over. The excitement had ended. The people had turned away from God. But God hadn't turned away from them. In fact, more than ever, he was coming. But it would be a while. Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament for a reason, for Malachi would be the last prophet sent to the Israelites for a very long time. It would be another 500 years before Israel's next prophet. Another 500 years before Israel's next long-overdue revival.

And it would arrive with the very messenger whom Malachi had foretold: John the Baptist. The one preparing the way of the Lord. Making straight a pathway for our God. And doing so, as I said, with a revival.

But it wasn't a revival meant to make them feel good. To make them feel warm and fuzzy and excited. John's preaching wasn't that much different than Malachi's, actually. And he gave the people a fiery message of God's Law and a baptism of repentance. A message that confronted the nation with its sinfulness, still just as bad as it was in the days of Malachi. And turned them toward the Lord who still had not abandoned them, even after 500 years of silence.

It was a message of Law that made them ready to hear a message of salvation. Made them not just ready. Made them desperate to hear a message of salvation. When John the Baptist is laying down God's Law, the sweetest sound in all the world is the voice of Jesus saying, "*I forgive you.*"

John's revival would end as well. It would end in spit and scorn. In a crown of thorns and a lashing whip. In nail pierced hands and shouts of "*Crucify him! Crucify him!*" With Jesus' death, the revival John had started would end.

But that's OK. Like the prophets before him, he was only there to prepare the way. The real revival would come on Sunday morning. And it would not simply be a revival of repentance or emotion. Of music and excitement. It would be a revival of body and spirit. A revival in which the dead are truly revived to new life.

A revival in which we still participate. That's what baptism is. A revival. Which means Lutherans are great at holding revivals. Even our infants take part in them. Revived in spirit so that we can await with hope a revival of the body on the last day.

A revival promised to us by a God who does not change. A God who turns to us even when we turn away. A God who is personal. And offers to us the sweetest words in all the world. "*I forgive you.*" Amen.