

The  
Writing  
Work of the  
People

Liturgical Writing as  
Spiritual, Theological,  
& Prophetic Work

**Jill Y. Crainshaw**



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# Acknowledgments

Gratitude.

As I complete the writing of a book about worship words, this singular word lingers with me.

Gratitude.

More than anything else, I want these pages to be an expression of gratitude to the countless people and communities who have shared their words with me.

I have encountered across many geographies and on the lips of many sages, wise, lyrical, and prophetic worship words. I have tasted some of these words at meal tables where I have savored feasts of delectable foods and delightful conversations. My ears have been comforted by some of these words during times of deep sorrow. My worship life has been enlivened and enlarged by hearing the many ways people call upon, pray to, and praise God.

Inspired by the worship wordsmiths in my life, I imagined over many years celebrating the “writing work of the people” in a book like the one you are now reading. Moving from imagination to manuscript was more challenging than I anticipated. How difficult it is to shape a “how to” guide for crafting worship words! Words that hold as much beauty and depth as the worship words I have encountered on the lips and in the lives of people in my communities defy my efforts at description.

So, I hope that you, kind reader, receive these pages as I have imagined them—as jumping-off places for your own liturgical imaginings and writings. I also hope that you will write new worship words, and, if you are willing, share them with me (crainsjy@wfu.edu). I am eager to encounter and celebrate your expressions of prayer and praise.

Before we get to the work of writing worship words together, I must say “thank you” to several of my muses. Editorial wizard Nancy Bryan from Church Publishing Incorporated believed in this project from the outset. She also knew just how to encourage me when I grew weary of writing. I would not have finished this manuscript without Nancy’s generous nudges. Thank you, Nancy.

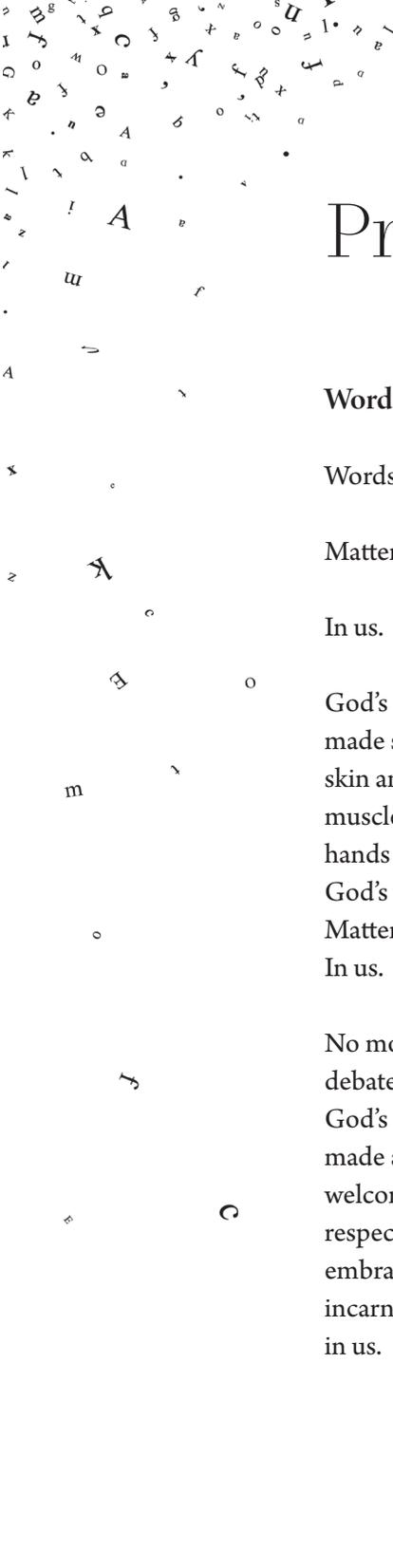
My students at Wake Forest University School of Divinity inspire me every day. How fortunate I am to get to spend time with religious leaders who are passionate about their callings and who with grace and prophetic insight use their voices to invite others to see and hear God’s presence in their lives. Their passion emboldens me.

I have been blessed by a calling that has taken me into many communities—hospitals, educational institutions, congregations, and more. The people I have met in these places have enlivened my understandings of life and faith, and I am forever in their debt. I remember some of these people in these pages. I repent in advance for where my remembering is faulty even as I say “thank you” for the holy ground we have shared together.

My most devoted muses dwell here with me in my home. Sheila’s encouragement and support are ever-present companions for my writing expeditions. She is a gifted wordsmith in her own right and shares her ideas about my writing with care and generosity. And our pups, Penny and Bella? They insist that I take breaks with them in the great outdoors. Together, the three of us—Penny, Bella, and I—find amazing poems in our backyard. Sometimes I write them down.

The final “thank you” goes to you who have found your way into these pages. I hope you experience this book as a source of inspiration for writing your own worship words. May you read and then write with wisdom, energy, and insight. And may you receive from me for your efforts—

gratitude.



# Prelude

## Words Made Flesh

Words.

Matter.

In us.

God's love  
made sounds and syllables  
skin and bones  
muscle and marrow  
hands and hearts  
God's words.

Matter.

In us.

No more speeches or spin doctors,  
debates or diatribes—no—  
God's nouns and adjectives and verbs  
made alive  
welcoming  
respecting  
embracing  
incarnating belonging  
in us.

Words made matter,  
planted in salvaged soil  
reclaimed  
restored  
valued  
savored and saving  
hope  
in us.

## CHAPTER 1

# In the Beginning Is the Word

“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”  
—Matthew 12:34b

*What does worship sound like? What ideas, hopes, dreams, and laments do the words of worship spark or stir or set loose in our hearts and minds? What images of God swirl up out of our communal prayers and hymns to shape what we believe or who we are or what we incarnate as people of faith?*

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Words matter.

Words bombard us. Newsfeeds. Social media. Billboards. Cries in the streets. This barrage of words? Words shape our lives. They heal and draw us together. They also hurt and divide.

Words matter.

Christian communities embody this wisdom each time we celebrate in worship God’s Word made flesh in Jesus. Words matter. Worship words matter.

That is the focus of this book. What do our words in worship announce about God’s love? About our faith? About our theologies? And how do our words in worship speak with prophetic and redeeming truth in a broken world?

Do worship words make a difference? Do they etch their meanings onto our faith? Do they affect what happens in the world around us? I believe they do.

Clayton (not his real name) was a member of the first church I pastored. When I arrived in the church sanctuary on my first Sunday, Clayton was there waiting for worship to begin.

The deacons introduced me to worshipers on that first Sunday as the church's new pastor. I was so nervous that I could hear my knees knocking. What did I have to offer to this community of believers? Most of them were older than me. They had lived longer. Experienced more. Seen more of how God works in human lives.

Besides being young, I am a woman, a female called to pastor a Baptist church in 1987. Not a popular choice for the church to make. The Southern Baptist Convention had proclaimed that women should not be pastors. Not all churches agreed with this proclamation. My new church was one of those who disagreed. They called me. They invited me to journey with them through the hills and valleys of their lives.

That first Sunday? Yes, I was nervous. Could I do it? Could I be their pastor? What did that even mean?

At the center of my anxiety was a worry about words.

I love words. I love how they sound, how they make me feel when I read them linked together into a good story. I love how they create a map across the pages of an engaging book. I also love how worship's words become flesh in worshipers' actions in the world.

In my mind? Being a pastor had a whole lot to do with words. Pastors preach. They pray. They offer words of care and hope. Pastors weave words together into prophetic stories. Pastors use words to create maps across listeners' spiritual geographies.

Pastors also invoke the words of scripture. Sometimes pastors stir worshipers' emotions and actions with prophetic words spoken for "such a time as this."

On that inaugural Sunday, people in my new congregation spoke amazing words. They uttered words that imprinted their sacred care and call on my heart. I carry those words with me even now.

For example, after that first Sunday's worship, we stayed in the sanctuary for a "getting to know you" time. I remember admitting to them that my biggest fear was failing them. I was worried about how to be the pastor they needed me to be.

Clayton responded. His words altered the trajectory of my pastoral leadership.

"We are glad you are here, Reverend," he said from his favorite pew halfway back on the left-hand side of the small sanctuary.

I remember thinking, "He called me Reverend. These folks think I am their pastor."

"What do you think our job is as church members?" Clayton asked me.

I didn't know how to answer Clayton's question.

He answered for me. "You don't have to worry about failing. We aren't going to let you fail. That is our job—to make sure you and the church succeed. We are all called to be ministers here."



Clayton's words mattered on that day. They sank into the marrow of my bones, into the "matter" of my heart, soul, mind, and body. They also became part of the church's covenant with me as their pastor.

"We are all called to be ministers here," Clayton announced.

We *are* all called. God calls all people of faith to speak words that make a difference. God calls us to speak worship words, words

spoken in service of God and faith. That is liturgy. The work of the people. To speak words that matter. To embody those words in the world around us.

This book listens for, explores, and teases out those mattering words.

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Clayton and the people of my first church taught me: God's Word and sacred words spoken by God's people are gifts of Christian faith.

God spoke life and beauty into being in the beginning. Through psalm-singers and shepherds on hillsides, through prophesying women and dreaming men, through a teenager in Nazareth and an angel in Joseph's ear, through prophets, priests, princes, and kings, God spoke wisdom and truth to and with God's people.

And in Jesus? God's Word became flesh. Earthy, earthly matter. Human flesh speaking human words. Human matter speaking and enfleshing words that matter.

Now? God speaks life and beauty into existence through the earthy matter that is you and me. God speaks God's wisdom into being through the sometimes soaring, sometimes stumbling, sometimes everyday-ordinary words that we speak. God speaks hope and grace into concrete reality with words that vibrate through our bodies and flow out through us into the world.

And our words? Our words can be, often are, wise, loving, profound, prophetic, and kind. Yet we know that human words can also do harm. Words from the mouths of unthinking, uncaring, or bullying speakers can cause as much damage as physical abuse. Harmful words leave deep scars, scars that can last a lifetime.

Yes, words are powerful, and today? Words swarm our lives. Words from teachers and preachers, Facebookers and bloggers,

politicians and spin doctors. Alongside this catalogue of words are our words. Many of us spend large segments of our days emailing, texting, blogging, tweeting, and talking about everything from politics to baseball to gossip overheard from a neighbor down the street.

Words are everywhere. So, too, are debates about which words are true and which are false.

In the midst of this contemporary word blitz, Christian communities gather for worship. We gather to hear a word from God. We gather to sing praises and cry out in lament. We gather to speak a word of thanksgiving to the Giver of the Word of Life. We gather to share words of peace and love with each other.

How we use words in worship matters.

Also, how we use words in worship shapes how we embody God's Word in the world. In other words, worship's words linger with us. They shape our beliefs. They also shape how we live out our beliefs in the world.

I don't know if Clayton realized how powerful his words to me were on that day more than thirty years ago. I presided at Clayton's funeral twenty-five years ago, and I have carried his words with me through my ministry with congregations and communities. Even now, I carry his words into classrooms to teach theology to other ministers.

Clayton's words were powerful, and so was his presence. Clayton showed up for church almost every Sunday while I was his pastor. On those Sundays when I struggled to find words to pray or preach? There was Clayton in his usual pew. His presence reminded me of his words: "Our job is to keep you from failing. We are all ministers here."

Clayton embodied a theology of grace and care through his words and actions. I wonder. What theologies do we embody today through our words and actions in worship? Beyond that,

what theologies do we embody through the words we speak in our daily public acts of praying? I use “public acts of praying” here on purpose. Worship happens in sanctuaries on Sunday morning. Worship also happens in the public square, in our daily lives. Words matter in both places. They matter in Sunday sanctuaries and in our Monday through Saturday public worship places.

What can we hear when we roam varied soundscapes to listen for and encounter sacred words? City streets, restaurants, board meetings, political decision-making tables—these places are full of words. I invite you to journey these soundscapes with me. Lean in and listen with me for the shape and sound of worship words that matter.



Some questions for our journey:

- How do we hear God’s call to us in worship?
- How do we join our voices to God’s voice to sing out songs of mercy, love, and justice in our daily lives?
- How do we write or speak in our liturgies what we have encountered about God’s justice and truth?
- What words can we speak that will help others hear and imagine God’s Word through our human utterances?
- How do we cultivate silence and listening as rhythmic partners to the words we speak in worship?