A Christmas Gift of Blessed Remembering (Daniel Erlander)

Co-missioners,

Today we're on the cusp of celebrating the Birth of births. This may strike you as an odd time to be sending you an obituary, as some might call it. Then again, perhaps it's the best of times for such a thing. How better to celebrate Christmas than by highlighting an example of what that Birth has accomplished in people who have heard and trusted that they were born with Christ to die with Christ and beyond that to live as never before.

This promising Birth has its grip on you and yours as well. Merry Christmas as you remember that this Saturday evening. And come the New Year, happy troublemaking! (See the last sentence below.)

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

In Memoriam, Dan Erlander
December 10, 1938–August 28, 2022
by Lori Cornell



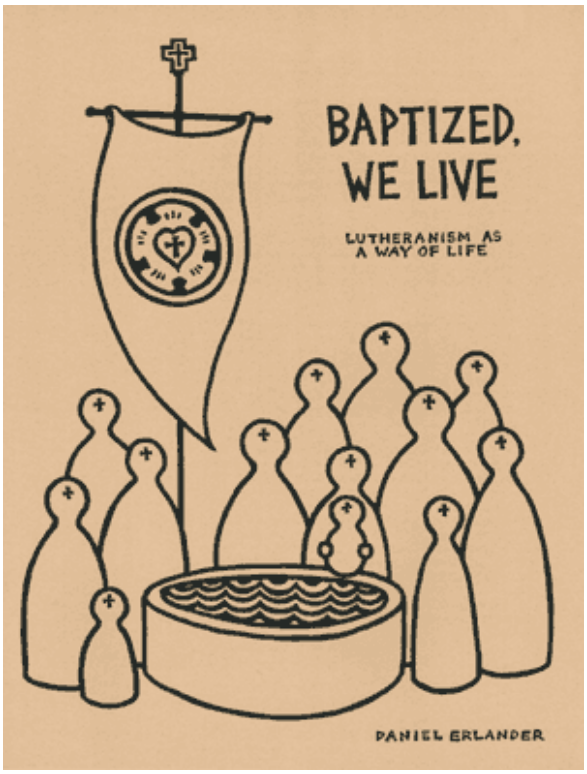
Daniel Erlander,
1938-2022

The first time I encountered Dan Erlander's work I was a freshman at Pacific Lutheran University, sitting in a campus-ministry study. Pastor Ron Vignec was the teacher—a burly, long-haired, irreverent pastor who looked like a logger and had a knack for being infinitely human. The study was *Baptized, We Live*, with its uncommon graphic-novel-style explanation of Lutheran Christianity. Ron gave us an Erlander broadside during that class that stayed on my wall throughout college: A silhouette holding a cross high in one hand with the caption, "Jesus and his troublemaking go merrily on." (It was, for my young-adult self, the perfect combination of rebellious and faithful.)

A dozen years later I sat next to the author and artist of those works, Pastor Dan Erlander, in a clergy text study group. I was serving my first call at Christ Lutheran in Lakewood, Washington, and he was my neighboring pastor on PLU's campus ministry with Pastors Susan Briehl and Martin Wells.

Dan was a bit of a rock-star theologian to the rest of us young preachers sitting in that coffee shop on Broadway in Tacoma—not because he postured himself as such, but because we depended on his unencumbered, seemingly simplistic, explanation of Lutheran theology for our own ministries. This was in the early ‘90s, when “decision theology” was running rampant in the Pacific Northwest and Dan, a native, recognized its allure. Erlander’s cartoon conversations in *Baptized, We Live*, gave us permission to poke at such “if-then” conditional theology playfully, while his teaching gave us a bold alternative: down-to-earth law-gospel theology rooted in “because-therefore” promise language.

It occurs to me that Dan’s comic-book style of law-gospel theology may have been disregarded by more sophisticated theologians in previous decades. (You know, those theologians of the cross that don’t require black-and-white drawings to comprehend the ways of God.). If you are among those who haven’t savored his work, I encourage you to “taste and see.”



Book cover for Daniel Erlander's "Baptized We Live"

Baptized, We Live was first published in 1981. During this era, the conditional-grace language of evangelicalism in the United States prompted Lutheran Christians to doubt the legitimacy of their faith—a faith that (for most) had begun at infant baptism. Erlander had taken a year-long leave from parish ministry, retreating at Holden Village, (a Lutheran ministry in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state).

Erlander's purpose in writing *Baptized, We Live* was to invite a more diverse audience to experience the teaching, worship, and life of Christ that "comes from a sixteenth century church renewal movement." I cannot personally attest to how wide *BWL*'s reach was, except to say that I made sure every one of my interns was well versed in its theology.

What a gift it is to open the first page of the first chapter of Erlander's book and be confronted by an illustration of Christ on the cross that resembles a woodcut more than a cartoon. The words running the length of the cross: IT IS HERE THAT GOD MEETS US. Make your way to the end of that same page and another key phrase borders Jesus' impaled feet: "We do not find God. **God finds us.**" Law and gospel encapsulated in two punctuated sentences.

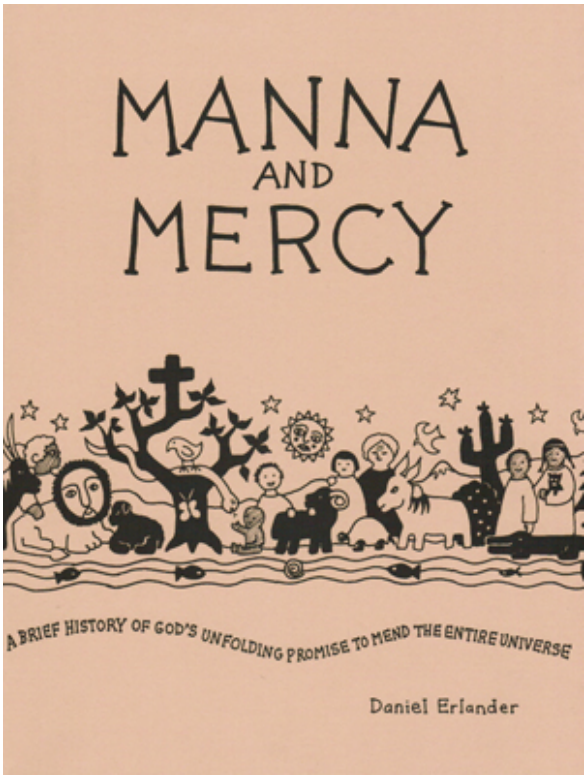
I recently officiated at a non-member funeral for a 30-year-old woman who died violently and publicly at the hands of a stranger. Her parents and husband, swimming in bewilderment and grief, had dismissed the idea of holding her service at the funeral home where her body was being prepared for viewing and cremation. I contacted the family and invited conversation, but it was clear that the husband was both suspicious of engaging

with institutional religion and apprehensive about subjecting his peers to a “church experience.”

He asked many questions, sat in our sanctuary, surveyed our fellowship hall, and after more conversation, still was unsettled about what to do. Four days later I offered him the closest thing I’ve composed to a secular service, with prayers of lament, Maya Angelou’s poem “Phenomenal Woman,” the prayer of St. Francis, and a reading of Psalm 139. I preached “Jesus wept.” And several hundred of us cried along with Jesus for a young life lost. I also made the sign of the cross over her casket and commended her into the hands of a merciful God who sees and knows us, and is there when we come to the end.

A month later I heard that the young husband had decided it was time to throw away the dozens of sympathy cards he’d received, except for the one I’d written to him the week after the funeral. My words, he said, had helped him to feel—for the first time—like God was near.

I learned this winsomeness from *Baptized, We Live* (along with many of Erlander’s other works): *BWL* celebrates God in the sunset (a place of great peace for the young woman whose life we committed to a merciful God), but also draws us into the more profound and poignant ways that God meets us: in his and our vulnerability, in his and our grief, in our corporate dying and rising.



Book cover for Daniel Erlander's "Manna and Mercy"

Now, more than ever in my ministry, I feel an urgent need for the Church to reclaim the simplicity, accessibility, and humor of Dan's theology. *Baptized, We Live* is only the first of many of his works I commend to you. *Manna and Mercy* has become my congregation's primary source for our Bible year in Confirmation. Erlander's illustrated story of God's persistent plan to redeem humanity (in the face of a world enamored with "big deals"), brims with law-gospel tension.

If you visit Augsburg Fortress online, you can find a whole heading under "Education" dedicated to Dan's works. Leader Sourcebooks allow teachers to make full use of *Manna and Mercy*, *Baptized, We Live* as well as baptism- and communion-preparation books. Each publication provides age-appropriate books and lesson plans. Board books offer a marvelous way for sponsors to remember their godchildren's baptism. And, if you are looking for a timely Vacation Bible School curriculum, *Operation*

Restoration: Mending God's World offers sober and whimsical counsel for children and the adults who hear the creation groaning. Each of these resources, but especially the VBS print media, showcases Erlander's endearing graphics (sometimes in color!).

As Covid continues to take its toll on church attendance, and the gap between spiritual and religious seems to grow ever wider, we preachers do not help ourselves by using complicated, long-winded explanations of God's work in Christ. Instead, freed by a Living Word—which we ourselves have been comforted and compelled by—we can drop the extra syllables and pick up our small crosses so that Jesus and his troublemaking go merrily on!

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community