As the church—and the greater society within which the church has been commissioned to serve as salt and light—moves toward the new millennium, we can expect the atmosphere to be rife with unfounded political, prophetic, and apocalyptic speculation. The operative words in this statement as in other references to the millennial shift are quickly becoming “unfounded” and “speculation.” Despite the literalist penchant for rattling speculative sabers and arousing fears among believers through misinterpretations of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, the third Christian millennium should be approached not with dread but with hope. Since “no one knows the day or the hour” of the end time, and since all of us continue to be the multiply blessed heirs of God’s loving kindness and saving mercies, the year 2001 CE should be welcomed as yet another gift of God and as an opportunity for one more new beginning.

With this new era dawning on the horizon, the Church invites believers to put to rest empty speculation and unfounded fear so as to join their voices with those of hope-filled believers past and present. The responsorial psalms for the 20th, 21st, and 29th Sundays of Ordinary Time (August 16 and 23, October 18) readily lend themselves to an ongoing celebration of hope which will see believers through an unknown but nevertheless not-to-be-feared future.

Psalm 40 (see next page) has an unusual structure: It is a composite psalm which partners a prayer of lament with a grateful song of praise for God. Whereas in Israel’s poetic tradition thanksgiving usually follows a lament, Psalm 40 reverses the order. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the deliberate placement of the thanksgiving song first adds power and credibility to the complaint. Understood logically the sequence is wrong, but experientially it is significant. Deliverance is often tempered with lingering sadness and fear because life’s experiences are not absolute or fixed. As the psalmist attests, hope, gratitude, and joy can and do survive, even amid tears and trepidation. Carroll Stuhlmueler has similarly explained that the composite nature of Psalm 40 mirrors the experience of any family or congregation and alerts us to the plight of a brother or sister who may be sorrowing while we are given over to celebration.

Within its melding of varied emotions, Psalm 40 allows any one of us to
find a voice with which to express ourselves to God. The first half of the song is given to grateful praise because the God for whom the psalmist has waited and waited has not disappointed. In terms that evoke the Exodus, the psalm poet rejoices that God "stayed toward him, heard his cry, drew him out, set him firmly in a secure place, and gave him reason to sing a new song. Clearly, the psalmist understands his own deliverance as a reflection of and a sharing in the pivotal experience of Israel, and, like Moses and Miriam before him, is moved to celebrate this experience in song. In verses 4-11, the author of Psalm 40 shares three of the insights gained from his experience: God has no equal (v. 6); the sacrifice of an attentive, obedient heart far outweighs any other sacrifice or obligation (v. 7); and the deliverance which the psalmist has come to know constitutes good news for all (vv. 10-11). Therefore, the psalmist’s new song is not to remain a private prayer sung in the private grateful silence of a relieved heart. Rather, the faithfulness and saving power of God is to be announced with unrestrained lips in the vast assembly. There, the psalmist no doubt finds echoes of similar experiences reverberating from the hearts of brothers and sisters.

After the transition of verse 12, Psalm 40 melds from thanksgiving into lament. This shifting of gears is not a lapse into melancholy but a continuation of a song of grateful praise. As Bernhard Anderson pointed out, the Hebrew lemmat should not be confused with the Greek tragedy with its no-exit situation. Scriptural laments are really expressions of praise, praise offered in a minor key,” sung with confidence in God who is faithful and who has already opened a window for every door that closes in our lives.

Proclaimed about three-quarters of the way through the liturgical year, Psalm 40 gathers into one song the joys and hopes as well as the pain and sorrows of the praying community. Following the psalmist’s lead, each of us is called to make public the good news of God’s involvement in our lives so as to add our own chapters to the ever-unfolding story of salvation. Millennial madness notwithstanding, this story will continue to be told and celebrated; with each new telling, the faith of the community will grow deeper and stronger, and the God in whom we trust and hope will be praised in major as well as in minor keys.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Psalm 40:2, 3, 4, 18
The verses selected for the responsorial psalm on this day appear in bold type.

Response (based on verse 14):
Lord, come to my aid!
For the leader. A psalm of David.

A
I have waited, waited for the Lord, and he stooped toward me and heard my cry.
He drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp;
He set my feet upon a rock; he made firm my steps.
And he put a new song into my mouth, a hymn to our God.
Many shall look on in awe and trust in the Lord.

B
Withhold not, O Lord, your compassion from me; may your kindness and your truth ever preserve me.
For all about me are evils beyond reckoning; my sins so overtake me that I cannot see;
They are more numerous than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me.

Deign, O Lord, to rescue me; O Lord, make haste to help me.
Let all be put to shame and confusion who seek to snatch away my life.
Let them be turned back in disgrace who desire my ruin.
Let them be dismayed in their shame who say to me, “Aha, aha!”
But may all who seek you exult and be glad in you,
And may those who love your salvation say ever, “The Lord be glorified.”
Though I am afflicted and poor, yet the Lord thinks of me.
You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, hold not back!


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God’s loving-kindness is steadfast; God’s faithfulness endures forever. An excellent song for gathering the community for prayer and/or for sending them on their way to translate their prayer into service, Psalm 117 celebrates two attributes of God which are so profoundly

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all-encompassing as to defy succinct definition.

The Hebrew word hesed, translated as loving-kindness, shares its etymological origins (H,S,D) with similar terms that mean eagerness or keenness as well as loyalty, ardent desire, and steadfastness. Although hesed was rendered in the Greek Septuagint translation as elos (pity) and in the Latin Vulgate as misericordia (mercy or pity), these terms seem weak; they fall short of the reality to be conveyed. Hesed more properly describes that persistent, determined, zealous, ardent, eager, merciful, and steadfast love of God whereby the covenant between God and humankind is sustained and maintained, despite—and even because of—human frailty. Moreover, as John L. McKenzie explained, God’s hesed also extends beyond the covenant: Hesed is the very movement of the will of God that initiated and continues the history of humankind. Indeed, all of human history can be summed up as one continuing expression of God’s hesed or covenantal love. Because of this and because hesed is a love that transcends every other love by its nature and depth, Martin Luther chose to translate it into German as gnade or grace.

In addition to God’s hesed, Psalm 117 revels in the ’emeth or covenantal faithfulness of God. Often coupled with hesed, ’emeth is derived from the root ’m-a and can be rendered as fidelity, firmness, truth, and/or support. In derivative form, ’emeth can mean to believe, to be trustworthy, to have faith in. The Hebrew ’amen (verily, truly) and our English word Amen (“so be it”) are similarly drawn from ’emeth. Therefore, each time a believer speaks his/her Amen, the covenantal love and faithfulness of God are proclaimed and affirmed.

Significantly, the author of Psalm 117 understood that this celebration of these special attributes of God was not limited to the people of the Covenant (Israel). Nor should Christians who pray Psalm 117 understand it as a song solely for the participants in the New Covenant. Rather, the psalmist has extended his summons to prayer to the goyim—all the nations! Created by God in the divine image, all peoples of the earth, from millennium to millennium, are called to share in a cosmic celebration of praise, honoring the God whose loving-kindness is, was, and ever shall be.

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Psalm 121:1-2. 3-4. 5-6. 7-8

Response (based on verse 2): Our help is from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

I lift up my eyes toward the mountains;
whence shall help come to me?
My help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

May he not suffer your foot to slip;
may he slumber not who guards you:
Indeed he neither slumbers nor sleeps,
the guardian of Israel.

The Lord is your guardian;
the Lord is your shade;
he is beside you at your right hand.
The sun shall not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The Lord will guard you from all evil;
he will guard your life.
The Lord will guard your coming and your going,
both now and forever.

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In the popular musical *The Sound of Music*, hills and mountains are key figures in the life and spirituality of Maria von Trapp. A place of solace in times of loneliness, the Austrian Alps also afford the young woman respite from the challenges of life in the abbey. When faced with a decision about her vocation, Maria is counseled by the abbess in a language she can well understand: "Climb every mountain!" In the end, the mountains provide the means for Maria and her family to flee the tyranny of the Third Reich and escape to freedom.

As the Hebrew Scriptures attest, hills and mountains also figured importantly in the life and spirituality of the Israelites. Numerous significant personal and national experiences of the chosen people were associated with mountains, e.g., Moses at Sinai and Pisgah, Elijah at Horeb and Carmel, and so on. Regarded as special sites for meeting and commingling with God, the majestic mountains suggested power, refuge, and holiness. Accordingly, Jerusalem, Israel's capital, was located in the central hill country of Judah, on Olpeit Hill, also known as Mount Zion. Pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem could see the city and its prominent Temple Mount from a distance. No doubt, the sight of their spiritual center stirred their hope and quickened their steps with a happy sense of homecoming. Psalm 121 (see page 47) along with the other fourteen Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) gave voice to the pilgrims' hopes and joys as well as their fears and weariness.

A consensus of scholars agrees that these psalms originated as traveling songs for the difficult and often dangerous journey from the distant diaspora to Jerusalem and back home again. An inopportune climate, a rough and rocky terrain, and the feared presence of robbers who frequently accosted the caravans of travelers added to the rigors of the lengthy trip. Despite the difficulties, the pilgrims persevered, trusting in the protection and providence of God.

Structured as a dialogue, Psalm 121 begins with a question, "From whom shall I seek help?" The answer is couched in the form of a priestly oracle or blessing intended to assure the pilgrim of safe passage. Acting as guide and guardian, God will accompany the pilgrims, not only on their Jerusalem itinerary, but in all their comings and goings, now and forever (v. 8). This promise reaches out from the promise of safe passage along the footpaths and highways of the ancient world to assure all believers that they will not travel unaccompanied on their pilgrimage through life. Through all our days and nights, on the mountains and in the valleys, in good times and in bad, from millennia to millennia, God is with us.

Notes

2. Books of the canon and of deuterocanonical literature that attract such speculation include 1 Enoch, IV Ezra, Ascension of Isaiah, Daniel, and Revelation.
3. Merk 13:32

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