Psalms in Ordinary Time: New Grace, New Possibilities

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

As the believing community begins to wend its collective way through the time after Pentecost, which ends the Easter Season, we seem to pick up in mid-stream (after the special feasts of the Holy Trinity and the Body and Blood of Christ) with a numbered “Sunday in Ordinary Time” (the last one of these that we saw this year was back in February; it was the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time). What makes things even more confusing is that the current edition of the Lectionary for Mass uses an older and more literal English translation of the Latin title for these Sundays per Annum (Sundays “of the Year”). However, during these several weeks that we now name ordinary time, the liturgical readings invite the assembly to reinvest all its energies in the extraordinary challenge of Christian living. For a people endowed with the very Spirit of God, the Sundays between Pentecost and Advent offer an annual opportunity for remembering who we are and what God has done for us: It is a time to redirect whatever has become skewed so as to witness more authentically to the abiding presence of God, in whom and by whom each of us is ever renewed.

If attitudes need adjusting, if focus needs more clarity, if priorities require some realignment, if the fire which the Spirit has kindled in the belly of every disciple needs some stoking, this long spate of “ordinary” Sundays lends itself extraordinarily well to the task of renewal at hand.

In keeping with this proposed effort, several of the responsorial psalms for this season are what Walter Brueggemann characterizes as prayers of new orientation. Admittedly, the majority of the Psalter’s songs give voice to the torment of the human experience, crying out to God in both individual and community lamentation. These psalms bring forth into the open and into the light the dark and seamy side of life; by naming the pain, these prayers enable those who speak and hear them to come to grips with the reality of suffering and to surrender it to God, who alone can make a difference.

But this is not the only movement or purpose of the psalms. Human existence is not simply an endless cycle of struggle and strife; there are also blessed, shining moments in every human life when disorientation and lament yield to

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the joy and delight of a new direction. As Brueggemann explains, the psalms of new orientation bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected. It isn’t so much a return to an old, stable view as “it is the experience and surprise of grace . . . when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable neither derived nor extrapolated, but wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God.” Three of these psalms of new orientation, which help believers in expressing the surprise of grace and in celebrating the new possibilities in life are Psalms 34, 23, and 33.

As the responsorial song for the 19th, 20th, and 21st Sundays in Ordinary Time, Psalm 34 rejoices in the fact that God always attends to the cries of the afflicted and delivers them from their affliction. The experience of this deliverance is palpably evident in the psalm as God exudes both a relief that the conflict has been resolved and a trust that there is nothing that God cannot and will not do for the sake of those in need. Judging “from the constant way the psalmist returns to troubles, afflictions, and helplessness,” Carroll Stuhlmueller concludes that the psalmist “probably experienced more than life’s normal share of problems.” Nevertheless, the composer of this psalm remained ever mindful of God’s faithfulness and looked to the future with unflinching hope.

Notice that the psalm’s superscription attributes this psalm to David upon being rescued from Abimelech. Actually, David feigned madness in order to escape from the Philistine king, Achish. It would appear that a scribe confused Achish, king of Gath, with a king of Gerar named Abimelech (Gen 20:26). Historical errors notwithstanding, the psalm’s superscription allows contemporary believers to appreciate how the scribes of the late post-exilic period looked for concrete, historical incidents in Israel’s early history, to provide an interpretive setting and to resist overspiritualizing their prayerful expressions. The psalms are songs for real people, living a real life, relating to a real and present God who is totally engaged in the lives of believers.

Acrostic or alphabetic in structure, Psalm 34 also includes a didactic instruction (vv. 8-21) which resembles those attributed to personified Wisdom in Israel’s sapiential literature. Having known firsthand the power of divine deliverance, the psalmist is eager to share his/her experiences with others so that they (we) might similarly benefit. “Taste and see how good the Lord is!” (v. 9) is an invitation to know God, not simply intellectually, or even spiritually, but in the nitty-gritty, authentic experiences of day-to-day living. “Taste and see” means that God’s forgiveness and redeeming power are as real to me as sorrow and need. Taste and see means that I wholeheartedly embrace the surprise of grace and eagerly accept the new possibilities which the gift of each new day affords.

Another of the Psalter’s songs of new orientation, Psalm 23 is the community’s responsorial psalm for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. One of the most familiar passages of Scripture, this psalm has

Nineteenth through the Twenty-First Sundays in Ordinary Time
Psalm 34

This whole psalm is used in the B Cycle; its verses are spread across the three Sundays. The first verse is the title, “Of David . . .,” given below. All three Sundays use vv. 2-3; vv. 4-9 are used on the Nineteenth Sunday; vv. 10-15 are used on the Twentieth Sunday; and vv. 16-23 are used on the Twenty-First Sunday.

Response for all three Sundays (based on verse 9):
Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, who forced him to depart.

I (Verses 2-4)
I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the Lord, the lowly will hear me and be glad.
Glory the Lord with me, let us together extol his name.

II (Verses 5-11)
I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame.
When the afflicted man called out, the Lord heard, and from all his distress he saved him.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.
Taste and see how good the Lord is; happy the man who takes refuge in him.
Praise the Lord, you his holy ones,

for nought is lacking to those who fear him.
The great grow poor and hungry; but those who seek the Lord want for no good thing.

III (Verses 12-23)
Come, children, hear me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Which of you desires life, and takes delight in prosperous days? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile; Turn from evil, and do good; seek peace, and follow after it. The Lord has eyes for the just, and ears for their cry. The Lord confronts the evildoers, to destroy remembrance of them from the earth. When the just cry out, the Lord hears them, and from all their distress he rescues them. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves. Many are the troubles of the just man, but out of them all the Lord delivers him; He watches over all his bones; not one of them shall be broken. Vice slays the wicked, and the enemies of the just pay for their guilt. But the Lord redeems the lives of his servants; no one incurs guilt who takes refuge in him.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Psalm 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

Response (based on verse 1):
The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

He guides me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side
With your rod and your staff that give me courage.

Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life;
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Psalm 33: 4-5, 18-19, 20, 22

Response (based on verse 22):
Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

Upright is the word of the Lord, and all his works are trustworthy.
He loves justice and righteousness; of the kindness of the Lord the earth is full.

See, the eyes of the Lord are upon those who fear him, upon those who hope for his kindness,
To deliver them from death and preserve them in spite of famine.

Our soul waits for the Lord, who is our help and our shield.
May your kindness, O Lord, be upon us, who have put our trust in you.

been prayed in foxholes and on deathbeds, in cemeteries and in nurseries, on subways and in submarines. In explaining the perennial popularity of the psalm, William Holladay notes that when Psalm 23 is prayed I am affirming my faith in God and identifying myself with all the company of people through time and space who share that affirmation. Moreover, when I repeat Psalm 23, I am interacting with God, and shifting reality, if ever so slightly, by helping to create a new situation between myself and God...I am the loved and cared for, the doted-upon sheep—You, God, are shepherd...even the dark valley and the presence of foes pose no fear or dread for me.

A personal, as well as a communal prayer, this most popular psalm "allows no one to be lost in the crowd, for the Lord is my shepherd, yet each one merges in to the assembly at temple worship. The psalm unites quiet personal journeys with the mighty exoduses of the nation, out of Egypt through the Sinai..."

This most popular psalm "allows no one to be lost in the crowd..."

and later out of Babylon across the Arabian desert. A prayer of disciples on the move, following wherever their faith in the Shepherd may lead them, Psalm 23 is also the sigh of the traveler who knows the joy of coming home to a warm welcome and a nourishing, albeit undeserved and gratuitous, respite. God's table is always at the ready to receive the hungry, the wandering and the weary.

Simply and directly, Psalm 23 addresses God as you: You are at my side; you spread the table; you anoint my head (vv. 4-5). Walter Brueggemann calls this form of address the most stunning and decisive factor in the prayer of Israel. The psalms are prayers addressed to a known, named, identifiable you who invites to conversation and communion. Who I am is, by definition, derived from and attuned to the you who is God. To pray in this way is to acknowledge that the source and center of life lives outside myself: My source and center is in God. It is this acknowledgment that transforms fear and threat into repose, refreshment, and courage. It is this awareness that enables us to look be-
Beyond the dark valley so as to be oriented to whatever new and gracious possibilities lie ahead.

Yet another opportunity for celebrating the new orientation to life afforded through the Holy Spirit is offered to the community in Psalm 33, sung on the Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time. A hymn in praise of God, this psalm purports to be a new song (v. 3) about a new world brought into being by the creative word of God.

Ordinarily, the call for a new song was characteristic of exilic and post-exilic hymns which expressed the yearning for a fresh start after a period of bleakness and shame. As to what precisely is “new,” scholars with expertise in the psalms suggest that the “newness” may be: (a) literary in nature, that is, the assigning of a new role or purpose to an ancient or traditional hymn; (b) pastoral, as in a new experience of divine deliverance; or (c) theological, in that God’s redemptive and re-creative power is being realized within a new generation of believers.

Motivation for this hymnic elevation of God’s words and works can be traced to the belief that God, who is ever faithful (v. 4) sees all (v. 13), knows all (v. 15), and actively works toward the deliverance and preservation of all (v. 19).

While Psalm 33 acknowledges the special and unique role of Israel in God’s saving activity (v. 12), it also affirms the universal scope of the divine creative and re-creative plan (vv. 13-15). As Bernhard Anderson notes, God’s “self-disclosure to Israel provides the basis for the universal horizons of thought. The revelation (word) of Yahweh is not “The revelation . . . is not only the inner meaning of the events of Israel’s history; it is also the meaning of every individual’s history . . . and the meaning of the whole cosmos.”

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**Notes**

4. Stuhlmuehler.