

# Psalms for the Turning Year: Three Footholds for Facing the Millennium

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

**I**n the few weeks that form a bridge between Christmas Day and the beginning of Ordinary Time, and between the end of one year and the beginning of another, the assembly of believers gathers together on three successive Sundays to celebrate the feasts of the Holy Family, Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> On each of these Sundays, the praying community is invited to participate in affirming the significance of these sacred events and in responding to them by entering wholeheartedly into the psalm response which is rightfully theirs to proclaim. An integral part of the liturgy of the word,<sup>2</sup> the responsorial psalm actively involves the congregation as the weekly gift of the word is unwrapped, revered, and applied to the exigencies of the human experience on the precipice of the third Christian millennium.

As the dawn of a new year makes the millennium more proximate, speculation abounds concerning the prospects of life beyond the year 2000. Whereas naysayers and foretellers of doom may clamor for a hearing, there are other voices to which the congregation can and should attend. These voices can be heard in the psalms, the song-prayers of a great cloud of witnesses,<sup>3</sup> both Jewish and Christian, who have shared their hopes and prayers, laughter and tears, fears, foibles and insights with believers for the past three thousand years. Rather than allowing us to teeter insecurely on a precipice over an unknown future, the psalms offer us sure footholds in the rich heritage of the Jewish and Christian faiths; from their vantage point, the future can be met with confidence and hope.

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**T**he first foothold offered to the community during these weeks is to be found in Psalm 128. This prayer provides an opportunity to celebrate family within the context of the Feast of the Holy Family. A wisdom psalm, Psalm 128 is one of the fifteen songs of ascent (Pss 120-134) which were sung by believers traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the three major pilgrimage feasts of the Jewish liturgical calendar: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkoth—or Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles.

Because of its sapiential characteristics, scholars assign a post-exilic date to this psalm. Appealing to their contemporaries not to abandon their faith, the wisdom writers sought, by frequent repetitions and admonitions, to impress on their readers the blessings that would be theirs if only they would *fear* the Lord. Fear, as the psalmist uses the word (v. 1) does not mean terror, which is usually destructive of happiness, but reverence. There is in it an element of dread, but fundamentally it is a song of awe.<sup>4</sup> Hebrew religion passed through many phases but it always came full circle to the fact that human beings must set out upon the great business of life with head and heart bowed before the greatness and goodness of God.

Echoing a long biblical tradition, Psalm 128 affirms that those who fear the Lord<sup>5</sup> and walk in the Lord's ways<sup>6</sup> will be blessed; they will eat the fruit of their labors<sup>7</sup> and have their posterity made secure through the births of many children.<sup>8</sup> Psalm 128 addresses the realm of earthly retribution; therefore, "we need to be reminded that not only in the present life but also in the new heaven and new earth (Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:1) our good works and loving friendships will blossom around us. Furthermore, true happiness is shared, first within one's family and also within the larger community of Israel."<sup>9</sup> This sharing continues with the ever-growing community of the new Israel.

While the psalm's reference to "children like olive plants around your table"

## Sunday in the Octave of Christmas: Holy Family

Psalm 128:1-2. 3. 4-5

Response (based on the first verse):  
Happy are those who fear the Lord  
and walk in his ways.

Happy are you who fear the LORD,  
who walk in his ways!  
For you shall eat the fruit of your  
handiwork;  
happy shall you be, and favored.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine  
in the recesses of your home;  
Your children like olive plants  
around your table.

Behold, thus is the man blessed  
who fears the LORD.  
The LORD bless you from Zion:  
may you see the prosperity of  
Jerusalem  
all the days of your life.

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in verse three may seem obscure to those unfamiliar with olive husbandry, it creates a vivid image. In the spring, mature olive trees send out shoots from their roots which poke through the arid soil as little sprigs of new life surrounding the base of the parent tree. Each shoot, if replanted elsewhere, will grow into a new olive tree. The image of a great tree encircled by the promise of abundant life readily lent itself to the blessing extended to the faithful in Psalm 128. In our use of this psalm during the Christmas Season, this same blessing is bestowed on the gathered Christian assembly, thankful for the year now waning and ready to

embrace the possibilities of the new year to come, with head and heart bowed before the greatness and goodness of God.

**A** second foothold or vantage point from which to welcome the new year is offered in Psalm 72, the responsorial psalm for the Solemnity of Epiphany. One of the Psalter's several royal psalms,<sup>10</sup> Psalm 72 is from the pre-exilic monarchic period, when a line of more than twenty kings ruled over the people for about 400 years in Judah and an equal number reigned in Israel for two hundred years.

Carroll Stuhlmueller explains that this psalm, composed for some special occasion in the monarch's life, e.g., a birthday, coronation day, royal anniversary, or the like, "communicates in elevated poetic form how God's hopes and promises for Israel were entrusted to the Davidic king who was, in fact, God's viceregent (or 'lieutenant,' in the literal

meaning of that word, 'holding the place of')."<sup>11</sup> The human person of the earthly sovereign, like the human words of Scripture, became the point of contact between God and the people; as such, the king was regarded as the mediator of God's blessings and even of God's presence.

Linked together by a series of fifteen "may" statements which sound for all the world like a series of "toasts" delivered at a banquet, the psalm reflects the people's hope that their ruler will establish peace and justice in four major areas of the human experience: the moral, social, political, and economic orders. Only when order perdures in these elemental spheres of life will peace abound (v. 7). Peace or *shalom* signifies that well-being which results when the fullest integration of life's blessings, be these physical, emotional, or religious, extends into economics and politics, pervading the community and spilling over into the rest of society.

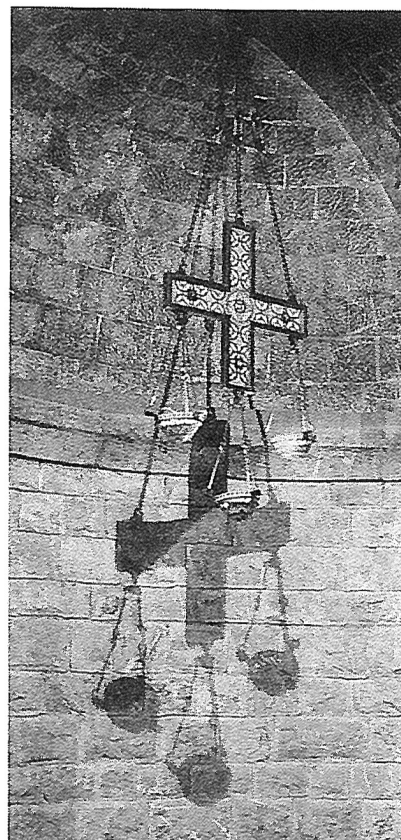
A perusal of Israel's history will reveal only glimpses or fleeting moments of this longed-for peace. As each successive ruler fell short of the ideal described in Psalm 72, this psalm readily lent itself to the growing hope now known as messianism. With confidence, Israel placed its welfare in the hands of God, eagerly anticipating the day when a worthy anointed king (messiah) or viceregent

**The series of fifteen "may" statements sounds like a series of "toasts" at a banquet.**

could be sent among them. While this psalm is never quoted in the Christian Scriptures called the New Testament, references to other similar royal psalms reflect the understanding of the early church that, in Jesus, the messianic expectations of the people were realized.

On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, the world-wide community of believers celebrates the realization of its hopes in the first advent of Jesus and prays with unabashed trust for that true and lasting peace which will be fully established when Jesus' reign is universally accepted and acclaimed.

**T**he responsorial psalm for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Psalm 29, proffers yet another foothold from which to venture into the coming



year. While millennial madness spawns rumors of wars, chaos, and other cataclysmic events, Psalm 29 assures the faithful that God is in charge; enthroned over all, the voice of God speaks strength and enunciates blessings of peace.

An adaptation of an ancient Canaanite hymn to Baal, the storm god, and believed to be one of the oldest of all the psalms, this song was used by Israel as an enthronement hymn, honoring the God whose power rendered obsolete all other powers and whose glory obscured all others. The ancients believed that the often treacherous and unpredictable seas were the habitat of evil, the source of all chaos. Similarly, they understood that thunder, lightning, rains, and snow were the manifestations of Baal. As Roland E. Murphy<sup>12</sup> explains, when sung by its Canaanite composers, the original hymn adapted as Psalm 21 described the course of the storm god charging with fury from the Mediterranean, wreaking havoc across the Lebanon mountain range and pillaging the wilderness of Kadesh to the east. When pressed into liturgical service by the Israelites, this psalm underscored the superiority of their God who, by a mere word, gave order to the watery chaos; at the sound of God's voice all the other forces of the earth and heavens

## Epiphany

Psalm 72:1-2. 7-8. 10-11. 12-13

Response (based on verse 11):  
Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

O God, with your judgment endow  
the king,  
and with your justice, the king's  
son;  
He shall govern your people with  
justice  
and your afflicted ones with judgment.

Justice shall flower in his days,  
and profound peace, till the moon  
be no more.  
May he rule from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of  
the earth.

The kings of Tarshish and the Isles  
shall offer gifts;  
the kings of Arabia and Seba shall  
bring tribute.  
All kings shall pay him homage,  
all nations shall serve him.

For he shall rescue the poor man  
when he cries out,  
and the afflicted when he has no  
one to help him.  
He shall have pity for the lowly and  
the poor;  
the lives of the poor he shall save.

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**Baptism of the Lord**

Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10

*The verses selected for the responsorial psalms on this day appear in bold type.*

Response (based on verse 11):  
The Lord will bless his people with peace.

<sup>1</sup>A psalm of David.

**I**  
Give to the LORD, you sons of God,  
give to the LORD glory and praise,  
Give to the LORD the glory due his  
name;  
adore the LORD in holy attire.

**II**  
The voice of the LORD is over the  
waters,  
the God of glory thunders,  
the LORD, over vast waters.  
The voice of the LORD is mighty;  
the voice of the LORD is majestic.

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars,  
the LORD breaks the cedars  
of Lebanon.

He makes Lebanon leap like a calf  
and Sirion like a young bull.

The voice of the LORD strikes fiery  
flames;  
the voice of the LORD shakes the  
desert,  
the LORD shakes the wilderness of  
Kadesh.

The voice of the LORD twists the oaks  
and strips the forests,

[The God of glory thunders,  
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

**III**  
The LORD is enthroned above the flood;  
the LORD is enthroned as king  
forever.  
May the LORD give strength to his  
people;  
may the LORD bless his people with  
peace!

were also tamed (Genesis 1:2, 6, 9-10).

Mentioned no less than seven times, the repeated references to the *gol Adonai* or voice of the Lord could be understood as a thunderous litany calling all to attend to the power of the divine word. Uttering its message over the waters, the voice of God retraces the path of the storm god, Baal, and forever obliterates the footprints of that idol to establish an unparalleled and unrivaled dominion over creation.

As witness of that dominion, all of humankind and even the heavenly court are summoned to glorify, praise, and adore the unique God. The word *elohim* (translated as "sons of God," v. 2) is clearly a vestige of the psalm's pagan roots. William Holladay observes: "These divine personages are referred to again in Psalm 89:7; they give no difficulty in a polytheistic context but are clearly in tension with monotheism after it emerged."<sup>13</sup> When adapted for use by Israel, the term *elohim* was used to refer to heavenly beings or angel-messengers who were in attendance at the royal court of God.

No doubt, this psalm was selected for the feast of Jesus' baptism for three reasons: its watery motif, the reference to the "sons of God," and the voice speaking from the heavens. Today it lends itself to our celebration in that it affirms our belief that the God who brought order out of the primordial watery chaos has also

spoken a word of salvation through the person and mission of Jesus. The same voice of the Lord, who acclaimed Jesus as God's beloved Son at his baptism and who thundered a victory cry over sin and death, has spoken each of us into being. At every baptism in Jesus' name, this same voice of the Lord continues to whisper love, forgiveness, and salvation.

**Notes**

1. In some years, depending on the calendar, the Baptism of the Lord may be celebrated on a weekday following the Solemnity of the Epiphany.

2. General Instruction of the Roman Missal #36, Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass #19.

3. Hebrews 12:1; William Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

4. Frank Ballard, "Psalms", *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1955).

5. Psalms 34:7, 9; 85:9.

6. Psalms 27:11; 119:37.

7. Leviticus 26:4-5; Isaiah 3:10.

8. Hosea 14:7.

9. Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms 2* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983).

10. See also Psalms 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 89; 101; 110; 132.

11. Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms 1* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983).

12. Roland E. Murphy, *The Psalms Are Yours* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1993).

13. William Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years*.