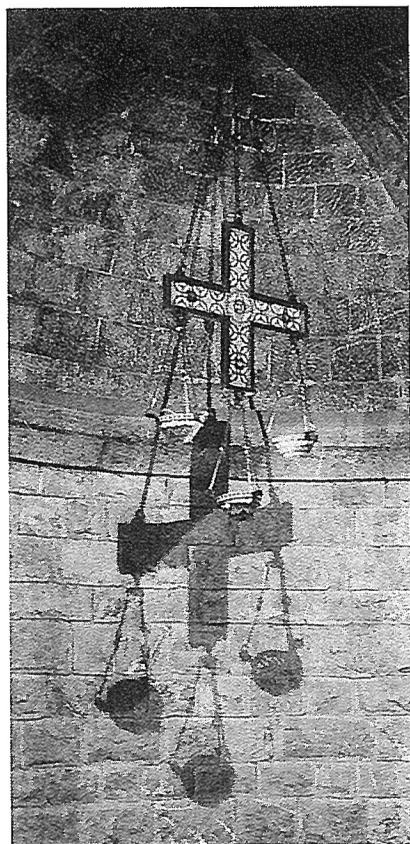


Psalms in Summer: Songs for a Spirited Church

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ



The Solemnity of Pentecost has been called the birthday of the church. Reborn through baptism into the dying and rising of Christ, believers are re-created through the promised legacy of Jesus, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Consonant with the church's embrace of new and renewed life, Psalm 104, the responsorial psalm for Pentecost, could be described as a birthday song which

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extends the celebration of the church to include the entire universe. Like a child surrounded by friends and gifts at a surprise birthday party, the psalmist seems to be saying, "For me? All this for me?" while gazing at all of nature's wonders and ascribing praise to the God who is both the creator and giver of all good gifts.

Believers through the centuries have been privileged to look over the ancient psalmist's shoulder, to see and to celebrate the world with the poet's vision and contagious delight. As the psalm proceeds toward its climactic and glorious doxology, it reveals its author's plan to order his/her observations and praise according to the poetic and mythic schedule of creation narrated in Genesis 1:1—2:4a. For example, on the first day God created light; and the first two verses of Psalm 104 correspond to that "day." The creation of the firmament on day two corresponds with Psalm 104:2-4. Day three, on which heaven and earth were separated, is remembered in verses 5-9. The creation of the sun, moon, and stars on day four correlates to verses 19-20. Day five, which marked the creation of the creatures of the sea, is celebrated in verses 25-26. And the sixth day, on which the animals and human beings were created, is referenced in verses 21-23, 27-28. Whereas the Genesis author emphasized the power of God to create and order the universe, however, the psalmist advances the concept of the ever-sustaining power of God's spirit. Sent forth at God's command, the spirit continually renews the face of the earth (v. 30) and all who live upon it (vv. 27-29).

Contemporary singers of this masterful psalm may not readily perceive its artistic creativity, since something is definitely lost in most English translations. As the late great bible scholar Carroll Stuhlmueller¹ explained, out of a total of 269 Hebrew words, Psalm 104 includes 93 different substantives or adjectives (the names of God not included), 63 verbs, and 21 other words equally distinct. The ancient poet could play with the intricacies and inferences

Solemnity of Pentecost

Psalm 104:1. 24. 29-30. 31. 34

Response (based on verse 30):
Lord, send out your Spirit,
and renew the face of the earth.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

O LORD, my God, you are great
indeed!

How manifold are your works,
O LORD!

the earth is full of your creatures.

If you take away their breath, they
perish and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the
earth.

May the glory of the LORD endure
forever;
may the LORD be glad in his works!
Pleasing to him be my theme;
I will be glad in the LORD.

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of the Hebrew language with the same exquisite ease with which God made sport with the monsters of the sea (v. 26).

It would appear that the psalmist was also well versed in languages as well. Psalm 104 bears a striking resemblance to an Egyptian hymn to the Aton,² the sun disk, which was believed to be the source of all life. Composed during the reign of Akh-en-Aton (or Akhenaten, ca. 1365 B.C.E.), the Egyptian hymn predates Psalm 104 by almost six centuries. Most scholars agree that the Hebrew psalm was adapted in the prosperous and generally peaceful pre-Exilic period,

between 780-609 B.C.E. In this period of relatively little political or economic conflict, the psalmist offered a reflective reverie that not only enumerated all the people's blessings but also helped these celebrants of creation draw some conclusions about their Creator. Walter Brueggemann³ has identified three of these conclusions: (1) God is confident, serene and at ease, with power so great as to tame even the sea. Among the people of the ancient Near Eastern world, the sea (or the deep or the abyss) was considered the abode of chaos; its enormous creatures were feared as harbingers of evil. (2) All that exists depends on God; should the divine face or presence or breath be revoked, all will die. (3) Nothing occurs by chance or coincidence but only according to God's loving choices and wise counsel.

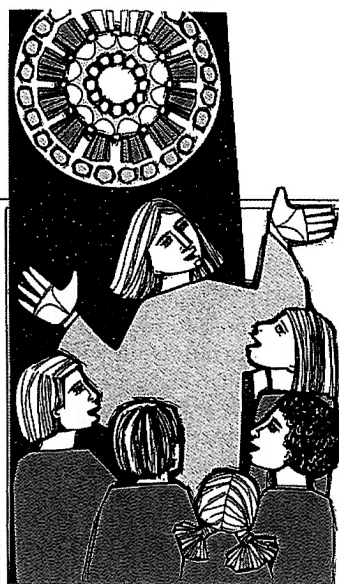
As a companion song for the Christian celebration of Pentecost, Psalm 104 encourages contemporary believers to affirm and celebrate similar conclusions about God in their own lives and in the communal life of the church: (1) The power of the Spirit to bring forth life and newness is greater than any other power, no matter how malicious or fearsome. (2) Through the abiding Spirit, God is ever present to each of us and to all. (3) Creation, redemption, and every aspect of God's plan of salvation are deliberate, ordered, and effective overtures of love,

continually available to all through the gift of the Spirit. With these assurances, the believing community concludes its celebration of the Easter Season on Pentecost.

Another beautiful song of creation, Psalm 8, sung on Trinity Sunday (June 7, 1998), begins and ends with an *inclusio*, praising the "name," that is, the very being of God. Within this framework, the psalmist invites believers to pause and marvel at God's handiwork.

Whereas Psalm 104 focuses broadly on the created universe, Psalm 8 narrows the focus to wonder at the creation of humankind, so infinitely incomparable to God and yet privileged with a God-given glory, honor, and dignity above all other creatures.

Bernhard W. Anderson⁴ has correctly observed that the psalmist's view of human dominion over nature is revolutionary when compared with the cosmic vision of other ancient religions. Many of these portrayed their gods as forces within the cosmos and regarded human life as enfolded in the order of creation with its rhythmic but repetitive cycles of life and death. Psalm 8 celebrates the One, the creator God who is not a force or power *within* the cosmos but who *transcends* the cosmos as its ruler. The



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Trinity Sunday

Psalm 8:4-5. 6-7. 8-9

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

Response (based on verse 2):

O Lord, our God, how wonderful
your name in all the earth!

For the leader; "upon the gittith." A psalm
of David.

I

O LORD, our God,
how glorious is your name over all
the earth!
You have exalted your majesty
above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and
sucklings
you have fashioned praise because
of your foes,
to silence the hostile and the
vengeful.

**When I behold your heavens, the work
of your fingers,**

**the moon and the stars which you
set in place—**

**What is man that you should be
mindful of him;
or the son of man that you should
care for him?**

II

**You have made him little less than the
angels,
and crowned him with glory and
honor.**

**You have given him rule over the
works of your hands,
putting all things under his feet:
All sheep and oxen,
yes, and the beasts of the field,
The birds of the air, the fishes of the
sea,
and whatever swims the paths of
the seas.**

O LORD, our God,
how glorious is your name over all
the earth!

psalm also rejoices in the knowledge that human beings have received as gifts a life and a dignity that lift them above nature's endless cycles of life and death to a share in the very dominion of God.

When Psalm 8 is read in light of its use in the New Testament, it takes on a fuller, deeper meaning which scholars call *sensus plenior*.⁵ The unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews made reference to Psalm 8 in describing the saving work of Jesus, in whom this psalm has been "fulfilled." Through his incarnation, Hebrews proclaims, Jesus became "son of man, for a little while lower than the angels;" through his victory over sin and death on the cross, Jesus has been "crowned with glory and honor, subjecting all things under his feet" (Hebrews 2:6-8 = Psalm 8:6-7). In his correspondence with the Philippians (2:6-11) and the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:27), Paul makes similar references to Psalm 8 in proclaiming the redemptive work of Jesus.

Contemporary believers in Jesus are privileged to celebrate the blessings of

Psalm 8 in the fullest manner possible. As human beings, each of us has been given a share in God's dominion over the entire created universe; as redeemed believers, each of us is also afforded a share in Jesus' dominion over sin, evil, and death.

Among the youngest members of the Christian community, a thirty-year-old song by Carey Landry remains a popular favorite. As happy, high-pitched voices sing out, "Great things happen when God mixes with us," older, more mature voices may take the occasion to enumerate some of those "great things." This is precisely what the ancient author has done in Psalm 15, the responsorial text for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (July 19, 1998). Those who would "mix with God," as it were, or enjoy the divine presence (Ps 15:1) are called to allow that experience of intimacy with God to cause "great things to happen" in their lives. Blameless living, based on truth and justice, a tongue free of slander and reproach, honesty in word and work . . . all of these great things become possible for those who are transformed by the presence of God.

Although traditionally credited to David because of his initiatives in developing Israel's liturgy, most scholars now assign a post-exilic date to Psalm 15, believing it to have been composed as an entrance or gathering song. Notice that the psalmist has elected to pass over the ceremonial or ritual aspect of liturgy to emphasize the ethical obligations of those who perform the rite. For those who would gather to mix with God, impeccable rituals are less important than wholesome and holy lives. In fact, the former without the latter is a sham. William R. Taylor⁶ has explained that the emphasis on ethics over ritual reflects the influence of the prophets, who understood that antisocial sins such as lying, slander, gossip, bribery, and greed destroy the good will and community spirit without which authentic worship becomes impossible.

Whereas our Hebrew ancestors in the faith "mixed with God" by seeking the divine presence in the Tent of Meeting, the Ark of the Covenant, on holy mountains, and in the Temple, keepers of the New Covenant believe that God has "mixed with us" par excellence in the person and mission of Jesus. Moreover, Christians continue to experience God

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 15: 2-3, 3-4, 5

Response (based on verse 1):
He who does justice will live
in the presence of the Lord.

He who walks blamelessly and does
justice;
who thinks the truth in his heart
and slanders not with his tongue.

Who harms not his fellow man,
nor takes up a reproach against
his neighbor;
By whom the reprobate is despised,
while he honors those who fear
the LORD.

Who lends not his money at usury
and accepts no bribe against the
innocent.
He who does these things
shall never be disturbed.

in the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. During the weeks of Ordinary Time that follow Pentecost, each member of the community is reminded of the responsibility to tend to that presence and to allow its effects to become visible and tangible in every aspect of life: at liturgy, in the market place, at work, and at play.

Notes

1. Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983).
2. See J. A. Wilson, "The Hymn to Aten" in J. B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [ANET], 2nd ed. (1955) 369ff. Or see R. J. Williams, "The Hymn to Aten," in D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) 142-150.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984).
4. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths, The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983).
5. In the article "Hermeneutics" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), Raymond E. Brown, ss, defines *sensus plenior* as "the deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, that is seen to exist in the words of Scripture when they are studied in the light of further revelation or of development in the understanding of revelation" (#50, p. 1157).
6. William R. Taylor, "The Book of Psalms," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955).



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