Psals of Advent: Songs and Shouts of Joy . . . for the Interim

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

A surprising as it may appear, three of the four responsorial psalms for the Sundays in Advent (Year C) are songs of lament (Pss 25, 126, 80). Advent is, after all, a period of intense joy. These four weeks serve as an annual celebration of the proleptic presence of Jesus; he who, having come into the world two millennia ago, will come again. Advent is a season of rejoicing in the belief that Jesus’ first advent is the sure guarantee of his final appearance. Nevertheless, the fact that this season of eager waiting and anticipatory hope should be commemorated by songs which bemoan suffering and confess the tragedy of sin seems not a little ironic. However, there is a wisdom to be discovered in this arrangement, a wisdom which is reflected in the arrangement of the psalter as a whole.

The song-prayers of our salvation story number 150 chapters. Chapter one, or Psalm 1, begins this story by affirming the Torah, or way of God, as the source of well-being. The first psalm promises that those who remain faithful and obedient to God’s purpose for humankind will know happiness, peace and prosperity. The last prayer-chapter of the psalter, Psalm 150, is an unabashed pouring forth, a torrent of praise which summons and mobilizes the hearts and voices of every creature to join in a mighty song of praise for the God who is Lord of all. But, as Walter Brueggemann has explained, in reading, singing and praying the psalter, the most important and interesting question is how to move from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150, from glad duty to utter delight. It is Brueggemann’s thesis that the way from Torah-fidelity—faithful covenant obedience—to self-abandoning doxology is by way of candor about suffering and gratitude about hope. For this reason, the majority of the psalms between Psalm 1 and Psalm 150 are prayers of lament, candid in their painful honesty, which admit that the reality of life, even during Advent, does not always or readily correspond to the simple faith affirmation which declares: “For the Lord watches over the way of the just but the way of the wicked vanishes!” (Ps 1:6). On the contrary, “plunged into the middle of the psalter, we find a world of enraged suffering!”

By the same token, however, these psalms are also full of confidence that, despite human failure and the inexplicable suffering of the innocent, God can and will turn sorrow into joy. This conviction is given voice when the believer’s cry of lament yields to grateful hope and trusting praise.

One vivid example of the hard-fought move from obedience to doxology, from lament to praise can be found in Psalm 25, the responsorial psalm for Advent’s first Sunday.

Acrostic in structure, Psalm 25 is similar in its spiritual posture to that of Jeremiah (ca. 627-587 B.C.E.) and stylistically comparable to the sapiential literature of Israel which began to appear about 450 B.C.E. Carroll Stuhlmuller notes that one might expect to find an artificial quality to this psalm, because its verses are ordered according to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. However, the acrostic structure does not function as a literary straight-jacket. On the contrary, it manifests a healthy control over hyper-emotionalism and reveals the psalmist’s authentic spirituality. In the peaceful privilege of speaking with God in prayer, each letter and syllable become sacred. Each letter of the alphabet is a gift from God and can transform even penitential lament into a return gift of praise.

The central focus of Psalm 25 is on the hesed or covenantal love of God for the believer (vv. 4-18). Without a hint of uncertainty, the psalmist attests to an experience that God is constant in fidelity and consistent in behavior. Secure in the knowledge that God does not abandon those who have been invited to share in the blessings of the covenant relationship, the singer-author of Psalm

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25 is personally rooted in complete trust. Nevertheless, "in the complexities and perplexities of human life the purpose of God can be seen only dimly" and at times, can be downright obscured by sin and frailty. Aware of, and temporarily mired in, the darker aspects of the human experience, the singer/prayer of Psalm 25 has assumed the hopeful stance of waiting for God: "waiting for the time when the reality of God's presence and the sovereignty of God's purpose in the world will once again become clear."  

Content to wait for God (vv. 3, 5, 21), but not passive in attitude, the psalmist actively searches for a deeper appreciation of the ways of God (vv. 4, 8, 9, 10, 12) which are revealed as truth, compassion, justice, kindness, constancy, and life (vv. 5-10; 20).  

As it is prayed during Advent, Psalm 25 envelops the waiting community in a confidence that will see it through. In the interim between Jesus' two advents, and despite the complexities and perplexities of life, we have cause for rejoicing. He came; he comes; he will come again.

Dorothea Day (1897-1980), pioneer of the Catholic Worker movement in the United States, readily asserted that she found deep spiritual nourishment in praying the psalms: "I loved the Psalms and learned many of them by heart and the anthems filled me with joy." Psalm 126 was one of Day's particular favorites. On one occasion when she was in jail for picketing the White House on behalf of women's suffrage, she requested a Bible. After joining her own thoughts and desires to those voiced in Psalm 126, Day wrote that the poet "who sang this song knew sorrow and expected joy." Day had indeed understood the attitude and circumstances which prompted the composition of Psalm 126, the responsorial psalm for Advent's second Sunday.

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A national lament and one of the songs of ascent (Psalms 120-134), Psalm 126 reflects both the sorrow and joy of the newly returned Israelites from their exile in Babylon. The people who had

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First Sunday of Advent C
Psalm 25: 4-5. 8-9. 10. 14
The verses selected for the responsorial psalm on this day appear in bold type.

Response (based on verse 1):
To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.

Of David.

I
To you I lift up my soul,
O Lord, my God.
In you I trust; let me not be put to shame,
let not my enemies exult over me.
No one who waits for you shall be put to shame;
those shall be put to shame who needlessly break faith.

Your ways, O Lord, make known to me;
teach me your paths,
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my savior,
and for you I wait all the day.
Remember that your compassion, O Lord,
and your kindness are from of old.
The sins of my youth and my frailties remember not;
in your kindness remember me,
because of your goodness, O Lord.

III
Look toward me, and have pity on me,
for I am alone and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
Put an end to my affliction and my suffering,
and take away all my sins.
Behold, my enemies are many,
and they hate me violently.
Preserve my life, and rescue me;
let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
Let integrity and uprightly preserve me,
because I wait for you, O Lord.

Redeem Israel, O God,
from all its distresses!


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For your name's sake, O Lord,
you will pardon my guilt, great as it is.
When a man fears the Lord,
he shows him the way he should choose.
He abides in prosperity,
and his descendants inherit the land.
The friendship of the Lord is with those who fear him,
and his covenant, for their instruction.
My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will free my feet from the snare.

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oasis (v. 4).

In gratitude for what God had already done and in anticipation of the good things yet to happen, the people prayed with laughter, gladness and shouts of joy! Repeated three times in this psalm, the term "shouts of joy" (vv. 2, 5, 6) is indicative of that assured spirit of happy hopefulness which is possible only when faith remains strong and unrelenting, regardless of the situation.

In the years following their return to Judah, our spiritual ancestors continued to pray Psalm 126 (and the other songs of ascent) as they journeyed to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts of pil-

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Second Sunday of Advent  
Psalm 126: 1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6

Response (based on verse 3):
The Lord has done great things for us;
we are filled with joy.

'A song of ascents.

When the Lord brought back the captives of Zion,
we were like men dreaming.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with rejoicing.

Then they said among the nations,"The Lord has done great things for them."
The Lord has done great things for us;
we are glad indeed.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the torrents in the southern desert.
Those that sow in tears
shall reap rejoicing.

Although they go forth weeping,
carrying the seed to be sown,
They shall come back rejoicing,
carrying their sheaves.

Third Sunday of Advent  
Isaiah 12:2-3. 4. 5-6

Response (based on verse 6):
Cry out with joy and gladness:
for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.

God indeed is my savior;
I am confident and unafraid.
My strength and my courage is the Lord,
and he has been my savior.
With joy you will draw water
at the fountain of salvation.

Give thanks to the Lord, acclaim his name;
among the nations make known his deeds,
proclaim how exalted is his name.

Sing praise to the Lord for his glorious achievement;
let this be known throughout all the earth.
Shout with exultation, O city of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

As a song for Advent, Isaiah’s prayer focuses our attention on the God who is continually coming into our lives: my life and your life; it is in that ever-provident and pervasive presence that we daily realize our salvation.

Notes