

# Psalms of Advent: Songs and Shouts of Joy . . . for the Interim

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

**A**s 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

**The most important and interesting question is how to move from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150, from glad duty to utter delight.**

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

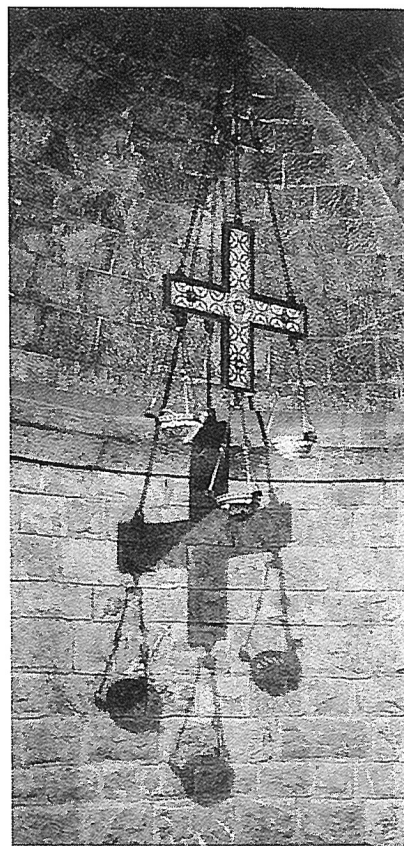
*Patricia Datchuck Sánchez, a regular contributor to Celebration, Praying, and Cantor, has worked in adult religious education for more than twenty-five years; currently she lives in Hattiesburg, MS, with her husband and four children. This article is part of her three-year series on the responsorial psalms in the Lectionary for Mass.*

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<sup>1</sup> 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!"<sup>2</sup>

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.

**O**ne 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 Stuhlmueller<sup>3</sup> 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 func-



tion 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

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"<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.

**D**orothy 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."<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> Day had indeed understood the attitude and circumstances which prompted the composition of Psalm 126, the responsorial psalm for Advent's second Sunday.

**"I loved the Psalms and learned many of them by heart and the anthems filled me with joy."**

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

## 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.

<sup>1</sup>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 heedlessly 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.

### II

**Good and upright is the LORD;**  
**thus he shows sinners the way.**  
**He guides the humble to justice,**  
**he teaches the humble his way.**

**All the paths of the LORD are kindness and constancy**  
**toward those who keep his covenant and his decrees.**

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.

### 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 uprightness preserve me,  
because I wait for you, O LORD.  
Redeem Israel, O God,  
from all its distress!

Psalms and Responsorial Psalms are taken from the *Lectionary for Mass* and the *New American Bible*. Copyright © 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC 20017. Used with permission.

The English translation of the Psalm Responses from *Lectionary for Mass* © 1969, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc. All rights reserved.

been forced to go forth from their homeland amid cries and weeping (v. 6) were now celebrating the joy of homecoming (vv. 2, 3, 5, 6). However, their happiness was strained by the daunting task of restoring what had been ravaged and pillaged by war. Businesses, homes, farms, flocks, and even roads and bridges had to be rebuilt. To that end, they prayed that God would aid them in their efforts to restore their fortunes. The psalmist expressed the people's confident hope that an outpouring of divine generosity could renew Judah as dramatically as the torrential rains were known to transform the dried and barren Negeb into an

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-

## 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.

<sup>1</sup>A song of ascents.

When the LORD brought back the cap-  
tives 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.

grimage (*Pesach, Sheruoth, Sukkoth*). Be-  
lievers in Jesus pray this song during the  
annual spiritual journey which is Ad-  
vent; we who have known sorrow are  
full of expectant joy.

**N**ot all the psalms we have inher-  
ited from our forebears in the  
faith are confined to the psalter.  
In fact the psalms preserved in this book  
represent only a small selection of many  
such prayers composed by the ancient  
Israelites. For the Bible as a whole is not  
only the story of God's relations with a  
particular people but also of this people's  
response in thanksgiving and adoration,  
in lament and petition along the way of  
its pilgrimage through history. For this  
reason, readers will find that the Torah,  
writings, prophets, and sapiential litera-  
ture are literally punctuated with song-  
prayers such as this one by Isaiah of  
Jerusalem.

Ministering to his people during the

reigns of four of Judah's kings (ca. 742-  
700 B.C.E.), Isaiah spoke forth the mes-  
sage of God in a time made turbulent by  
threats from without (Assyria conquered  
Israel and made Judah a vassal state),  
and from within (covenantal fidelity  
waned; the needy were ignored; and  
liturgy was rendered void and inau-  
thentic). With his prophetic colleagues  
(Hosea, Micah, and Amos), Isaiah at-  
tempted to offer his contemporaries (and  
us) an alternate perception of reality by

**This psalm continues to have  
particular religious value in an  
age which needs continually to  
be confronted with its  
indebtedness to God.**

challenging them to see their own his-  
tory in the light of God's freedom and  
God's will for justice.<sup>9</sup> To that end, Isaiah  
called his people to focus not on their  
earthly kings and the faulty political  
alternatives on which they relied, but on  
God, and the covenant which alone  
would sustain them. He called them to  
cast aside the injustices which made  
people overlook the poor (Isaiah 10:1-4)  
in order to bring a renewed integrity to  
their worship. In a word, Isaiah reminded  
his people that the source of their salva-  
tion was to be found not in themselves  
or in any earthly power but in God  
alone, who would be revealed among  
them as Immanuel, God-with-us.

The song of thanksgiving (Isaiah 12:2-  
5) which constitutes the responsorial  
psalm for the Third Sunday of Advent  
celebrates the divine salvific power by a  
triple affirmation of God as *Yeshuah*, i.e.,  
my salvation or my savior.

As R. B. Y. Scott<sup>10</sup> explains, this psalm  
continues to have particular religious  
value in an age which needs continually  
to be confronted with its indebtedness to  
God. The more capable and confident  
human beings become in their own  
power, the less inclined they are to re-  
member and give thanks to God. The  
more we think of ourselves as masters of  
our own universe and makers of our  
own destinies, the less likely we are to  
grasp the alternative perception of real-  
ity to which our prophets call us. Psalms  
like this one, from our ancient teacher  
Isaiah, remind us that, as believers, we  
are to realize our own personal and col-  
lective histories under the auspices of  
God's loving will.

## 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 glori-  
ous 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-provi-  
dent and pervasive presence that we  
daily realize our salvation.

### Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995).
2. Brueggemann, *The Psalms*.
3. *Psalms 1* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1980).
4. Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak For Us Today* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983).
5. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*.
6. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952).
7. Day, *The Long Loneliness*.
8. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*.
9. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1987).
10. *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 5: The Book of Isaiah (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956).