Psalms of Christmas Day: Make It So

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

In the television series Star Trek: The Next Generation, Jean Luc Picard replaces James Kirk of the original Star Trek series as captain at the helm of the Starship Enterprise. As loyal "trekkers" may recall, Picard had the habit of reviewing the status of the ship with his crew before deciding which course should be taken in order to continue their mission. Then, after detailing his plan and issuing the orders for its accomplishment, Picard would declare, "Make it so."

With that, the crew embarked "to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one's gone before." "Make it so" required that the men and women of the Enterprise be open to new possibilities, eager and ready to accept and participate in whatever new discoveries lay ahead of them.

The psalms attend to and reflect the experiences of real people in a real world.

This author thinks that certain prayers of the Psalter offer believers possibilities and opportunities similar to those enjoined on Gene Roddenberry's space travelers. But, whereas Roddenberry's characters and their exploits remain in the fictional realm, at least for now, the psalms attend to and reflect the experiences of real people in a real world. These prayers, which Walter Bruggemann describes as psalms of new orientation, "speak boldly about a new gift from God, a fresh intrusion that makes all things new." Psalms of new orientation engage believers, not in a fictional seeking out and exploring of "strange new worlds" but in the very real process of claiming life in its newness as a grace and in helping to shape a new world, a new situation, around that grace.

Each of the three psalms for Christmas Day (96, 97, 98) are psalms of new orientation which delight anew, as adapted for Christian use, in the grace of Jesus' birth and create an environment in which believers are challenged to decide how the implications of that grace should impinge upon and be formative of their personal and communal worlds for this day and each day of the year to come.

Also known as "enthronement" psalms (along with Psalms 47, 93, 99), the

Mass at Midnight
Psalm 96:1-2. 2-3. 11-12. 13 The verses selected for the responsorial psalm at this Mass appear in bold type.

Response (Luke 2:11):
Today is born our Savior,
Christ the Lord.

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all you lands.
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
Announce his salvation day after
day.
Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.
For great is the LORD and highly to be praised;
awesome is he, beyond all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are things of nought,
but the LORD made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty go before him;
praise and grandeur are in his sanctuary.
Give to the LORD, you families of nations,
give to the LORD glory and praise;
give to the LORD the glory due his name!

Bring gifts, and enter his courts;
worship the LORD in holy attire.
Tremble before him, all the earth;
say among the nations: The LORD is king.
He has made the world firm, not to be moved;
he governs the peoples with equity.
Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;
let the sea and what fills it resound;
let the plains be joyful and all that is in them!
Then shall all the trees of the forest exult . . .

[They shall exult] before the LORD,
for he comes;
for he comes to rule the earth.
He shall rule the world with justice and the peoples with his constancy.


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Patricia Datchuck Sánchez, a regular contributor to Celebration, Praying, and Cantor, taught Scripture for three years at a college in Uganda; currently she lives in Hattiesburg, MS, with her husband and four children. This article is part of her three-year set of columns on the responsorial psalms in the Lectionary for Mass.

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What is the good news proclaimed in Psalm 96? It is that YHWH rules; YHWH is above all other gods (4); YHWH's governance brings salvation, day after day, for all the peoples of the earth (2-3). Because YHWH rules, war is dissolved into peace; fairness and justice characterize the realm. All creation resounds with the goodness of this news; heaven and earth rejoice (“and heaven and nature sing!”). 

For its part, the human community is challenged to claim this reign, to participate in its provenance and sanctification, and to give voice, at this time and in this place, to the glory and power of God. In other words, Psalm 96 enables believers to reach out in hope to God who rules in faithfulness and to declare “Make it so!”

Some scholars have suggested that this psalm is a liturgy occasioned by David’s bringing of the ark of the covenant in triumphal procession to Jerusalem. Verse 13 acclaims “the LORD who comes to govern the earth.” Christians bring to this psalm an understanding that the undisputed ruler of the heavens has indeed come to earth in a unique manner in the person and mission of Jesus.

The church’s annual proclamation of this good news is not merely a remembrance of a birth which occurred almost two thousand years ago; rather, the liturgy of Christmas is an affirmation and participation in that birth and its implications for the contemporary community. Notice the refrain which weaves together the psalm’s proclamation of good news: “Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

For this reason, the song we sing can be called new (1). The God we worship is unchanging but ever current; God’s saving grace among us is not relegated to an irretrievable moment in history. Each time and in every place the good news is announced, God is present; YHWH rules.

Jesus is born. These are the realities which are to give shape to our lives and to our world today... Make it so!

Another one of the enthronement songs, Psalm 97 (and Psalm 98 as well) appears to repeat many of the sentiments and ideas celebrated in Psalm 96. But as Frank H. Ballard in The Interpreters Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955) has noted, there are different kinds of repetition. There is repetition which is sheer monotony, like the constant striking of the same note on a piano or the frequent telling of trivial stories. Then there is the repetition which is sheer delight. The sun rises with great regularity every morning but the beauty of dawn would never be characterized by tedium. Fine poetry is read again and again and the great classics of literature have perennial significance. So it is with the great truths of the faith expressed in the Psalter. In commenting on Psalm 97, Ballard explains that while it contains nothing that has not been well expressed in other psalms, “the thoughts themselves are like springs of living water to which thirsty men (and women) turn with never-failing gratitude.”

At dawn on Christmas Day, Psalm 97 refreshes the community with the assurance that there is reason for great rejoicing; God’s reign has brought light into the world. Clouds and darkness, forever dispelled, are replaced by justice and deliverance (6, 10). Scholars posit a post-exilic date for this psalm; therefore the clouds and darkness would have been representative of the shame and suffering of the years spent away from Judah in Babylon. Coming home to their own land, the Israelites believed that the God who reigns over all the earth (1, 5) had closed the door on their darkness and ushered them once again into the light.

In the liturgical context of the Christmas Season, Christians turn to this psalm to welcome the light which has come into the world in Jesus. So much of this feast is celebrated with light, from the candles in the sanctuary to the twinkling decorations which annually adorn the Christmas trees and are strung over our rooftops. A fitting symbol, the light, which overcomes the darkness, was featured throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, in the sepulchral literature (Wisdom 7:29-30), in the writings of the Qumran community (Dead Sea Scrolls), and it has come to its ultimate climax in the Christian Scriptures (John 1:5).

Jesus, born for us this day, is the light of the world. This proclamation is the source of our celebration but it is also the basis for the challenge of Christian commitment. The one who declared “I am the light of the world” (John 8:9) has also charged, “You are the light of the world... your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify the God who rules heaven and earth (Matthew 5:14, 16). Make it so!

Yet another song, Psalm 98, honoring the enthronement of God and the universality of the di-
Christmas Day
Psalm 88: 1-6

Response: All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.

Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done wondrous deeds;
His right hand has won victory for him,
his holy arm.

The Lord has made his salvation known;
in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice.
He has remembered his kindness and his faithfulness
throughout the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God.
Sing joyfully to the Lord, all you lands;
bring into song, sing praise.

Sing praise to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and melodious song.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
sing joyfully before the King, the Lord.

vine reign exhibits the simple structure common to all enthronement psalms. In verses 1-3, the people of God are summoned to sing a new song, praising the saving deeds of YHWH on behalf of Israel. Verses 4-6 extend the summons to include all of humanity in the celebration. Finally, verses 7-9 expand the parameters of this liturgy to embrace all of the created universe.

Carroll Stuhlmuehler in Psalms 21' recognized the influence of Deuter-Isaiah reflected in Psalm 98: “For instance, the combination of victory (in Hebrew, salvation) and vindication (in Hebrew, justice or righteousness) in verse 2 occurs frequently in chapters 40-55 of Isaiah (46:13; 47:12; 51:5); the phrase, all the ends of the earth, is another favorite of Second-Isaiah (45:22; 52:10).”

Also reflected in this psalm are references to the central terms of Israel’s covenant tradition, viz., God’s kindness or steadfast love and faithfulness (3). The Hebrew word khesed, which has been weakly rendered as “kindness” in the New American Bible, is a term so rich in meaning that it has stymied translators for centuries. None of the many sug-
gested meanings, e.g., mercy, love, loving-kindness, loyal (loyal-) love come close to encompassing the full significance of the term. Similarly the Hebrew word emunah, rendered here as “faithfulness,” can be variously, albeit insufficiently, translated as firmness, truth, confirmation, support, and so on. Perhaps it is only fitting that these special covenant terms defy human efforts to translate them. Like human language, the human mind can only draw near to God in unutterable awe. Something of this wonder is preserved by the fact that our words are incapable of surrounding and speaking of the divine mystery.

Perhaps the psalmist experienced a similar inadequacy before the majesty of God. The call for harps and trumpets and horns (5-6) probably reflected a Temple setting for the psalm, but the musical accomplishment may also have helped to compensate for and complement what was found wanting in mere human words. With horns, harps, and trumpets, this prayer of praise in honor of God who rules becomes what Gerardus van der Leeuw in Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art once described as a “holy sound.” “Music”, said van der Leeuw, serves the community in a “priestly capacity before the face of God because it speaks of the ineffable and mediates the mystery” around which, and because of which, the community has gathered.

On this day, the name of the mystery who brings us together is Jesus; his name, his birth, his presence be praised by human thoughts and words, by trumpets, harps and horns… Make it so!

Notes
2. Editor’s Note. The tetragrammation YHWH is used to represent the personal name of God, which Jews normally do not pronounce. Most English translations of the Psalter use Lord to translate this personal name in accord with the Jewish practice of substituting Adonai for YHWH when reading the text.

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