Psalms of Easter: Singing The Rest of the Story

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

Perenniually popular radio personality Paul Harvey is probably best-known for his unique and interesting feature “The Rest of the Story.” Beginning with a person or event familiar to his listening audience, Harvey proceeds to enlarge on his subject by supplying little-known details and background information. Then, having yet again intrigued his listeners, Harvey’s mellow Oklahoman accent intones the refrain, “Now, you know the rest of the story.” In a sense, Psalm 22, the responsorial psalm for the Fifth Sunday of Easter in the B Cycle (April 27) is the liturgical version of the “rest of the story.” But first, some background about the story’s beginning. Prior to Easter and at the outset of Holy Week (Palm-Passion Sunday), the first half of Psalm 22 is used by Christians to give expression to the passion and pathos of the last days of Jesus’ life. Referenced no less than twelve times in the Christian Scriptures, it would appear that the early Christian authors used Psalm 22 (1-22) as a sort of literary outline or structure for styling their narratives about Jesus’ suffering and death. Indeed, it would also seem that Jesus himself, in his cry from the cross (“Eli Eli lama sabachthani,” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”), was using the words of this ancient lament to give prayerful voice to his pain (verse 1).

In the wake of the Easter event, however, the church invites the gathered assembly to become familiar with “the rest of the story.” The second half of the psalm (22:23-32) represents a decided shift in attitude and mood. The bold complaint of the lament has yielded to an even bolder proclamation of praise; the God on whose “shoulder” the psalmist has wept is now the God raised up on that same psalmist’s shoulders for all to acknowledge, acclaim, and appreciate. At first glance, it may seem that this mood swing can be attributed to the fact that the originator of the lament is no longer suffering. However, this is far from the truth. Like all of the laments in Scripture, Psalm 22 is borne of a deep faith and an unshakable confidence in God’s power and willingness to save and to alleviate whatever suffering afflicts the believer. Although the suffering psalmist is probably still in the throes of mental, perhaps even physical, pain, this same sufferer, as one who knows and firmly believes the rest of the story (viz., that God hears prayers and can transform sadness to joy, sickness to health, death to life), rests in the assurance that better times are on the way. Walter Brueggemann notes that “many of the psalms are to be understood and interpreted around the turn from distress to relief.” To understand the how and what of the dramatic change is “not simply a literary question, but one that cuts to the heart of the theological issue for faith.”

A variety of explanations have been offered concerning why and how the psalmist’s pleas for help were replaced by proclamations of praise. Some scholars suggest that some oracle of salvation was originally uttered between verses 22 and 23. Whether this was a liturgical prayer sung by a priest or levite in the course of worship in the Temple, or whether this was simply an inner awareness of God that has heard and will help, is not certain. But, at this point, it is evident that the psalmist has had an experience with which all of us are familiar. A loving voice has hustled the tears and whispered reassuringly, “Everything’s going to be all right.” Others believe that the act of speaking the sacred name of God is the moment of transition. Notice the bold statement (v. 23) that marks the point of transition from lament to praise: “I will proclaim your name to my brethren!”

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When God’s name is spoken, power becomes act; things happen! Brueggemann further explains that this change is a central conviction of Israel about the structure of reality. Because of God and only because of God, life is transformed, death is averted, enemies are overcome, shalom is known once more.

As Psalm 22 continues, the one who has cried out in need to God matches the cry of distress with a promise or vow of praise (26). Claus Westermann argues that this pairing is only fitting and should not be bejeweled as a type of do ut des, barter-gaining with God. “On the contrary, it is only through the promise that I bind to my petition that the petition gains weight and value. I know that with the promise that I add to my petition I have entered into a relationship with God.”

Honoring both the vow to praise God and the relationship with God, the psalmist’s prayer reaches out to embrace and include the “lowly” (27), “all the families of the nations” (28), and “coming generations of peoples yet to be born” (31-32). Caught up in this lament-turned-proclamation, believers in Jesus will find a means to express the joy that Jesus, who died, is risen. Those who believe and now participate in Jesus’ transformation from death to life . . . those who now know and celebrate “the rest of the story” . . . can pray this psalm with faith and hope.

Also a song of lament sung with unswerving hope in God, Psalm 4 (used on the Third Sunday of Easter, B) appears to be the prayer of an individual in the midst of the assembly gathered for worship. A community reveling in the joyous victory of the Easter season may be inclined to think that the lament is an inappropriate vehicle for its prayer. Nevertheless, a good one-third of the psalter is comprised of laments, all of which invariably erupt into praises. After a frank assessment of the fact that life, on this side of the passage through death, is not entirely idyllic, the lament psalms entrust life, such as it is, to the care and constancy of God. Full of hope for a future that will include “wonders” (verse 4) and “better times” (7), Psalm 4 encourages an optimism that gracefully sees the cup which is one’s lot in life as half-full or even overflowing (as in Ps 23:5) rather than half-empty.

Evidently, the author of Psalm 4 wished for a cry of confusion to be waited afloat accompanied by the soft strains of lyres and harps; notice the di-
will appeal to contemporary leaders of song who will find its simple, straightforward declaration of trust in God an appropriate response that soothes many of life's little and large wrinkles.

In a word, Psalm 4 exudes the un-ruffled peace of one who has struggled but has never lost a sense of the sustaining presence of God.

Each day, as I go through the early morning routine of washing, dressing, and preparing for work, I invariably look at myself in the mirror over the bathroom sink. Fresh from bed and still groggy from sleep, I find looking back at me a bleary-eyed face that only a mother could love. As I prod myself into action, I have on occasion talked to myself: You'd better get busy... You have a lot to do today... Don't you forget to... Probably most people can relate similar experiences and, while we cannot be certain of precisely where or when the hymn known as Psalm 103 was composed, it seems to have been prompted by the author's internal self-conversation, perhaps even while gazing into an ancient mirror.

As Walter Brueggemann notes, the formula with which this psalm begins, "Bless the Lord, O my soul" is so familiar that we no longer notice how odd it is.¹¹

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**Third Sunday of Easter**

Psalm 4:2. 4. 7-8. 9

Response (based on verse 7):

Lord, let your face shine on us.

When I call, answer me,

O my just God,

you who relieve me when I am in distress;

Have pity on me, and hear my prayer!

Know that the Lord does wonders for his faithful one;

the Lord will hear me when I call upon him.

O Lord, let the light of your countenance shine upon us!

You put gladness into my heart.

As soon as I lie down, I fall peacefully asleep,

for you alone, O Lord,

bring security to my dwelling.

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