Psalms of Easter: Singing The Rest of the Story

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

Perennially 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 onset 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,[1] 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 sabacthani,"* "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."[2] 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[3] 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 that God 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 hushed the tears and whispered assuringly, "Everything's going to be all right." Others[4] 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.[5] 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 that cry of distress with a *promise* or *vow* of praise (26). Claus Westermann argues that this pairing is only fitting and should not be belittled as a type of *do ut des* banal bargaining 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."[6]

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 gratefully 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 confidence to be wafted aloft accompanied by the soft strains of lyres and harps; notice the di-

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 22: 26-27. 28. 30. 31-32

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

Response (based on verse 26):
I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

A

I

My God, my God, why have you
forsaken me,
far from my prayer, from the words
of my cry?
O my God, I cry out by day, and you
answer not;
by night, and there is no relief for me.
Yet you are enthroned in the holy place,
O glory of Israel!
In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and they escaped;
in you they trusted, and they were not
put to shame.

But I am a worm, not a man;
the scorn of men, despised by the people.
All who see me scoff at me;
they mock me with parted lips, they
wag their heads:
"He relied on the LORD; let him deliver him,
let him rescue him, if he loves him."
You have been my guide since I was
first formed,
my security at my mother's breast.
To you I was committed at birth,
from my mother's womb you are my God.

Be not far from me, for I am in distress;
be near, for I have no one to help me.

II

Many bullocks surround me;
the strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
They open their mouths against me
like ravening and roaring lions.

I am like water poured out;
all my bones are racked.
My heart has become like wax
melting away within my bosom.
My throat is dried up like baked clay,
my tongue cleaves to my jaws;
to the dust of death you have
brought me down.

Indeed, many dogs surround me,
a pack of evildoers closes in upon me;
They have pierced my hands and my feet;
I can count all my bones.
They look on me and gloat over me;
they divide my garments among them,
and for my vesture they cast lots.

III

But you, O LORD, be not far from me;
O my help, hasten to aid me.
Rescue my soul from the sword,
my loneliness from the grip of the dog.
Save me from the lion's mouth;
from the horns of the wild bulls,
my wretched life.

B

I

I will proclaim your name to my brethren;
in the midst of the assembly
I will praise you:
"You who fear the LORD, praise him;
all you descendants of Jacob, give
glory to him;
revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not spurned nor disdained
the wretched man in his misery,
Nor did he turn his face away from him,
but when he cried out to him, he
heard him."
So by your gift will I utter praise
in the vast assembly;
**I will fulfill my vows before those
who fear [the LORD].**
**The lowly shall eat their fill;
they who seek the LORD shall
praise him:
"May your hearts be ever merry!"**

II

**All the ends of the earth
shall remember and turn to the LORD;
All the families of the nations
shall bow down before him.**
For dominion is the LORD's,
and he rules the nations.
**To him alone shall bow down
all who sleep in the earth;
Before him shall bend
all who go down into the dust.**

III

**And to him my soul shall live;
my descendants shall serve him.
Let the coming generation be told
of the LORD
that they may proclaim to a people
yet to be born
the justice he has shown.**

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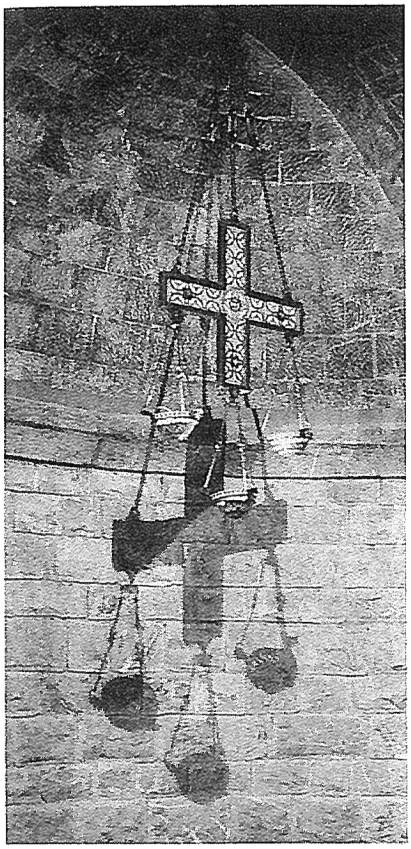

rective to the choir leader which prefaces the psalm: "For the leader; with stringed instruments. A psalm of David." Such references to instruments and a leader of song, along with the psalm's internal references to sacrifices (6) would suggest that it might have been part of a repertoire of psalms composed or collected for use in the Temple by one of its liturgical choirs.

Begun during the monarchy of David (hence the attribution, albeit pseudonymously, of so many psalms of David), the Temple choirs functioned under the auspices of several named leaders, e.g., Korah,[7] Asaph,[8] Jeduthun,[9] Heman,[10] and others. No doubt, even yet, this psalm will appeal to contemporary leaders of song who will find its simple, straightforward declaration of trust in God an appropriate response that smoothes many of life's little and large wrinkles.

In a word, Psalm 4 exudes the unruffled peace of one who has struggled but has never lost a sense of the sustaining presence of God. No sedatives for this believer; sleep comes quickly to a heart and mind at rest in God. For the Easter community, Psalm 4 enunciates the faith that, through Jesus, death and sin are overcome; this is the source of all hope, serenity, and security.

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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]

Third Sunday of Easter
Psalm 4:2. 4. 7-8. 9

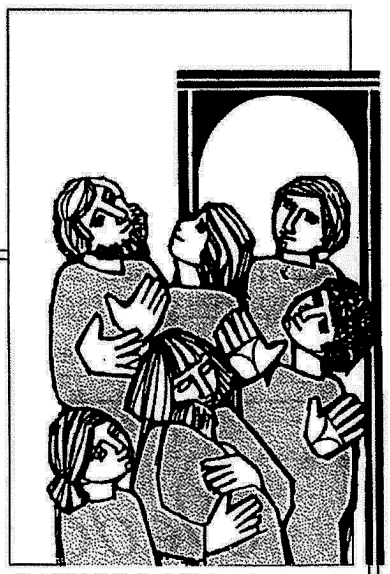
Response (based on verse 7):
Lord, let your face shine on us.

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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