Psalms of Lent: A Little Traveling Music
BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

The six weeks of Lent have been described metaphorically as a journey toward Easter; therefore, the psalms which accompany Lent's pilgrims could be referred to as "a little traveling music." Psalm 91, sung on the First Sunday of Lent in the C Cycle, so readily lends itself to the theme of the journey that Michael Morgan, an Episcopal priest, recommended it to Tim Cahill, a driver in the Pan-American Race, as a good highway prayer; it is no less apt a prayer for those who are "running the good race" which is Christian discipleship (1 Corinthians 9:24-2; 2 Timothy 4:7).

In its original context, Psalm 91 appears to have been the trusting prayer of a pilgrim who made the journey to the Temple in Jerusalem to seek divine protection from the exigencies and struggles of human existence. The pilgrim's prayer has been given expression by a priest or other liturgical minister who offers the assurance of safety and deliverance.

Verses 1 and 2 constitute a welcome into the sanctuary of God's presence. By referencing the shadow of the Almighty (v. 1), the psalmist reminds the pilgrim of another traveler who, centuries before, had listened to God's call and, in profound faith, had entrusted himself to God's care. "Almighty" or "El Shaddai" (Hebrew) was Abraham's special name for God; literally translated it means God of the Mountain or of the heights (Genesis 17:1). Verses 3 through 13 pledge all the various ways in which God will protect those who trust and believe.

The avian imagery of pinions and wings offering cover and refuge (v. 4) had a dual significance for our ancestors in the faith. First, it called to mind the pivotal event in Israel's history, the exodus from Egypt, whereby God had borne the people up, as "on eagle wings" (NAB translation) to deliver them (Exodus 19:4). Second, the mention of wings offering refuge recalled the Ark of the Covenant which was regarded as the special dwelling-place of God's presence (Exodus 25:22; 1 Kings 8:19-12; Psalms 17:8 and 36:7).

First Sunday of Lent
The verses selected for the responsorial psalm on this day appear in bold type.

Response (based on verse 15):
Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.

I
You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
Say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."
For he will rescue you from the snare of the fowler, from the destroying pestilence.
With his pinions he will cover you, and under his wings you shall take refuge; his faithfulness is a buckler and a shield. You shall not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day.
Not the pestilence that roams in darkness nor the devastating plague at noon.
Though a thousand fall at your side, ten thousand at your right side, near you shall not come.
Rather with your eyes shall you behold and see the requital of the wicked, Because you have the Lord for your refuge; you have made the Most High your stronghold.

II
Because he clings to me, I will deliver him; I will set him on high because he acknowledges my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in distress; I will deliver him and glorify him; with length of days I will gratify him and will show him my salvation.

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cherubim were a visible sign of the protection that God extended to the faithful who cried out for relief from enemies ("the wicked"), from calamities of nature ("pestilence, plague, lion, asp, viper, dragon"), political upheavals ("thousands falling at your side"), physical infirmities ("affliction"), and things that go bump in the night ("terror of the night").

The sure sign of God's protection, for the psalmist, is the promise of angel messengers to secure the pilgrim's way (v. 11). From this and similar references to protective beings (Genesis 24:7; Exodus 23:20; Tobit) comes the tradition of the guardian angel which is a persistent motif in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, expressed as well in apocryphal literature.1

Psalm 91 concludes in an oracle of salvation which is presented as God responding to the pilgrim's needs and fears with a pledge of personal help and involvement. This and other such oracles of salvation (Psalms 12:5, 60:6, 91:115-16; 108:7) formed the basis of Israel's central conviction about the structure of reality in the presence of God. Because of God, no situation is untenable; with God, "life is transformed; health is restored; enemies are resisted and destroyed; death is averted; shalom is given again."2 The oracle serves to affirm every Lenten pilgrim's faith that the God toward whom we travel is powerful and accessible, capable, and willing to transform every cry of distress into a shout of grateful praise. Immunity from all difficulties is not promised by Psalm 91, but it does assure us that God grants protection in such a way that each trial strengthens and purifies the believer.3

As regards its contextual position in the Book of Psalms, William Holladay4 suggests that Psalm 91 and the other psalms of Book IV (90-106) form the editorial center of the psalter. Interwoven in theme and structure, these seventeen psalms offer answers to the plaintive questions raised in Psalm 88: "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? Where are the blessings you promised?" (vv. 47, 50). In response, Psalm 91 and its companion psalms offer the assurance that God the Almighty is here and hears prayers. Come and hide yourself in the shelter of God's wings. Be safe, be strong, and know the saving power of God.

To sojourners who must dwell a space in Lent on their journey to Easter, Psalm 91 extends the added assurance that God's power reaches beyond pestilence, war, plagues, and wild beasts to heal and forgive the sinner, to guide home the lost, and to reconcile the alienated.

In order to appropriate to ourselves yet again these divine gifts, we need only heed the promise of the oracle of salvation and cling to God, call on God, acknowledge God's name, and relax in the security that God delivers, answers, and saves.

Psychologists who counsel parents of babies and toddlers experiencing anxiety separation often advise the parents to add a few games of Peek-a-boo to their daily routines. This simple "now-you-see-me, now-you-don't, now-you-do, peek-a-boo" exercise allows the child to grow in the security that parental love and care do not cease when the parent is "absent" (at least, not visible) for a time. Moreover, the child learns not to fear abandonment; the parent, who may be out of sight for a while, will return. Once separation anxiety is overcome by loving parental assurance, children are more apt to mature happily and wholesomely. On Lent's Second Sunday, Psalm 27 offers yet another solution for sufferers of all forms of anxiety—a trusting faith in the sheltering, nurturing, and abiding presence of a never absent God.

A composite song, Psalm 27 exudes a confidence that says "I know that there is nothing that will happen to me today that you and I cannot handle together. Because God is my light, refuge, and my salvation, I do not fear evildoers, enemies, or even an army encamped against me" (vv. 1-6). This boundless confidence is matched by a spirited lament (vv. 7-12) sung out in the meter of a dirge (3+2). Because the psalmist is so confident, the cry for help is bold, unquestioning, and even demanding. A series of eight imperatives (v. 7: hear, have pity, answer me; v. 9: hide not, do not repel; v. 11: show me, lead me, give me not up) covers all the bases of human need. The psalmist has interspersed these petitionary imperatives with a listing of motivations (v. 8: of you my heart speaks; you my glance seeks; vv. 9-10: you are my helper and savior; v. 12: foes, false witnesses have risen up against me).

The last two verses of the psalm, a thoroughgoing declaration of faith in God (v. 13), find their answer in an oracle of salvation which assures the believer that the God who is trusted and believed will not fail to act. By scholarly consensus the call to "wait" (v. 14) in the English translation should not be read as an actual call to stand still but rather a call to an active hope. Ever sure of the presence of God,
whether seen or unseen, in times of trouble and in times of peace, the psalmist need not harbor any anxiety. God is, as it were, riding with us, protecting those we trust, amid the ups and downs of human existence.

This prayer song is particularly appropriate for believers who live in the interm between Jesus’ two advents. He is not far from us; he abides with us. We can find his face among the poor and the needy. We can enter into his presence in the bread of the eucharist and in the bread of the Word. He is not playing an elaborate game of peek-a-boo. He remains present in the power of the Spirit. He is yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega; all time belongs to him, and all the ages. It is this Jesus who is himself the Way, our traveling companion, and our final destination; in him we believe and hope.

A hymn of thanksgiving may seem precipitous during Lent when the season would appear to warrant a more somber reflection on personal sin, human need, and frailty. Nevertheless, “It is right to give God thanks and praise” in anticipation of the yet-to-come Easter blessings, because we are already the recipients of the pardon, healing, and redemptive gifts of God in Jesus. In other words, the sojourn in Lent sets travelers on a familiar and well-worn road, back to God.

While we are en route, Psalm 103, sung on the Third Sunday of Lent, summons all pilgrims to praise the hesed of God. This Hebrew term which still defies adequate translation has been described by the psalmist as “kindness and compassion” (v. 4); “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness” (v. 8); “surprising kindness” (v. 11), and “everlasting kindness” (v. 17).

Standing in truth, awash in the hesed of God, the psalmist is also completely and frankly aware that the human condition is all too often in polar opposition to the indescribable love of God. On the one hand, there is sin and indignity (v. 10); on the other hand, there is finitude and death. We are all guilty and deserve death. However, in Psalm 103, the desperate reality of human need is seen in another light that comes from God’s reality: once submitted, God’s hesed overwhelms and overrides every human anguish. Compassionate with the continual missteps and back-pedaling of humankind, God’s bounty coaxes the wayward one toward goodness. Mercifully, God freely grants forgiveness when those with a lesser capacity for love would deem it undeserved. Aware of the finitude of human existence (vv. 14-16: “We are dust, our days are like grass; we bloom and then are gone”). God, nevertheless, fills each human lifetime with good (v. 5); the divine hesed extends a kindness that reaches into eternity (v. 17).

Psalm 103 gives voice to the spirituality of the exilic and post-exilic prophets (e.g. Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah) who revived the hopes of their contemporaries with promises of a new beginning. “Gentle spirituality such as this which blossoms out of the dead soil of exile . . . may not be able to adequately explain the mystery of sin and pain, yet it speaks convincingly to our faith about the steadfast love of God.”

During Lent, therefore, believers need not linger in contemplation of their failures and inadequacies. Rather, Lent is a season for surrendering human need to the all-pervasive hesed of God. Breathing and mea culpa are only a prelude to the celebration of salvation to which we are called and to which we are traveling. “Bless the Lord, O my soul!”

Notes
1. See Carroll Stuhlmueller, Psalms 2 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1993). Perhaps drawing on this psalm, popular piety seems to have attached the wings of the cherubim to God’s angel messengers. We should temper the upsurge in popularity being enjoyed today by angels by the fact that they are not to be distractions from but instruments for revealing God’s intimate and continuous concern for each person.
4. In Brueggemann, see p. 153
5. From the rite of the blessing of the Easter candle at the Easter Vigil.
6. From the introductory dialogue of the eucharistic prayer.
8. Stuhlmueller, 104.

Third Sunday of Lent
Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11

Response (based on verse 8):
The Lord is kind and merciful.
Bless the Lord, O my soul;
and all my being, bless his holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.
He pardons all your iniquities, he heals all your ills.
He redeems your life from destruction, he crowns you with kindness and compassion.
The Lord secures justice and the rights of all the oppressed.
He has made known his ways to Moses, and his decrees to the children of Israel.
Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
For as the heavens are high above the earth, so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.

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