Psalms of Lent: Celebrating Surrender

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

As the season of Lent reaches out to enfold the church once again within the mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising, the psalms of this season in the Cycle of the Lectionary give the gathered assembly words and a voice with which to remember, witness, and celebrate the central tenet of the Christian faith. For centuries, believers have turned again and again to these same psalms because “at the source of this prayer tradition the community found a particular, peculiar spokenness that we still speak: a spokenness that is daring and subversive, attuned to the reality of human hurt, to the splendor of holy power, to the seriousness of moral coherence, and to the possibility of cosmic and personal transformation.”

But, in addition to offering discipline and instruction in prayer and being an impetus to spiritual growth and conversion, the psalms also serve as a springboard: Those who sing these ancient prayers are invited to plunge deep into the realm of imaginative, intuitive dialogue with God, a dialogue which goes beyond words into a pondering which brings profound awakening and communion. One of the most poignantly “instructive” and/or “springboards” of the Lenten season is Psalm 51, chosen in this cycle as the responsorial psalm for Lent’s Fifth Sunday.

Numbered among the psalter’s seven penitential psalms, Psalm 51 is described by contemporary scholars as a prayer of disorientation which couples a candid confession of sin with a trusting surrender to the transforming power of God. The psalmist frankly admits that this lack of orientation or skewed stance in life is due to the breach in the covenantal relationship with God caused by the psalmist’s own offenses. A continuing refrain of self-incrimination and breast beating, e.g., “my offense,” “my sin,” “my guilt,” makes it clear that the psalmist offers no excuses and accepts the responsibility for the offending actions. From the time of Augustine, the reference in verse seven to “being conceived in pain and born in guilt” was interpreted in some traditions as one of the

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Psalm 51:3–4, 12–13, 14–15. The verses selected for the responsorial psalm on this Sunday appear in bold type.

Response (based on verse 12):
Create a clean heart in me, O God.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.

For I acknowledge my offense and my sin is before me always:
Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.
That you may be justified in your sentence, vindicated when you condemn.
Indeed in guilt was I born, and in sin my mother conceived me;
Behold, you are pleased with sincerity of heart, and in my inmost being you teach me wisdom.
Cleanse me of sin with hyssop, that I may be purified; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear the sounds of joy and gladness; the bones you have crushed shall rejoice.
Turn away your face from my sin, and blot out all my guilt.
A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.

Cast me not out from your presence, and your holy spirit take not from me.
Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me.

I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you.
Free me from blood guilt, O God, my saving God; then my tongue shall reveal your justice.
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
For you are not pleased with sacrifices; should I offer a holocaust, you would not accept it.
My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit: a heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn.

Be bountiful, O Lord, to Zion in your kindness by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem; then shall you be pleased with due sacrifices, burnt offerings and holocausts; then shall they offer up bullocks on your altar.


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scriptural bases for the doctrine of original sin. But, far from being a substantiation of a later, theological idea and a slur on the integrity of marital, sexual relations, “being born in sin” is poetic hyperbole meaning “thoroughly sinful.”

Traditionally, this psalm has been attributed to David after his turning away from God resulted in an adulterous union with Bathsheba and the arranged death of her husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25). However, scholars agree that Psalm 51 is probably more appropriately associated with that “profound expression of the awareness of sin that emerged in the exilic and post-exilic period.” The sociological and psychological situation of the community influenced its moral and religious posture before God.

Spiritual and liturgical renewal was also sorely needed; of the Temple, its cult, and the city of Jerusalem, as they had known it, there remained only a memory.

Freshly returned from exile in Babylon, the people of Judah were decimated. They were poor economically and politically vulnerable: Businesses, farms, and flocks had to be reclaimed and/or re-established without the benefit of king, army, or protected city walls (until the time of Nehemiah). Spiritual and liturgical renewal was also sorely needed; of the Temple, its cult, and the city of Jerusalem, as they had known it, there remained only a memory. Bereft of all amenities, and with no one else to whom to turn, the people of Judah approached God with empty hands and implored that they be filled with: (1) ḫanān, a Hebrew term for graciousness and mercy beyond expectation, and beyond any merits; (2) ḥesed, the steadfast love of God which never breaches the covenant; (3) ṭūḥamim, a compassion and caring such as that which a nursing mother would shower on a loved child.

The psalmist’s awareness of how desperate the situation was personally and for the community is revealed in the series of cultic imperatives: Teach me, wash me, renew me, cast me not out, sustain me (6-14). Each emphatic request springs from the knowledge that sin has taken the psalmist to a lethal place from which there is no rescue, save by God. The dual plea for a clean heart and a new spirit (12) underscores the desire for another chance at living in wholeness and holiness before God. For the people of the ancient world, the heart was the seat of the intellect and will; a person’s spirit was regarded as the breath or wind of God which imparted and sustained life. Sin had sullied their minds and weakened their resolve. Sin had knocked the wind out of them, as it were. Fully cognizant that only God can set things right and in total surrender to God’s transforming forgiveness, the psalmist invites all penitents to follow suit and surrender to God so as to celebrably the gift of a new beginning, not on the altar of burnt offerings in the Jerusalem Temple (9:18-19) but on the altar of a contrite spirit within the temple of a renewed human heart.

Although the compilers of the Lectionary have seen fit to edit Psalm 137, setting aside the verses which cry out with shocking rage against the enemy, “Happy are they who shall seize and smash your little ones against the rock!” (8-9), the psalm is better appreciated by restoring this omission. No doubt, this editorial judgment to edit out the offending verses was made out of respect for contemporary sensibilities but without its blatant burst of fury, Psalm 137 is rendered somewhat sterile.

Occasioned by the exile in Babylon, Psalm 137 is a lament, a psalm of disorientation which paints a scene of suffering and desperation. To edit out their admitted desire for vengeance against their captors is to minimize the agony felt by the exiled Israelites. Walter Brueggemann points out that “such a statement (7-9) might be an embarrassment to bourgeois folk who have never lost that much, been abused that much or hoped that much.” However, for the marginalized souls of this world, the psalmist probably sounds like a kindred spirit, whose simple, unfailing faith knows that there is no necessity to “make nice” with God. Even the most unspeakable aching for relief can be unleashed with utter abandon in God’s presence. It should be noted however that despite the justifiable rage, the psalmist has left the desire for vengeance in the hands of God.

Displaced people in a strange and hostile land, the Israelites refused to celebrate their liturgies and sing their sacred songs at the request of their captors the lyrics of our songs, And our despoilers urged us to be joyful: “Sing for us the songs of Zion!” How could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten! May my tongue cleave to my palate if I remember you not, If I place not Jerusalem ahead of my joy.

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Second Sunday of Lent
Psalm 116:10. 15. 16-17. 18-19.
Response (based on verse 9):
I will walk in the presence of the Lord, in the land of the living.
I believed, even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted." Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.
O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds. To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the Lord.
My vows to the Lord I will pay in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem.

As a Lenten song, Psalm 116 celebrates the God who has made death a passage to fuller life.

In many ancient, near eastern cultures, libations or cups with drink offerings were either imbibed or poured out in the presence of the gods as a sign of communion, or as an act of praise or thanksgiving for favors received. That this practice found its way into the Hebrew and Christian liturgies is evident throughout the Bible (Exodus 25:29, Numbers 15:1-11, 28:7; Mark 14:23-25 and parallels, 1 Corinthians 10:16, 21; 11:25-29).

In Psalm 116, the responsorial text for Lent’s Second Sunday, the psalmist refers to the offered cup as the “cup of salvation” (13). Some scholars are of the opinion that the reference is to an offering being poured out in gratitude for God’s saving mercy. Others understand the cup as the believer’s allotted portion in life, being accepted as God-given and metaphorically held out in acknowledgment of the divine provenance. In either case, the psalmist is, as it were, raising a “toast” in honor of the God whose power to deliver is even now being enjoyed by the grateful servant (12). Before the assembly of the faithful, the psalmist delights in praising the saving action of God.

In both the Septuagint and Vulgate translations, Psalm 116 is divided into two separate prayers (1-9 = Ps 114; 10-19 = Ps 115). The first section of the psalm is thought to be a song of thanksgiving prayed by an individual who had recovered from a near fatal illness. Having been encompassed by “the cords of death” (3), the psalmist cries out to God for freedom and healing. As Bernhard Anderson observed, the psalmist understood that death was not only the terminus of life but that death also “works its power during our historical experience to the degree that one experiences any weakening of personal vitality through illness, handicap, imprisonment, attack from enemies or advancing old age.”

Having tasted death and survived, the psalmist revealed in drinking deep of the cup of salvation (13) and in tendering praise to the God who had filled it. Numbered among the Hallel (“Praise”) psalms, Psalm 116 would have been sung by Jesus and the disciples after their last supper together before making their way to Gethsemane. Early believers associated the “precious death of the faithful one” with Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross, and the Roman Martyrology applied the same reference to those who gave their lives for the sake of the Christian faith. As a Lenten song, Psalm 116 celebrates the God who has made death a passage to fuller life.

Notes

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