Psalms of Lent

Songs of Penitence and Praise

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In his excellent studies on the Psalter, Walter Brueggemann has devised what he calls a "basic plan of organization," whereby he has classified the psalms according to a threefold scheme: psalms of orientation, of disorientation, and of new orientation. Informed by the genre or literary form of the psalms, Brueggemann's scheme provides believers with an interface between those experiences that are common to them and the offer of faith in the psalms.

All who share in the experience of human life will know seasons of well-being that are evocative of grateful praise to God. Psalms which articulate the believers' confident delight in God's ever-provident reliability can be described as psalms of orientation; among them is Psalm 33, which provides the responsorial text for the Second Sunday of Lent.

Classified by its genre among the hymns of praise, Psalm 33 claims to be a new song (v. 3), "new" in that it is being sung again with a fresh outlook or orientation. Roland Murphy has suggested that the song is new because it "re-news" or reaffirms the praise owed to God at every juncture of an evolving life. Citing the fact that similar calls for a "new" song may be found elsewhere in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, Carroll Stuhlmueller has explained that when we seek what precisely may be new about this song, we find that the newness may be literary, if a new role is being given to an ancient hymn; pastoral, if it is marking a new deliverance by God; ritual, as in a spontaneous shout or song of the people; or theological, in that God's creative and redemptive power is being actualized to full effect in a new generation of believers. Stuhlmueller has also suggested that though this song may have been new, its theme was old and familiar: "The truth is that the old songs that are genuine become new to every person who discovers their truth for himself/herself. We need singers that are made new rather than new hymns." 

First Sunday of Lent
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22

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

Response (based on verse 22):
Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

Exult, you just, in the Lord;
praise from the upright is fitting.
Give thanks to the Lord on the harp;
with the ten-stringed lyre chant his praises.
Sing to him a new song;
pluck the strings skilfully, with shouts of gladness.
For upright is the word of the Lord,
and all his works are trustworthy.
He loves justice and right;
of the kindness of the Lord the earth is full.

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made;
by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as in a flask;
in cellars he confines the deep.

Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all who dwell in the world revere him.
For he spoke, and it was made;
he commanded, and it stood forth.
The Lord brings to nought the plans of nations;
he foils the designs of peoples.
But the plan of the Lord stands forever;
the design of his heart, through all generations.

Happy the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people he has chosen for his own inheritance.

From heaven the Lord looks down;
he sees all mankind.
From his fixed abode he beholds all who dwell on the earth,
He who fashioned the heart of each,
he who knows all their works.

A king is not saved by a mighty army,
nor is a warrior delivered by great strength.
Useless is the horse for safety;
great though its strength, it cannot provide escape.
But see, the eyes of the Lord are upon those who fear him, upon those who hope for his kindness,
To deliver them from death and preserve them in spite of famine.

Our soul waits for the Lord, who is our help and our shield, For in him our hearts rejoice; in his holy name we trust. May your kindness, O Lord, be upon us who have put our trust in you.

psalmist’s call for a new song offers the reminder that the God whom Israel loved and praised for the gifts of steadfast love and justice (vv. 4-5), for the wonders of an ordered creation (vv. 6-9), for the call to covenant and protection from enemies (vv. 10-12), for the constancy of the divine attentiveness (vv. 13-15), and for deliverance from sickness and death (vv. 16-17) is the very same God whom we continue to acknowledge and who has come to live and move among us in the person and mission of Jesus.

Just as Israel was called to ponder the marvels of creation so as to discover therein the fingerprints and footprints of God and thus to find the cause for a new song of praise, and just as the people of Israel were called to remember God’s faithful and personal involvement throughout their long and checkered history so as to recognize therein the basis for gratitude, so also are Lenten Christians who pray Psalm 33 to realize that, in Christ, God has chosen to become inextricably involved with every aspect of the human experience. That divine involvement has resulted in a new creation (“Whoever is in Christ is a new creation,” 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; a new Covenant (“This cup is the new covenant in my blood . . .” Luke 22:20); a new definitive deliverance from sin and death (“For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ appears, you too will appear with him in glory,” Colossians 3:3); and a promise of a new mode of presence and protection (“I will ask the Father and you will be given another Advocate to be with you always . . . to teach and remind you, to convict the world of sin . . . to guide you to all truth,” John 14:16; 16:8, 13).5

Having led the keepers of the covenant in a celebration of their blessings and having summoned forth the appropriate response of grateful praise, Psalm 33 concludes with a description of the duly oriented believer. Convinced of God’s saving power and faithfully reliant on God as the source, center, and goal of every season of life, the authentic believer is able to wait for God (v. 20), to rejoice and trust in God’s holy name (v. 21), and to hope without stinting in the steadfast and loving kindness of God (v. 22).

Humane life not only knows times that call forth a “new song”; it also knows seasons of hurt, loneliness, suffering and loss—those painful experiences that evoke the emotions of grief, resentment, and even rage which often characterize what Walter Brueggemann calls psalms of disorientation. Psalm 130, the people’s scriptural response for Lent’s Fifth Sunday, offers an appropriate vehicle for expressing these intense and gripping moments.

De profundis . . . out of the depths of human emptiness, the psalmist cries for God to fill the void that is life apart from God. Bernhard Anderson is correct in his assertion that the word “depths” reverberates with the mythic overtones of the primeval abyss of watery chaos. In Psalm 130, however, the abysmal chaos is equated with the realm of confusion, darkness, and death caused by human sin. When believers freely allow themselves to be swallowed up by the abyss of sin, they thereby pit themselves against the creative, lucid, and life-giving power of God.

Fully aware of the hole he has dug for himself, and acknowledging that he does not have a leg to stand on (v. 3), the psalmist is not without hope. The humble admission of personal sinfulness is matched by confidence that God, who can hear prayers even from the lowest trough of human weakness, is also willing to forgive and redeem. Because of the divine capacity for forgiveness, God is to be revered (v. 4).

Although one might expect reverence to be a requisite for forgiveness, it is not. As Walter Brueggemann has noted, “this Psalm scandalizes all our calculating notions of religion,” in that divine forgiveness precedes the human response of reverent obedience. This unexpected turn of events underscores the fact that forgiveness is a gift to the undeserving, a gift that transforms and heals, such that defiance yields to reverence and shame to trusting joy.

Numbered among the Songs of Ascent and prayed by pilgrims en route to Jerusalem, Psalm 130 also provides a fitting accompaniment for Lenten travelers. The unyielding hope which underlies this lament strikes a chord in the heart of every sinner and reminds us that no matter how far we may have sunk into the depths of sin or however many detours we may have taken, God’s forgiveness is ever present to dig us out and lead us home.

The experience of coming home to God is one of many surprising and wonderful gifts by which believers are offered a new lease on life and a new invitation to allow joy and light to break through sadness and gloom. These occasions also afford opportunities for

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Psalm 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8

Response (based on verse 7):
With the Lord there is mercy, and fullness of redemption.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to my voice in supplication.

If you, O Lord, mark iniquities, Lord, who can stand? But with you is forgiveness, that you may be revered.

I trust in the Lord; my soul trusts in his word. More than sentinels wait for the dawn, let Israel wait for the Lord.

For with the Lord is kindness and with him is plenteous redemption; And he will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.

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taking a new look at God so as to become newly focused on and newly centered in God. Among the songs which give voice to the attitude that Brueggemann calls a “new orientation” is Psalm 23, the responsorial psalm for the Fourth Sunday of Lent.

A psalm of confidence, Psalm 23 paints a verbal picture that requires little comment. Willing to be led by God and free of all wants (v. 1) and fears (v. 4), the psalmist has found contentment and full satisfaction in God. His/her contentment should not be attributed to naïveté; however. While fully cognizant of the fact that dark valleys, evil, and foes (vv. 4, 5) are inevitable aspects of the human condition, and while not claiming to be immune to treachery, the psalmist’s experience of God’s companionship offers strength and support in every adversity.

William L. Holladay suggests that the perennial popularity of Psalm 23 is due to the fact that it enables all who pray it to address God as You, to acknowledge God’s presence, and to interact with God. Through this interaction, reality is shifted and shaped. Holladay agrees with Brueggemann that the recitation of Psalm 23 is performative in that it helps to create a new situation between the believer and God. Besides shaping and expressing a personal faith in a personal God, Psalm 23 also helps to reshape the relationship with God. By declaring “You are at my side... your rod and your staff give me courage... you spread the table... you anoint my head,” those who pray this psalm affirm and experience for themselves the provident care and reliable leadership of God as shepherd, defender, host, and friend.

This experience of God will sustain believers through the ever-changing seasons of human life. As we move together through the weeks of Lent, each of us is offered the opportunity for highlighting and celebrating our Jewish and Christian heritage. Through the course of our shared history, Jews and Christians have known moments of orientation (creation, covenant, incarnation), disorientation (fall from grace, slavery in Egypt, exile in Babylon, Jesus’ crucifixion), and new orientation (return to and reconstruction of Judah, new covenant, resurrection of Jesus, mission of the church). Each moment—and the believer’s response to each moment—contributes to the ambiance of penitence and praise in which faith is stirred, suffering is accepted, love deepens, service is inspired, relationships grow, and reality is shaped.

Fourth Sunday of Lent
Psalm 23:1-3. 5-4. 5. 6

Response (based on verse 1):
The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.
The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
In verdant pastures he gives me repose;
Beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul.
He guides me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side With your rod and your staff that give me courage.
You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life; And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.

Notes
3. See Isaiah 42:10; Psalms 40:3; 45:1; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Revelation 5:9; 14:3.