Psalms of Easter: Songs of Survival and of Celebration

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Veteran soldiers, who have recently returned from the battlefields, often share their war stories; their retelling of their harrowing experiences and narrow escapes seems to enhance their sense of celebration that this all has ended well. Those who have escaped with their lives from natural disasters or from freak accidents are also inclined to recount the details of their misadventures. Patients who have recovered from life-threatening illnesses or near-death experiences are eager to chronicle their journey back to health with those who will listen. Common to all these survivors is an overwhelming gratitude for a new lease on life, so overwhelming that it somehow seems necessary to keep remembering and retelling the struggle so as to better celebrate the fact that it is no more.

For the believing community of Christians, who have journeyed through the struggle of another Lenten season and, who, during the six weeks of that season have told and retold the story of Jesus’ battle with sin and death, the weeks after Easter offer an annual opportunity for remembering the great “war story” of our salvation and for delighting in appropriating, yet again, Jesus’ victory. Psalm 30, assigned to the Third Sunday of Easter, provides the community with both the words and the ambiance that such a celebration requires.

Numbered among the psalms of thanksgiving, Psalm 30 is a song sung on the other side of a difficult situation; it is a clear example of what Claus Westermann has described as a “declarative narrative.” It does not express the perspective of a “Monday morning quarter-back” full of ideas and suggestions as to how things should have gone, but rather the truthful recollection of a veteran “quarterback” who has survived several “sacks” but has emerged from the game, not unscathed but, nevertheless, a winner. In its tempo and between its lines one can almost hear the sighs of relief that an ordeal which could have ended tragically has been happily and peacefully resolved. Relieved and grateful, the psalmist is eager to give credit where credit is due, namely, to God.

In its opening verses (vv. 1-3), Psalm 30 praises God for attending to the needs of the afflicted. After crying out, the psalmist was drawn clear, healed, brought up from a hellish place, and preserved from a fatal end. The references to Sheol and the Pit in verse three have been variously interpreted. Most commentators regard this as an individual psalm of thanksgiving and suggest that the author had just survived a very serious illness which would have resulted in death and an eternity in the nebulousether world. But God reversed that fortune and the psalmist was alive.
“flashback.” By remembering and retelling the struggle, the psalmist shows by contrast how the present blessings of freedom and restoration seem all the more wonderful.

Notice the psalmist’s reference to his past sense of false security in which he boasted, “I shall never be moved!” (v. 7). Carroll Stuhlmueller suggests that this statement reflects the typical problem of “religious” people who claim special privileges from God; they especially must learn that God’s gifts reach beyond what they deserve. Once cleansed from such an attitude, the psalmist could cry out more truthfully, declaring utter dependence on God.

Having put aside mourning for dancing, the psalm concludes with a fitting doxology (vv. 12-13). Just as death required a eulogy, a new lease on life requires a doxology.

By singing this psalm, Easter believers praise and thank God and recount themselves to the new life God has given us in Christ. Although the Third Sunday of Easter is celebrated, as is all our worship, “on the other side of the crucifixion,” this fact does not preclude our remembering and retelling the events whereby our salvation has been accomplished.

A hymn of praise composed to accompany the community in procession to the Temple, Psalm 100 gives voice to Israel’s joy at being in the presence of its covenant partner. A short but vibrant doxology, this psalm may form the conclusion for Psalms 96-99 which honor God as king, or for the larger collection of hymns of praise.

### Fourth Sunday of Easter

Psalms 100:1-2. 3. 5

Response (based on verse 3):
We are his people: the sheep of his flock.

Sing joyfully to the Lord, all you lands; serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful song.

Know that the Lord is God; he made us, his we are; his people, the flock he tends.

The Lord is good:
his kindness endures forever, and his faithfulness, to all generations.

and filled with praise for the redeemer. A consensus of scholars agrees that this individual psalm was adapted for communal use and sung at the rededication of the Temple after a period of great suffering, e.g., either after the return from exile in Babylonia, or, more probably, during the period of the Maccabean revolt.

In verses 4-5, the psalmist extends an invitation to the community to join in praising and thanking God, giving the impression that one voice alone does not do justice to God; that voice must be supported by a communal crescendo of voices. As Walter Brueggemann has noted, the Hebrew verb hadah, to “give thanks” or, more properly, “to praise,” is to be understood as a confessional statement, acknowledging that it is God who has given this new chance at life. More than simply expressing a feeling of gratitude, giving thanks or praising God implies a commitment made to the divine benefactor.

Within the body of Psalm 30 (vv. 6-10), the author confirms the experience of liberation from death and celebrates the opportunity for a new chance at life by retelling his story. Roland Murphy refers to this part of the psalm as a
which comprise Psalms 91-99. In either case, the hymn of praise probably accompanied a thanksgiving sacrifice or offering (see the title of this psalm: “A Psalm For the Thank Offering”).

Liturgetically, the toda or thank offering required that an animal be sacrificed and a part of it burned on the altar along with part of an assortment of unleavened and leavened baked goods known as the mincha. Then the rest of the animal would be cooked and, with the remaining baked goods, would become a meal to be shared by the offerer and his/her family in the presence of God.

In the final verse of Psalm 100, the psalmist cites the motivation for joy and the reason for the thank offering: God’s goodness and kindness are forever; God’s faithfulness to the covenantal relationship with Israel is extended to all generations.

For keepers of the New Covenant, the heaven is God, who lives in every situation that people encounter in their lives. God’s presence is with us in the midst of our struggles and challenges. God’s love is not confined to the past, but is present in every situation that people face. God’s love is not limited to the past, but is present in every situation that people face.

Frank H. Ballard has suggested that Psalm 100, with its emphasis on gladness and joyful singing, is one among many of the psalter’s contributions to the great ministry of gladness. Although such cheerfulness is not altogether absent in Christian liturgies, it is not always dominant. In this season of new life and resurrected glory, Psalm 100 is both a summons to and a means of allowing our communal cup of joy to overflow with praise and thanks, because we “know that the Lord is God; God made us, we are God’s.” By sharing in the thank offering of Jesus which is the eucharist, we are continuously being renewed in the new and everlasting covenant of God’s love.

above the portal of a mosque in Damascus, Syria, the following inscription has greeted the followers of Mohammed for more than twelve centuries: “Your kingdom is a kingdom of all ages.” Written in Greek and remarkably well preserved, these words from verse 13 of Psalm 145 attest to the fact that the mosque was once a Christian church and to the prominent place that this psalm has enjoyed in the worship of the church from its earliest centuries. Praised at the midday meal by the nascent Christian community, Psalm 145 was also sung regularly in the morning, noon, and evening services in Jewish synagogues. According to the Babylonian Talmud (Bereneth, 4b), those who prayed Psalm 145 three times daily were assured a place in the world to come. Easily dated to the post-exilic period because of its acrostic or alphabetic structure, Psalm 145 was a favorite among the Essenes of Qumran who added the refrain “Blessed be God and blessed be his name for ever and ever” after each verse.

A hymn of praise honoring God as the author of all things living, Psalm 145 is included among the psalter’s songs of creation. Walter Brueggemann has defined this hymn of praise as a liturgical and unrestrained yielding of self and community to God in which the singers voice the song of all creation, acknowledging the daily experience of life’s regularities which, because of God, are experienced as reliable, equitable, and generous. The only proper response to such sustained blessing is gratitude. Therefore Psalm 145 exudes a grateful joy which begins in the heart of one individual (v. 1: I will extol you, I will bless, I will praise) and reaches out to welcome and include all humankind and all creation in the celebration.

Cognizant of the fact that the entire created universe functions in a harmonious, orderly complementarity because “God is faithful in all his works and holy in all his works” (v. 13), the psalmist is content to entrust present and future existence unreservedly to God. The cause for such trust is further strengthened by the fact that God’s provident power is particularly directed toward those who are “falling” or “bowed down” (v. 16). Because of God’s generous love, the fortunes of the needy and downtrodden are reversed and transformed. As the responsorial psalm for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Psalm 145 reminds the gathered assembly of the great reversal of fortunes which we call salvation. By virtue of his redeeming death on the cross, Jesus has extended to every needy and undeserving sinner the transforming power of God’s forgiving love. In grateful joy, we acknowledge both the gift and the Giver.

Notes
2. Ezra 3:7-13
3. 1 Maccabees 4:52-59
9. Other songs of creation are Psalms 8, 33, and 104.