

Psalms of Advent

Songs of the Revolutionary Remnant

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

If we were to assign to Advent a specific "theme song" that gave voice to the spiritual and theological ambience of the season and expressed the appropriate attitude and posture of preparedness which are evoked in these four weeks, that theme song would be the text known best by its Latin name, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55).

Though this "cantic" (the name for biblical psalms that are not part of the Book of Psalms) is not used as a responsorial psalm in the A Cycle of the Lectionary, which we begin this coming Advent, it is used liturgically several times over the course of a year: as the psalm on the Third Sunday of Advent in the B Cycle, as the gospel reading for the Advent weekday celebration each year on December 22, and as the gospel text for the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25) and the Solemnity of the Assumption (August 15). And, of course, it is sung each day as the gospel cantic at evening prayer in the liturgy of the hours.

Through the centuries the composition of this prayer has been attributed to both Elizabeth¹ and to Mary,² but, as Raymond E. Brown has noted, "virtually no serious scholar would argue today that the *Magnificat* was composed by Mary."³ The current general scholarly consensus does not attribute the cantic to Luke either, however; instead it supports a pre-Lucan authorship, proposing that the *Magnificat* as well as the other canticles in Luke's gospel, namely the *Benedictus* (1:67-79) and the *Nunc Dimittis* (2:28-32) are probably hymns derived from the Jewish Christian circle of the "anawim" or the "poor ones."

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Magnificat

My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit finds joy in God my savior,

For he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness;
all ages to come shall call me blessed.

God who is mighty has done great things for me,
holy is his name;
His mercy is from age to age
on those who fear him.

He has shown might with his arm;
he has confused the proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has deposed the mighty from their thrones
and raised the lowly to high places.
The hungry he has given every good thing,
while the rich he has sent empty away.

He has upheld Israel his servant,
ever mindful of his mercy;
Even as he promised our fathers,
promised Abraham and his descendants forever.

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The designation "poor ones" originally referred to the physically and economically strapped members of the First Covenant, but the term evolved, in time, to include those who would not trust in their own strength and resources but chose, instead, to rely solely on God, living in utter confidence in God's care. This group included the lowly, the sick,

widows, orphans, the disadvantaged, and the disenfranchised. As Joseph A. Fitzmyer has pointed out, descriptions of these poor ones can be found in the Psalter (Psalm 149:9) and in the prophetic literature, particularly in Isaiah (49:13; 66:2), where they are described as the "remnant" of Israel.⁴

Historically, the notion of a remnant whose humble faithfulness to God would assure their survival was redefined several times in the course of Judaism's development. When the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 B.C.E., Judah considered itself the remnant, but when the Babylonian siege of Judah began in 598, both those who were being deported and those who were left behind considered themselves to be the remnant.

"Eventually," Raymond Brown writes, "under the catalyst of defeat and persecution, the remnant was redefined, not in historical or tribal terms, but in terms of piety and way of life."⁵ The fact that riches, resources, and power had not been able to stave off defeat brought the spirituality of the survivors into sharper focus: The remnant or the "poor ones" came to be seen as those who looked to God as their only riches, resources, and power.

Centuries after the Babylonian Exile, these poor ones found a kindred spirit in Jesus of Nazareth, who was presented in Luke's gospel as living in total reliance on God (Luke 12:22-34), praying in utter trust and dependence on God (11:1-4), embracing the role of the humble servant rather than that of the exalted king (22:27), and, in all his words and works, challenging his followers to do likewise. It is no surprise, therefore, that the psalm/cantic which celebrates the salvation that God accomplished in Jesus should be sung within the context of this gospel (in its infancy narrative) and placed on the lips of Mary, who is herself presented as an embodiment of the spirit of the poor ones.

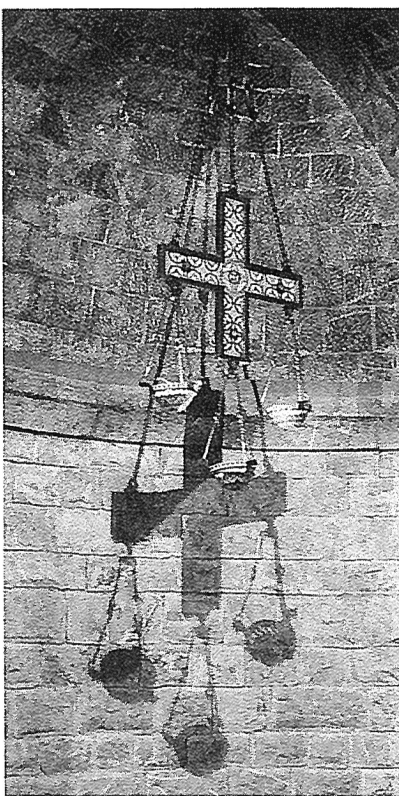
The structure of the *Magnificat* is

modeled on the prayer of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10). In the poverty of her barrenness, Hannah entrusted herself to God, who reversed her fortune and blessed her with a son, Samuel. Interspersed through the borrowed outline of Hannah's prayer, the composer of the *Magnificat* has made reference to a series of texts and motifs from the Hebrew Bible.⁶ The result is a beautiful mosaic of praise. Both Hannah and Mary extolled God as savior, because each of them rejoiced in the new experience of salvation that was to come through the birth of her child. Through the gift of Samuel, God reversed the fortunes of Hannah and of "all Israel" (1 Sam 4:1); through the gift of Jesus, God reversed the fortunes of all humankind.

As this great reversal is celebrated in the verses of the *Magnificat*, God's poor ones down the centuries are blessed with a catena of promises: "The arrogant of mind and heart will be dispersed . . . the lowly will be raised . . . the hungry will be filled . . . the rich will be sent empty away . . . the mercy of God is remembered from age to age and forever." Citing Stanley Jones, William Barclay has called the *Magnificat*, with its emphasis on the reversal of fortunes, the most revolutionary document in the world.⁷ The dispersal of the proud instigates a moral revolution; the casting down of the mighty begins a social revolution; and an economic revolution is launched when the rich are "sent empty away."

During each Advent this triple revolution is invoked once more and contemporary believers are challenged to choose sides. Shall we align ourselves with the "silent majority" who prefer the emptiness and defeat of pride and self-sufficiency, or shall we join our hearts and minds and voices to those of the revolutionary remnant who humbly trust in and rely on the God whose incarnation and final return have brought and will bring a reversal of fortunes to us all?

A sense of Advent-like anticipation and something of the spirituality of the "poor ones of God" is reflected in Psalm 24, the responsorial psalm for the Fourth Sunday of the season. Most scholars agree that this short hymn, composed as a processional, was sung to accompany the Ark of the Covenant as it was carried through the streets of Jerusalem to its resting place in the Temple, which would



explain the references to gates and doors being lifted up and thrown open to welcome the coming of God.

Recall that the Ark was a portable shrine which, according to tradition, contained the Tablets of the Law, i.e., the terms of the Covenant (Deut 10:2, 5). Early in Israelite history it was revered as a direct manifestation of the divine presence, and it was virtually identified with God. Israel had followed the Ark through the desert (Num 10:33), carried it around Jericho's walls (Josh 6), and taken it into battle (1 Sam 4:2-4; 2 Sam 6:17). After Canaan was settled and the Temple was constructed, the Ark was housed in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred area in the Temple precincts (1 Kgs 8:4-7).

It is not until verses 7-10 (which are summarized in the refrain on this Sunday) that the Ark is welcomed and God is praised in military terms. Carroll Stuhlmueller has explained that this language was derived from earlier traditions of God as the warrior-defender of Israel, the one who made possible the "procession" from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land (Num 10:35-36; Judg 5:4-5; Ps 68:7-8).⁸ After the appearance of Jesus, Christians who prayed this psalm infused it with their remembrance of the "procession" of the

Lord from death to life and with gratitude for their own "procession" from sin to forgiveness.

As an Advent song, Psalm 24 eagerly anticipates Jesus' second coming and, with it, the final procession of every believer through death to risen glory in Christ forever. Psalm 24 also reminds us that, by virtue of the indwelling Spirit, each of us has become, as it were, a living ark through whom the loving presence of God is to be manifested to the world.

The attitude of those who would be such living arks and, thereby, participate in the great procession of salvation is described in verses 3-6. "Clean hands and a pure heart" would require of us blamelessness and integrity in word and work. Such cleanliness and purity are not to be achieved by ritual ablutions but by piety, prayerfulness, humility, and total reliance on God—the very characteristics of the "poor ones." Each Advent, then, we are called to be renewed in these qualities and to join the ranks of the revolutionary remnant as we wait in joyful hope for the God who comes.

We sing another processional song, Psalm 122 (see next page), as the responsorial psalm for the First Sunday of the new liturgical year, to remind Advent believers that ours is a God who comes to us and that we are a pilgrim people always

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6.

Response (based on verses 7 and 10):
Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness;
the world and those who dwell in it.

For he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD?
or who may stand in his holy place?
He whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean,
who desires not what is vain.

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD,
a reward from God his savior.
Such is the race that seeks for him,
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

caught up in the process of going out to meet and welcome God, wherever and whenever God chooses to be revealed.

This psalm and the others in the collection of "songs of ascents" (Psalms 120-134) are believed to have been chanted by pilgrims traveling from the distant Jewish diaspora to celebrate the three major "pilgrimage" feasts in Jerusalem.⁹ Because of the dangers of travel in the ancient Near Eastern world, pilgrims usually banded together in caravans which provided not only the comfort of "safety in numbers" but also a much welcomed opportunity for camaraderie.

Notice that the psalmist first expresses personal joy—"I was glad . . ."—but that personal delight at going to the Holy City is immediately intermingled with the eager excitement of the other pilgrims. There is a certain contagiousness to the way this excitement is expressed that readily embraces all who pray this psalm.

In verses 3-5 the pilgrims, who have just arrived at the gates of the city (v. 2), unite in signing its praises. Jerusalem is the compactly constructed city in which all the tribes of Israel become conscious of their unity. The adjective "compact" may have been a reference to the physically impressive, massive walls that enclosed a network of streets lined with closely packed houses—such a sight would have filled a peasant with wonder.¹⁰ Alternatively, "compact" may have been used to describe the union of associates or the members of a group. No doubt the gathering of Israelites from places far and near would also have been a cause for joy and wonder. By recalling the theme of David and his just rule over a united Israel (v. 5), the psalmist expresses the hopes of the people for a return to that golden age of their history.

The prayer for peace which comprises verses 6-9 begins, Stuhlmuehler writes, with a "haunting paranomasia [word play] in the Hebrew: sha'alu shalom yerushalaim."¹¹ With this play on words and puns in the name Jerusalem—e.g. sha'alu (pray), shalom (peace), yishlayu (prosper), shalwah (prosperity or tranquillity)—the city is blessed. Like other Israelites, the psalmist believed that a blessing, once uttered, has the power to bring about its own fulfillment. He also understood that the very name of the city contained in itself the promise of its own peace and prosperity.¹²

As pilgrims enroute to the heavenly

Jerusalem, Advent believers sing this psalm with the fuller sense that we no longer find our source of unity and peace in a place but in a person. Jesus is the name by which we are saved and through whom we are blessed. He is coming again; let us go out to meet him, singing.

Notes

1. Scholars supporting Elizabethan composition include A. Loisy, S. Benko, A. von Harnack, F. C. Burkitt, J. M. Creed, J. G. Davies, B. S. Easton, M. Goguel, J. R. Harris, E. Klosterman, and P. Winster.
2. Supported by a decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, June 26, 1912.
3. Raymond E. Brown, s.s., *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1979).
4. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, s.j., *The Gospel According to Luke* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1981).
5. Brown, op. cit.
6. Here is a table of the references quoted or alluded to in the *Magnificat*:

Luke 1:47	Ps 25:5.
1:48	Ps 113:5-6; 1 Sam 1:11; Gen 29:32; 30:13.
1:49	Deut 10:21; Ps 111:9; Zeph 3:17.
1:50	Ps 103:17.
1:51	Ps 89:11
1:52	1 Sam 2:4, 7; Sir 10:14; Job 12:19; Ezek 21:31.
1:53	Ps 107:9; 1 Sam 2:5; Job 22:9.
1:54	Isa 41:8-9; Ps 98:3.
1:55	Mic 7:20.
7. William Barclay, "The Gospel of Luke" in *The Daily Study Bible* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Saint Andrews Press, 1975).
8. Carroll Stuhlmuehler, *Psalms I* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983).
9. The pilgrimage festivals were Pesach

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 122:1-2. 3-4. 4-5. 6-7. 8-9.

Response (based on verse 1):
I rejoiced when I heard them say: let us go to the house of the Lord.

I rejoiced because they said to me,
"We will go up to the house of the LORD."

And now we have set foot
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, built as a city
with compact unity.
To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD.

According to the decree for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

In it are set up judgment seats,
seats for the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
May those who love you prosper!
May peace be within your walls,
prosperity in your buildings.

Because of my relatives and friends
I will say, "Peace be within you!"
Because of the house of the LORD, our
God,
I will pray for your good.

(Passover), Sukkoth (Tabernacles), and Shevuoth (Weeks, Pentecost, or First Fruits).

10. See William R. Taylor and N. Stewart McCullough, "The Psalms" in *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955).

11. Stuhlmuehler, op. cit.

12. Taylor and McCullough, op. cit.

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