The Psalms: A Three-Thousand-Year-Old Dialogue with God

BY PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ

A n ancient rabbi once remarked that those who minister to the community in the prayerful expression of its faith should carry two stones in their pockets. One stone should be inscribed: “For my sake the world was created!” The other stone should have as its inscription: “I am but a puff of wind—dust and ashes—here today and gone tomorrow.” The rabbi continued, “The person who carries these two stones possesses the keys to wisdom.”

Perhaps it might also be said that the carrier of these two stones possesses, as well, the keys to the mystery of human existence. Wonderfully created and graciously entrusted with the stewardship of the universe (“for my sake the world was created”), each person has been extravagantly endowed with an eternal, transcendent voice which will never be silenced. But the earthen vessel which bears each person’s unique and eternal voice to the world is fraught with fragility and anchored by time (“here today, gone tomorrow”).

Perhaps it could be further noted that the carrier of these two stones, in addition to possessing the keys to wisdom and to human existence, also possesses the keys to the psalter, wherein the eternal human voice finds its fullest expression. As carriers of these two stones and keepers of these keys, ministers of liturgical music are called on to unlock continually, but never routinely, the treasure of the psalms for the worshiping community. When the psalms are sung, the gathered assembly celebrates every aspect of its faith and joins its voice to the eternal voice of every believer who has prayed these special prayers for almost three millennia. Composed over a period of many centuries by a variety of poets, cantors, and choirs, the psalms mirror every attitude and emotion, every posture and thought of a believing people.

The late Carroll Stuhlmueller once wrote that opening the Book of Psalms is like walking into a home that has been lived in for many generations. As keeper of the keys to that home, ministers of liturgical music can serve as both host and guide by extending the rich hospitality of the psalter to those who may be less familiar with it. Once visitors to the psalter begin to feel at home they can appreciate all the memories and rich traditions preserved therein. Moreover, they can hear the saving story of our people, told and retold in joyful modes as well as in more somber tones.

People who are in love often have a favorite song and when they hear it are likely to remark, “Listen, they’re playing our song!” When the psalms are sung, each is in a sense our song. Each psalm brings to focus here, in this moment, the rich heritage of humankind’s centuries-old dialogue with God and affords the assurance that the dialogue will continue even into the unknown future. “The psalms,” said Stuhlmueller, “bring us home to God; no matter how we are dressed, how we feel, what we have done or left undone. The psalms lead us through the sections or rooms of our life, always ending with a strong ‘Amen’.”

Claus Westermann has suggested that the two primary categories of the psalms or prayerful approaches to God are praise and lament. This being so, then those who would help others to pray are challenged to bridge and maintain an appropriate tension between the shouts of praise, which gratefully glory in God and in divine gifts (“for my sake the world was created”) and the cries of lament, which confidently confront God with the inevitable burdensomeness of living (“I am but a puff of wind—dust and ashes”) and trust that God hears and cares.

During each season of the liturgical year, the responsorial psalms celebrate the God who hears and cares while engaging the community in the spirit and significance of the season. Soon, the psalms of Advent will unite the voices of believers. It may seem surprising that this season of joyful anticipation is accompanied by psalms of lament (Ps 80, 85, 89). But as Walter Bruggemann has noted, the lament springs from an insistent hope that God is present and will act. Psalms of disorientation, the laments are acts of bold, tell-it-like-it-is faith with the power to reshape the world. Even if all is not as it should be, the lament clings, without doubt, to the sure promise that transformation is possible because the other partner in this frank and prayerful conversation is the God who comes.

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