

The Psalms of Easter

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Who prays the Psalms? David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays, Christ prays, we pray. We—that is, first of all the entire community in which alone the vast richness of the Psalter can be prayed, but also finally every individual insofar as he participates in Christ and his community and prays their prayer. David, Christ, the church, I myself, and wherever we consider all of this together we recognize the wonderful way in which God teaches us to pray.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*

It finally comes to this, if one thinks about the fragment of our life, how the whole was really planned and thought out, and of what material it consists. There are finally fragments which still belong to the rubbish heap, and there are those fragments which are meaningful only when looked at in the perspective of centuries because their fulfillment can be only a divine matter.... An analogy that comes to mind is the fugue. If our life also is only a slightest reflection of such a fragment, in which at least for a short while the various themes, growing ever stronger, harmonize, and in which the great counterpoint is held on to from beginning to end so that finally, after the breaking-off point, the chorale ‘Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit’ (I come before Thy throne—J.S. Bach) can still be intoned, then we do not wish to complain about our fragmentary life, but even to be glad for it.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

As I write, the year 2001 is rapidly on the wane. So much has changed. From the television screen, faces of terror peer out, faces that were unknown or at least unnoticed a few weeks ago. Death is a reality for many people whose vision until now had been uninjured by the scythe. (For me, the anthem for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and New Year’s Eve is Ralph Stanley’s wailing “O Death” on the soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) At the airport yesterday, a palpable edginess attempted to rule in all our hearts alone. People with machine guns stood near the cellular phone salesperson. Just as the plane was loading, a security agent wielding a wand pulled aside a woman passenger who was dressed as if she were a model for a Junior League recruiting poster; the agent made as certain as is humanly possible that no explosives or other contraband were in her belt, earrings, large purse, or shoes. Meanwhile, Argentina is installing its fifth president in two weeks, Australia is ablaze from the work of juvenile arsonists, India and Pakistan are hurling threats of nuclear exchange, and Osama Bin Laden may be dead or may be alive. Closer to home, Buffalo rhymes with “seven foot snow.” The clock on the mantel ticks now as the gloom of one of the shortest days of the year intrudes into

the feeble, cold light of early afternoon. The needles of the recently fresh, daily-watered tree continue to pile up on the floor. On average, my pastoral colleagues and I have this year—as in most years—made the journey to the cemetery at least every two or three weeks with people we know and love. Between Easters is when Easter is needed the most.

On Easter morning in the worship of many congregations there is the Marcionite practice of excising the texts of the Old Testament. This may be understandable in that the resurrection of Jesus is the uniquely powerful and unexpectedly gracious gift of God to humanity and creation and the Church; but the Jesus who is raised was a Jew who bore testimony to the covenant of God with Noah, with Abraham and Sarah, with David, with the prophets—that is, with more than five millennia of worshipping, faltering, seeking and hoping, despairing and longing, cursing and praying, birthing and dying members of a particular community. The Psalms are integral to Easter; “alleluia” is a Psalm word, a Hebrew word. In his wise preface to *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today*, Samuel Terrien observed:

The Hebrew Psalms were the liturgical food of the inner life of Jesus. He was born and reared to their strains. As a Jewish boy in a pious home, he probably learned them by heart at his mother’s knee. When he was baptized as a man conscious of his solidarity with the human race, it was a psalm, according to the Gospels, which crystallized in his mind the goal and scope of his mission; and when he hung on a cross, in his naked solitude and destitution, preyed upon by physical and spiritual torture, it was a psalm which his voice uttered, and it was with a psalm that he gave up the ghost.¹

J. Clinton McCann, Jr., in his introduction to Psalms in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, states the case well:

The book of Psalms presents nothing short of God’s claim upon the whole world and that it articulates God’s will for justice, righteousness, and peace among all peoples and all nations...I consciously and constantly hold side by side the psalms and the New Testament. A careful reading of each reveals that the psalms anticipate Jesus’ bold claim upon the whole world (“the kingdom of God has come near”—Mark 1:15) and that Jesus embodied the psalter’s articulation of God’s will for justice, righteousness, and peace among all peoples and all nations.²

McCann concludes, “The eschatological perspective of the psalter—the proclamation of God’s reign amid persistent opposition—reinforces the conclusion that God’s power is essentially that of pure, unbounded love. God’s life, too, consists of suffering servanthood.”³ McCann notes that Paul, the apostle of resurrection, advises the Colossians and Ephesians to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God,” and that “the Gospel writers cannot tell the story of Jesus without frequently referring or alluding to a psalm.”⁴

Preaching and singing the Psalter at Easter especially will convey both the continuity of God's covenant and the surprises and assurances in store for those who live with faith in that promise. Additionally and not insignificantly, the Psalms may free contemporary congregations from the shallow and insipid vacuities of what passes for "praise music" in the church. In his often-overlooked little book, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested that

If we want to read and pray the prayers of the Bible and especially the Psalms, therefore, we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ. We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and then we shall be able to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. If we were dependent entirely on ourselves, we would probably pray only the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.⁵

In 1984 Walter Brueggemann began his clear and provocative *The Message of The Psalms* with a quotation from the novelist John Updike's character, Rabbit Angstrom: "Laugh at ministers all you want, they have the words we need to hear, the ones the dead have spoken."⁶ It is not insignificant that many of those words we need to hear may be found in the lectionary for the season of Easter, which includes the following Psalms: 118, 16, 116, 23, 31, 66, and 68. For reasons of brevity, the remainder of this article will consider Psalm 118 and Psalm 23.

Psalm 118

Psalms 113-118 are collectively known as "the great hallel" or the "Egyptian hallel." As a body and individually, these songs were sung at the new year festival of Tabernacles and at Passover. They were used in households and also in the Temple. James L. Mays summarizes their content and significance:

The cycle begins with Psalm 113 and its praise of the Lord as the God who reverses the fixed arrangements of human affairs by lifting up the lowly, needy, and helpless. Psalm 114 tells the story of the exodus as the manifestation of the Lord's rule in the world. Psalm 115 contrasts the Lord as Israel's help to the nations and their gods. Psalm 116 thanks the Lord for deliverance from death, and Psalm 117 calls on all the nations to praise the Lord. Every one of the first five psalms in the cycles anticipates themes and motifs of Psalm 118. The cycle and the occasion provide a combined literary and liturgical context for understanding the psalm as Israel's thanksgiving for the steadfast love of the Lord shown in their deliverance from death...The prophets had announced the death of Israel as the Lord's judgment (e.g., Amos 5:2; Hos. 13:1; Ezek. 18:31). But the Lord did not give Israel over to death. At every festival they

can praise the steadfast love of the Lord in the faith that “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord”(v. 17). In trust that the Lord’s steadfast love is indeed everlasting, they can pray, “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord” (v. 25) and so commit their future to the Lord’s salvation.⁷

A consideration of Psalms 113-118 would be worthwhile in confirmation classes, study groups, officer training courses, interfaith dialogues, and in a sermon series for Lent and Easter, for here as Martin Luther so acutely observed, is the Gospel in summary. Luther called Psalm 118 “my own beloved psalm,”⁸ and believed that it must be a favorite of the saints in heaven. More importantly, the Gospels relate the Last Supper as a Passover meal. Both Mark (14: 26) and Matthew (26: 30) conclude the supper with a verse so often unnoticed: “And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” The hymn, of course, would have been the “great hallel,” and thus Psalm 118 was the final one Jesus sang with his disciples. This psalm thus takes on a prescient power and poignancy for the preacher.

J. Clinton McCann rightly observes that there is an open-endedness to Psalm 118 that is particularly significant for times of exile, oppression, and distress.⁹ Faith is not the same as certitude, particularly for those who soon or at least inevitably face death. And yet, in the life of the believing community, even death can be bracketed with the beginning and ending verses of Psalm 118: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!” As Luther put it in his hymn, “The body they may kill; God’s truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever.”

Historically and possibly even today, the Church has abided through this confidence that in going to the cross and grave, Jesus bears witness to God’s often hidden yet strong presence in every exile, and the resurrection is the liberation and exodus from every captivity to powers, sin, and death. As noted by both Mays and McCann, all four Gospels employ Psalm 118:25 in the narrative of Jesus’ processing into Jerusalem—he is the blessed one who enters in the name of the Lord. Mark 12:10 and Acts 4:11 (Peter’s sermon in Jerusalem) proclaim Psalm 118:22, that Jesus is the stone which the builders rejected, now become the cornerstone. And verse 24 of Psalm 118 is often used as a call to worship, reminding the Church that each Sunday is a day of resurrection, a “day on which the Lord has acted,” a day, the Day which only God can make.

I recall two particular instances when Psalm 118:24 came alive unexpectedly. Some years ago I officiated at a wedding in Atlanta for a bride who was a weather forecaster on a local television station. As is my habit, I began the service with this verse. Later on, at the reception, Johnny Beckman, one of the deans of Atlanta meteorology, bounded over and said, “I am so glad you used that verse. I think every marriage and every life would be so much stronger if we took it to heart. Every day I begin with it. And many times every day people call me and they are worried about whether it will rain on their picnic or whether it will be too hot for an outing or too icy for a trip. Sometimes I quote this verse to them. We need to be about the Lord’s business and live in trust, and not be so hung up on the climate!”

More recently a member of the congregation I now serve shared that he, too, always begins the day with verse 24. He said he began September 11, 2001, with the verse. And at lunchtime he remembered thinking, “Did the Lord make this day

for so much death? And how can there still be rejoicing?” My friend continued (incidentally, this was on the eve of surgery for him): “I have to believe the Lord did make this day, too. People messed it up horribly. Still, God acted somehow in the midst of terror, to bring life out of death. And we may indeed rejoice in that, even when everything seems to be at risk of being lost.” Faith is not the same as certitude, especially when there is death; resurrection was and is a profound surprise—totally unexpected, unwarranted, and unbelievably good news.

The continuity with the covenant with Israel, the context of Passover/Last Supper, and the applicability both to worship and existential situations, remind us that Easter and the Psalms are not so much private and personal, but essentially public and corporate celebrations. Some, perhaps many, people may be in worship during Easter of 2002 with both deep grief and faint hopes. It will be important (maybe a matter of life and death) for them to hear and to trust that Jesus did not die just to collect the souls of individual butterflies, but to redeem creation and humanity from false confidence in princes and from the prison of the confined cocooned self. It is by singing and enacting together many “hallels,” many countless Hallelujahs, that the Church “shall not die, but live”(Psalm 118: 17).

Eugene Peterson eloquently conveys that

Left to ourselves, we are never more selfish than when we pray. With God as the Great Sympathizer, the Great Giver, the Great Promiser, we go to our knees and indulge every impulse for gratification. But the Psalms that teach us to pray never leave us to ourselves; they embed all our prayers in liturgy. Liturgy defends us against the commonest diseases of prayer: the tyranny of our emotions, the isolationism of our pride. Liturgy pulls our prayers out of the tiresome business of looking after ourselves and into the exhilarating enterprise of seeing and participating in what God is doing. We are drawn into a large generosity where everyone is getting and receiving, offering and praising. We are drawn to the place where people are being loved and where they love us. We are deepened into the practice of humanity in covenant with God that goes both beneath and beyond our self-defined religious desire. We are put beside people who help us and whom we can help. Liturgy breaks us out of the isolation of ego and emotion where we are cut off from the large winds and landscapes of grace. God wants us outside the walls that quarantine us in our ego-sickness...¹⁰

The southern poet and Methodist preacher Harold Lawrence recounts a true story from Middle Georgia in 1933, which despite the offensiveness of its central character, conveys the resurrection work and witness of neighbors to someone in need. In “The Depression Pig,” farmer Bartow Barron’s Duroc hog falls into an abandoned dry well. Barron searched everywhere in vain for the missing animal:

until he gave it up for lost
or hidden in a wrinkle of the night.

It was two weeks to the day
when he went over to the well again
on his ragged knees for one last desperate look
and staring at him from a gray-lit spot
through two narrow pits of gristle
were the sunk-back beady eyes
of that skinny thin-railed pig
shining like diamonds on a withered hand.

He threw down scraps and turnip tops
and lowered water in a foot-tub
while he studied how to save it
looking deep into the fire that night
after banking up the coals
and still seeing them through closed eyes
under cold covers
before stumbling upon the lame notion
of filling up the well with dirt
a shovel-full at the time
to raise the bottom to the top.

For the next twelve days
with sweat-stained clothes and blistered hands
he ditched and shoveled willfully
showering down on the protesting pig
and scarring the place with pot-holes
making such vain attempts
he would have given it up
had neighbors not pitched in with him
bending backs and scraping rocks
and hauling fill dirt from all sides

Before that afternoon slipped quickly out
and the fall chill snapped the air
and crept along their sleeves and collars
tawny arms reached down and grabbed
mole-soft ears and upper joints
of an idea they had ridiculed
and with winks to that larger eye
that watches over its own
walked out Bartow Barron's winter meat.¹¹

Of Psalm 23 James Mays says:

The trust expressed is not just a matter of mood. Strength must be found, a way must be walked, harm and evil threatened. Enemies persist. That is the environment of trust. Trust is not a rosy, romantic, optimistic view of things. Its foundations are prayer and thanksgiving and the story of salvation. "There is a great difference between this sleep of stupidity and the repose which faith produces" (Calvin, 1:395)...The earliest Christians said, "The Lord is my shepherd and understood Lord to be also the title of Jesus...Jesus, as the shepherd in David's place, is the one who restores our souls, leads us in the paths of righteousness, accompanies us through danger, spreads the holy supper before us in the presence of sin and death, and pursues us in his gracious love all the days of our lives."¹²

Fragments of an Easter Sermon on Psalm 23

Quite naturally we link Psalm 23 to crisis and death. In fact, in the book of Psalms, this most familiar psalm comes just after the psalm that Jesus prayed from the cross: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" The psalms are for both extraordinary and ordinary situations. Wherever our souls have ventured, willingly or unwillingly, over the past year, we have not been far from the psalms. In loneliness we long for companionship; in fatigue we seek refreshment; in error we need correction; in terror we gasp, struggle to breathe, and reach for reassurance; in challenges we hope for courage; and every evening and morning our transitoriness speeds toward an eternal home.¹³

All the days of our lives we are pursued by enemies imagined and all too real. And to one another we often say, "Take care." By this we mean to encourage the well-being and peace of a friend or family member, to remind however gently that the road is rutted and rocky and there are perils in carelessness. Take care. Be filled with care.

There is also another meaning of those two words. To take care is to *receive* care, as one would take a vitamin or medicine. This psalm is God's saying to us, "Take care, because I love you. Whatever else you may be, you are loved. Receive what you need most, what you cannot do without, from me." In his commentary on this psalm, John Calvin said, "God, in the Scripture, frequently takes to himself the name, and puts on the character of a shepherd, and this is no mean token of his tender love towards us. As this is a lowly and homely manner of speaking, he who does not disdain to stoop so low for our sake must bear a singularly strong affection towards us."¹⁴

One of the most significant things about the Psalm 23 is its realism. No matter how much we may try to sentimentalize it, here the enemies are real. The shadow of Death does not disappear with some magic wizardry or fade with the sunrise. The valley is part of the landscape of every person's journey and of our life together. Remember that tradition says that David was the author of this psalm. During his youth, David battled a giant; he was a musician, and even became king, but he

was also an adulterer and a fugitive. Though a spiritual leader, he seemed at times to be utterly bereft of vision. Though a loving parent, he was not spared the rebellion of his son, Absalom: "O Absalom, would that I had died instead of you!" Though he gained wealth and prominence, there were times when he felt like a homeless, motherless child. David needed to take care, in both senses of meaning, more often than he did.

Psalm 23 affirms that the one sustaining truth is the guiding, welcoming presence of God. Without that presence, the valley of the shadow is a place from which there is no return. "The Lord is my shepherd," David prayed and sang, bleating perhaps like a sheep, often defenseless, prone to wander, not the brightest of creatures. "I shall want nothing." Whatever else I have wanted (and it has been a lot! And more than I could handle!) I want the presence of God above and beyond these things. Throughout his lifetime, David came to know about being pursued by his enemies—Goliath, the raving and depressed Saul, those from his own household—by his own shadow side. So often it seemed that David was never more than a few heartbeats from death, and he knew this. The only safe home, the only sanctuary, was the presence of God. When David went to worship he did so knowing that he was in the presence of other fugitives. This Easter morning we are here in that same awareness, with that same hope.

Recently I read again Fred Buechner's memoir, *The Longing for Home*. In it Buechner describes his relationship with his grandmother. His own father had committed suicide, and Buechner found sanctuary in his grandmother's house. "What was there about that house that made it home in a way that all the other houses of my childhood never even came close to being? The permanence of it was part of the answer—the sense I had that whereas the other houses came and went, this one was there always and would go on being there for as far into the future as I could imagine." As the temple was for David, as Buechner's grandmother's house was for him, so is this place of worship a sanctuary for you and for me. It is here always, and all are welcome. Buechner continued, "Beauty was another part of the answer, beauty that I took in through my pores almost before I so much as knew the word beauty—the paintings and books and green lawns, the thunder of water falling in a long, silver braid from the gooseneck spigot into the pantry sink, the lighting of lamps with their fringed shades at dusk..."¹⁵

Not long ago many of us gathered at the cemetery for the burial of one of our city's greatest physicians, a servant leader, a father figure to hundreds if not thousands. He knew the Psalm 23 by heart, and often would whistle Crimond or even "He Leadeth Me" in the halls of the hospital as he visited patients, not all of whom were part of his own caseload. He had vast personal experience in the valley of the shadow, through his own son's death, and through more than a decade of struggling against the illness that finally exhausted his body. The more closely dusk descended upon him and his family, the more he trusted the Shepherd to bring "peace at the last" and to be present. With Abraham and Sarah and David and Isaiah and Mary and the shepherds and Martin Luther and Bonhoeffer and so many, many other saints, he did fear not, though sometimes he did weep. And when we gathered at the grave, his young granddaughter sat in the lap of her grandmother, next to her parents, and we all, through our tears, prayed, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." At that

moment Psalm 23 was no memory verse, no sentimental offering or glib expression of things working out, but a plea and a reaching and a touching and a being touched, a fulfillment of a life and a witness and a gift of whatever we mean when we muster and stammer the word “eternal.” Psalm 23 was the most familiar, the most surprising, the most important prayer in the world, there, then. And whether you knew it or not, all of you were there, too, praying in the cemetery as part of the innumerable communion of saints.

So, here we are, even on Easter morning, very much in need of tender care. Before us a table is set. Behind us just outside, in pursuit, are regret, fear, grief, illness, anger, guilt, anxiety, and Death. But behind Death and Death’s courtiers, and before us on the table, is another Presence, at the end of the day more powerful and so much more hospitable! The usual translation of Psalm 23 is that “goodness and mercy shall follow” us all the days of our lives; but more profoundly and urgently, the actual Hebrew means “pursue.”¹⁶ Easter is more than being tailed or watched from a distance, more than being under surveillance; Easter is being chased after, being pursued by One with energy to guide and strength to save, pursued by One reaching to embrace and to feed. The Good Shepherd is pursuing you, even where you would never expect Him, even where you would not choose to go.

Come, not because you are strong, but because you are weak. Come not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come, but because you need mercy and help. Come, because you love the Lord a little and would like to love him more. Come, because he loved you and gave himself for you. Lift up your hearts and minds above your cares and fears and let this bread and wine be to you the token and pledge of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, all meant for you if you will receive them in humble faith. I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the Lord...¹⁷

Notes

¹ Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), ii.

² J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Vol. IV* ed. Leander E. Keck, Thomas G. Long, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 641-642.

³ McCann, 670.

⁴ McCann, 672 ff.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), 14-15.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 14.

⁷ James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 378. See also the commentary on each Psalm 113-118. Dr. Mays provides another thorough treatment of Psalm 118 in *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 136-145.

⁸ McCann, 1156.

⁹ McCann, 1155. See also Mays’ treatments cited in note 7.

¹⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 91-92.

¹¹ Harold Lawrence, *Southland and Other Poems of the South* (Atlanta: Cherokee, 1992), 11-12. For the gift of this volume I am grateful to Mrs. Delrey P. Humphreys, an elder of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Tucker, Georgia, who like my own ancestors, grew up near Bartow Barron’s farm in Washington County, Georgia.

¹² Mays, *Psalms*, 119.

¹³ Erik Routley, *Exploring the Psalms* (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1975), 117.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Heart Aflame: Daily Readings from Calvin on the Psalms*, with a foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing Company, 1999), 73.

¹⁵ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 11.

¹⁶ Mays, *Psalms*, 118. Also McCann, 768-769.

¹⁷ From a communion liturgy printed in *Worship Now*, vol. 1 (Iona Community, Church of Scotland), mimeographed copy from 1970's.

Additional resources used in preparation for this essay include Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) and two volumes by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) and *They Cried Unto the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).