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Psalm 2, Psalm 8, Psalm 17, Psalm 23, Psalm 90, and Psalm 100.

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The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse —
who can understand it?

Jeremiah's voice thus indicates that the matter of the two ways is, at some level — perhaps at the *ultimate* level — a *matter of the heart.*

Brent A. Strawn

Psalm 2

Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Transfiguration, Year A
First Lesson: Exodus 24:12, 15-18
(Psalm 2)
Second Lesson: 2 Peter 1:16-21
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 17:1-9

Together with Psalm 1, Psalm 2 forms a two-part introduction to the Psalter (see the essay on Ps 1). In terms of genre, Psalm 2 is a *royal liturgy* (see the introductory essay); it was most likely used originally in Jerusalem as part of a ceremony involving the Judean king. When it was placed at the start of the Psalter, of course, the Judean monarchy had been reduced to a distant memory — yet it was also a lingering hope. And that is one of the points that Psalm 2 makes as a co-introduction to the Psalter: hope in God's promise to act once again through David's seed! As J. Clinton McCann has noted, "Psalm 2 is really more about the reign of God than about the Davidic monarchy." According to McCann, in the final form of the Psalter the royal psalms function eschatologically. They affirm "that God's rule is effective *now* and will ultimately be manifest."[1] The psalm's reference to God's "anointed" (Hebrew *māšîaḥ*) may also be evidence of an early brand of messianic hope. For its part, the New Testament certainly interpreted the psalm in a messianic way (cf. Heb 1:5).

The psalm consists of four stanzas, which have an *abb′a′* structure:

1. J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 42, 45.

Stanza 1	*a*	The "kings of the earth" speak rebelliously.
Stanza 2	*b*	The divine King enthroned in heaven laughs.
Stanza 3	*b′*	The Davidic king enthroned in Zion reports God's speech.
Stanza 4	*a′*	The "kings" are warned to serve God.

Each of the first three stanzas ends with a quotation, in which a different voice speaks from a different location. One main theme of the psalm is kingship. A second theme is the idea of "speech," as the many references to discourse suggest: "rage" (Hebrew √*rgš* implies speaking), "murmur," "laugh," "mock," "speak," "tell," "say," and "ask." All the action of the psalm takes place in the act of speaking — the kings of the earth rebel by speaking, God responds by speaking, God's anointed king announces God's speech, and in the end, the kings of the earth are warned to be speechless and serve God.

Stanza 1. The psalm opens with a rhetorical question that indicates amazement and puzzlement that the nations would seek to rebel. Then follows a lengthy indicative "answer" (vv. 2-9) to this "question," which provides the reason why rebellion against God is a fruitless and hazardous undertaking. It is worth repeating that the action in the first stanza — as in the rest of the poem — occurs solely in the act of the characters *speaking*. Here the kings and officials of the nations speak words of rebellion against the Lord. The poem deftly sets up the conflict between the "kings" and "rulers" (both plural) and "the LORD and his anointed" (both singular). If the struggle were merely a matter of numerical superiority, there would be little hope for those who trust in the Lord.

Stanza 2. The second stanza shifts the scene to heaven, and the speaker is now the heavenly king ("He who sits" in v. 4 is a technical term for "the one who is enthroned" — a phrase denoting God's kingship). The Lord responds to the rebellious speech of the nations' kings with a countering speech: "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." God's response to the rebellion of the nations is *to act in and through the Davidic king*. As noted above, the ancient editorial decision to make this "royal" response to evil part of the introduction to the Psalter most likely demands an eschatological interpretation to this verse.

Stanza 3. The speaker and location again shift in the third stanza. The last words of the second stanza indicate that the "I" who speaks in the third stanza is the Davidic king enthroned on Zion in Jerusalem. This king announces God's promise to him:

You are my son;
  today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
  and the ends of the earth your possession.

The Judean king was considered God's "son" (cf. 2 Sam 7:1-17). In terms of the psalm's plot of a rebellion of the "nations" and "kings of the earth," the surprise here is that the fate of the nations and the ends of the earth has already been determined: these entities have been promised to the Davidic king.

Stanza 4. The last stanza of the poem breaks the pattern to which the hearer/reader has grown accustomed. As expected, there is a new speaker, this time the same narrator who voiced the first stanza. But rather than the stanza ending with a quotation as did the first three stanzas, this one ends with a warning and with the rebellious nations remaining silent in renewed obedience to God. The Hebrew text of Psalm 2 is difficult (compare the translations of the NIV and NRSV), but the general sense is clear. Rather than continuing to speak words of rebellion, the leaders of the nations are to remain silent and to "kiss" either God's feet (so NRSV and others) or God's son (so NIV and others).[2] Note also that the closing admonition in verses 10-12 rounds off the rhetorical structure of the psalm: verse 1: question; verses 2-9: answer; verses 10-12: admonition.

The Lord's response in Psalm 2 to human rebellion is noteworthy in two ways. On the one hand, it is a response of "derision," "wrath," and "fury." Modern readers often stumble over the concept of God's wrath. But God's wrath is merely the flip side of God's love. God, who loves the creation, sees sin and evil being done and responds in anger. A God who cannot get angry at sin and evil is an uncompassionate and distant God — not the sort of God who risks all to become incarnate in a human being. In a world in which the reign of God is disputed by many forces bent on rebellion, with those forces inevitably bringing about evil due to that rebellion, there is good news in the announcement that God does not greet the suffering caused by such rebellion with indifference. Psalm 2 confesses that while God's reign is contested, the ultimate outcome is beyond doubt.

On the other hand, God's response is not to take vengeance via an

2. For a discussion of the textual problem, see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Waco: Word, 1983), 64.

"act of God" — God is not in the fire, the wind, or the earthquake (cf. 1 Kings 19:11-12) — rather, God responds through the Davidic king. As noted above, Psalm 2 is a royal psalm, one of those psalms that originally had to do with Jerusalem's kings. A historical explanation for this psalm must reckon with the reality that the psalm originally had to do with God's actions in and through the Davidic king. But in its canonical setting the psalm demands a theological explanation. According to the theological vision of the Old Testament, one factor that contributed to the failure of the monarchy was that Israel's kings never lived up to God's ideals. Yet Israel's prophets had consistently promised the advent of a Davidic king who would fulfill those ideals and reign as the ideal Davidic king (cf., e.g., Isa 11). Psalm 2 is assigned by the lectionary for use on Transfiguration Sunday, immediately before Lent. At the transfiguration, as well as in the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is identified as that promised ideal king. In the context of the end of Epiphany and the start of Lent, Psalm 2 announces that a rebellion that seeks to achieve independence from God is not a "way" that will find genuine freedom. Instead, such a rebellion is the "way" to bondage. Genuine freedom is found in a living relationship with the Lord who has promised to act through Israel's king, the Lord who became a human being and walked the lonely valley to the cross. In the words of the Fourth Gospel, "If the son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Rolf A. Jacobson

Psalm 4

Third Sunday of Easter, Year B

First Lesson: Acts 3:12-19
(Psalm 4)
Second Lesson: 1 John 3:1-7
Gospel Lesson: Luke 24:36b-48

Psalm 4 appears only once in the Revised Common Lectionary, as a response to Acts 3:12-19, a speech given by Peter to unbelievers who were astonished that he and John had just healed a lame man. "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob . . . has glorified his ser-

Psalm 8

Trinity Sunday, Year A
First Lesson: Genesis 1:1–2:4a
(Psalm 8)
Second Lesson: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 28:16-20

Trinity Sunday, Year C
First Lesson: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
(Psalm 8)
Second Lesson: Romans 5:1-5
Gospel Lesson: John 16:12-15

When measured according to its form, Psalm 8 is usually described as *a hymn* (see introductory essay). In fact, it is the first hymn in the Psalter, although it is a slightly odd hymn. Most hymns open with a characteristic *call to praise* such as "Praise the Lord!" or "Bless the Lord!" (often repeated at the end of the psalm), followed by *reasons for praise,* usually introduced by "for" (Hebrew *ki*). Psalm 8, however, begins and ends not with a call to praise but with an exclamation of praise. That is, rather than speaking to other humans, summoning them to the praise of God, this psalm starts by speaking words of praise *directly to God.* In fact, the characteristic call to praise is entirely missing from Psalm 8; it is doxology rather than exhortation. Thus, Psalm 8 is in many ways the counterpart to Psalm 150, a praise psalm that is pure exhortation (see the essay on Ps 150).

When measured according to its content, Psalm 8 is usually described as a creation psalm[1] because it praises the Lord for the work of creation: the earth, heavens, moon, stars, sheep, oxen, birds, fish, and of course, humanity. Like other creation texts, this psalm is a theological witness to *the faithfulness of God.* God is praised not primarily for the aesthetic beauty of the world, but for the fidelity God shows in creating and continuing to maintain creation.

The psalm has a concentric structure that is built around the question of verse 4:

1. See Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 93-96; see also Pss 19; 104; 139; and 148.

v. 1a Praise Sentence ("How majestic . . .").
  vv. 1b-3 The splendor of God's "glory" in creation.
    v. 4 Question: What is humanity that you care for it?
  vv. 5-8 Answer: God has crowned humanity with responsibility.
v. 9 Praise Sentence ("How majestic . . .").

James Limburg has called this a psalm for "stargazers."[2] This is an apt characterization, for the psalm is not a portrait of God or humanity but a landscape that portrays God, humanity, and nature – painting all three in a vast panoramic sweep. The psalmist, the modern reader may imagine, has wandered into nature on a starry, starry night and come face-to-face with God's "glory" in nature (vv. 1b-3). (Many of us have had a similar experience, realizing how small and insignificant we are when measured against the scale of time and nature.) And having come face-to-face with God's glory, the psalmist has further wandered into a question: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" This essentially existential question is the spine of the psalm. The NRSV's decision to pluralize the Hebrew terms *'ĕnôš* (literally, "a man") and *ben 'ādām* (literally, "a son of man") for the sake of inclusive language is legitimate, because the psalmist is not asking only about his or her own purpose, but about the worth and purpose of the entire human race.

But if the question of verse 4 is the spine of the psalm, the theological answer provided in verses 5-8 is the *beating heart* of the psalm. The answer is as profoundly *theological* as the question is *existential* (there is no gap between the two categories here!). And the answer is surprising. Within the whole witness of Scripture, there are many answers to the questions, "What are we that God cares for us?" and "How do we know God cares for us?" In the Gospel of John, for example, we know that God cares for us because the only Son died for us (John 3:16). In the book of Deuteronomy, we know that God cares for us because God has given us just laws (Deut 4:7-8). In Psalm 139, we know that God cares for us because we are so lovingly created (Ps 139:13-18). But here in Psalm 8, we know that God cares for us and that we have worth *because God has given us responsibility for other parts of God's creation!*

The psalm says, literally, "You made him [us] to rule over the work of

2. James Limburg, *Psalms,* Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 24.

Fig. 1. Psalm 8 speaks of the dominion of humans over the animal world (vv. 6-8). This image shows that such dominion should not be interpreted in reckless, cavalier fashion. Instead, as the conjunction of Genesis 2 with Genesis 1 reveals, human rule over the animal world (Gen 1:26, 28) is to be marked by protection (√*šmr*) and service (√*ʿbd*) of the earth (Gen 2:15; cf. v. 5). This image shows an anthropomorphic figure (probably a deity) "ruling" the deer (the foot placement signifies subjugation; see figs. 11-12), but in order to protect it from the leonine monster (probably a demon of some sort).

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your hands, all things you have set under his [our] feet" (v. 6). The concept of "rule" or "dominion" (the causative [hiphil] verb form of √*mšl*) is borrowed by the psalmist from the realm of royalty. Kings were given responsibility and authority to go with that responsibility, but the authority (or dominion) was not to be misused or abused. It was to be used *for the care* of those governed (see Pss 72 and 74). Psalm 8 pictures all of humanity as the kings and queens of creation, bestowed with special divinely given gifts, which we are to use for the care and keeping of creation (cf. Gen 1:26-28; 2:15; see also fig. 1).

This is both a surprising and remarkable answer to the question, "What are we that God should care about us?" The answer, in effect, says that God not only cares about us, but also has a job for us to do — one befitting a king, no less! Every child in the process of growing up can relate to this answer. Children want to help their parents; they do not want to be taken care of forever. Children grow in part through responsibility; they do not grow if they are forever the objects of parental sheltering. I think of the special joy my own daughter takes when she brings her

mother a piece of cake and says, "I helped Daddy make it!" In that moment, you can feel the self-worth dripping off her proud words. That is the message of Psalm 8: God not only knows who I am, God has given me a part in baking the cake that is God's kingdom.

A few words about how Psalm 8 fits in the lectionary. Psalm 8 is the assigned psalm twice, with both occasions falling on Trinity Sunday. The context in Year A is especially apt for the preaching of Psalm 8, since the Gospel that day is the Great Commission from Matthew 28. The two texts fit well together, since both speak of the responsibility bestowed upon believers by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Redeemed free of charge by the love of Christ, we are called to serve as evangelists, teachers, and caretakers of God's creation.

Rolf A. Jacobson

Psalm 9

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

First Lesson: 1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49
(Psalm 9:9-20)
Second Lesson: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Gospel Lesson: Mark 4:35-41

For a number of reasons, it appears that Psalms 9 and 10 were originally one psalm and should therefore be considered together. First, there is no heading for Psalm 10; note the heading for Psalm 9, "To the leader . . ." That Psalm 10 would lack a superscription is unusual, since, after the introductory Psalms 1–2, every psalm in Book I (Pss 1–41) except for Psalm 33 begins with a heading. Second, the two psalms appear as one in early Greek and Latin translations. Third, certain expressions occur only in these two psalms (for example, "times of trouble" in 9:9 and 10:1). Fourth and most important, the two psalms taken together are built on an acrostic pattern, with every other line beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (though a few letters are left out or out of order). A number of psalms exhibit this acrostic pattern, which serves, among other things, as a structuring device (see Pss 25; 34; 111; 112; 119; 145; cf. Prov 31:10-31).

PSALM 17

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
First Lesson: Genesis 32:22-31
(Psalm 17:1-7, 15)
Second Lesson: Romans 9:1-5
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 14:13-21

Psalm 17 is the prayer of an individual who has been persecuted by some oppressors. Some scholars have concluded that the oppressors made false accusations against the petitioner, based on language in verse 1 that the psalmist has a "just cause" and in verse 10 that may indicate that the psalmist has been the target of false witnesses ("with their mouths they speak arrogantly"). This life setting for the psalm must remain hypothetical, however, because the language is stereotypical in the Psalms and may simply indicate a more general situation of oppression.

The psalm's structure and logic are straightforward, containing three stanzas, each opening with a request or requests followed by a passage that supports them in some way.

- vv. 1-5 First stanza
  - vv. 1-2 Opening petition to be heard
  - vv. 3-5 Supporting assertion of innocence
- vv. 6-12 Second stanza
  - vv. 6-8 Petition to be heard and protected
  - vv. 9-12 Supporting description of the oppressors
- vv. 13-15 Third stanza
  - vv. 13-14 Petition to be saved and have oppressors defeated
  - v. 15 Supporting statement of trust

The first stanza focuses almost entirely on the psalmist, who asks for the prayer to be heard and asserts innocence. The second stanza focuses almost entirely on the oppressors, emphasizing their violence. The third stanza brings these two foci together, as the psalmist asks for both deliverance for himself and judgment on his enemies. This psalmic logic has been cleanly summarized by Richard J. Clifford: "The psalmist is portrayed as utterly faithful to God, the mirror image of the lawless enemies.

It behooves God to act."[1] One should also note that Psalm 17 may have been placed after Psalms 15-16 because the psalmist's claim of righteousness echoes the concern in Psalm 15 that only the blameless may abide with God; likewise, the closing vow in Psalm 17 echoes Psalm 16's praise of the protection that is found in God's presence.

In the first section of the psalm, the pray-er asks for God to hear. There is a textual problem in verse 1. The Hebrew text reads simply "righteous" *(ṣedeq),* which makes no sense. In context, especially in the light of verses 3-5 in which the psalmist asserts blamelessness, verse 1 likely should be understood as "hear my just cause." The key to the psalmist's opening plea is this: the psalmist begs God to hear her prayerful words because those words come from "lips free of deceit" and because "my mouth does not transgress." One need not assert that the psalmist is claiming complete blamelessness about all of her life. Rather, the psalmist is asserting that in *this particular matter* for which she is being persecuted, she is blameless. As Clinton McCann has noted, "The psalmist's certainty of the rightness of his or her cause (vv. 1-2) and the protestation of innocence (vv. 3-5) seem problematic; they may suggest that the psalmist is proud or self-righteous. But . . . the psalmist asserts not sinlessness in general but rightness in a particular case involving false accusation by opponents. In this sense, Psalm 17, like Psalm 7, is reminiscent of the book of Job."[2]

In the second stanza the psalmist turns from personal innocence to the oppressors' guilt and violence. Again, the psalm may seem problematic because of the psalmist's plea that God "overthrow them" and his prayer to be delivered "by your sword" (v. 13). Especially problematic is the wish of verse 14b:

> May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them
> [i.e., the retribution];
> may their children have more than enough;
> may they leave something over to their little ones.

This so-called "double wish" in the Psalms — that God save the psalmist *and* punish the wicked — is difficult for us, particularly in the light of Christ's commands both to love our enemies and to pray for those who

1. Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1–72,* Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 101.

2. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *NIB,* 4:742.

persecute us. But, as Claus Westermann has noted, if "a righteous person dies in misery and a godless person triumphs . . . then that could not have been understood in those days in *any other way* than as a decision of God against the righteous and for the evildoer, and with that the foundation of Old Testament faith in God would have been really shattered." Therefore, "if God intervened for the righteous, this was at the same time an intervention against the enemies."[3] Today, there is still truth to such an insight. There are indeed innocent people who suffer at the hands of evildoers, and sometimes in these cases the only way to rescue the oppressed is to overthrow the wicked. But here is the catch: we need to remember that we are just as likely to be the guilty oppressors as we are the innocent sufferers. We do well to read this psalm as the psalm of someone who has suffered because of our sin, rather than identifying ourselves only and always with or as the innocent sufferer. Since so few of the wealthy in America suffer at another's hands, this may be the most faithful way for affluent North Americans to read Psalm 17 – as a psalm prayed against us.

The psalm ends with a declaration of faith. In this confession the psalmist reverses the vocabulary that had begun the psalm in verse 1. "Hear my *righteous* plea" and "may your eyes *see* what is right" have become "in *righteousness* I will *see* your face." Thus, the psalm ends with the pray-er expressing confidence and trust in the grace of God. Rather than enemies dominating the psalmist's vision, the psalmist closes with an image of her eyes fixed firmly on God.[4] The language of verse 15 suggests that the psalmist may have spent the night in the temple awaiting God's response. For the modern reader, the ending of the psalm promises that those who lay themselves down to sleep can trust in the care of the Savior.

The psalm is assigned for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A. The text's relevance for this day lies in two things. First, the psalm reminds us of the age-old problem of oppression and wickedness. The psalm insists that God is not distant from the suffering of the innocent and indeed that the covenantal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has something intimately at stake when people suffer. The psalm can be prayed today especially on behalf of those who suffer oppression at the hands of the wicked. The psalm reminds us that while there is no sinless-

3. Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 66.

4. See Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Waco: Word, 1983), 164-65.

ness in the world, there are those who suffer wrongly. Second, almost everyone has had trouble going to sleep or staying asleep when burdened by great troubles. Some verses in Scripture we recite not because they express what we already feel, but because in the act of reciting them, we come to feel what they express and be what they say. Psalm 17 closes with such a word of hope.

> As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
> when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness. (v. 15)

Rolf A. Jacobson

Psalm 19

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B
First Lesson: Exodus 20:1-7
(Psalm 19)
Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
Gospel Lesson: John 2:13-22

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
First Lesson: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
(Psalm 19)
Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Gospel Lesson: Luke 4:14-21

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
First Lesson: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
(Psalm 19)
Second Lesson: Philippians 3:4b-14
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 21:33-46

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
First Lesson: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
(Psalm 19:7-14)
Second Lesson: James 5:13-20
Gospel Lesson: Mark 9:38-50

tions, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born is a drama that still plays out following the Crucified's life and his praying of Psalm 22.[12] His praying shows that even our Lord found occasion to lament; that God can be present in lament and suffering (note especially the connection of suffering and divine things in Mark 8:31-38); and that lament can be answered, distance overcome, complaints matched with deliverance in an instant, in the space of a half-verse or the space of three days.

Brent A. Strawn

Psalm 23

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A
First Lesson: Acts 2:42-47
(Psalm 23)
Second Lesson: 1 Peter 2:19-25
Gospel Lesson: John 10:1-10

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
First Lesson: Acts 4:5-12
(Psalm 23)
Second Lesson: 1 John 3:16-24
Gospel Lesson: John 10:11-18

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C
First Lesson: Acts 9:36-43
(Psalm 23)
Second Lesson: Revelation 7:9-17
Gospel Lesson: John 10:22-30

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A
First Lesson: 1 Samuel 16:1-13
(Psalm 23)
Second Lesson: Ephesians 5:8-14
Gospel Lesson: John 9:1-41

12. Cf. McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 4:765-66; Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 108, 110.

Psalm 23 is probably the most well known and well loved of all the psalms. It is the classic *psalm of trust* (see introductory essay). The poem has become so woven into the fabric of American culture that it can appear in any genre of literature or any walk of life. In John Wayne's movie *Rooster Cogburn (. . . and the Lady)*, Katharine Hepburn bravely recites it in the face of danger. In Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*, a young girl weeps it as a lament over her dead puppy. The hip-hop artist Coolio samples the psalm in his famous song "Gangsta's Paradise." The psalm was carved into the waiting room of the hospital where this commentator was born. It is read at more funerals and gravesides than perhaps any other text. Deep familiarity with any text – including and perhaps especially this one – can insulate us from being touched by its eloquent message. To preach on such a foundational text is to run the risk of either trivializing the sublime, of turning the sermon into an autopsy on a beloved passage, or of trying to do too much to wring some new profundity from the text. But to preach on the psalm is also to give life to the dead, to put people in touch with the beating heart of the gospel, and to proclaim once again the very basis of the faith.

The rhetoric of the psalms of trust assumes that the psalmist has passed through a time of crisis or is perhaps in the midst of or about to enter such a crisis. But whether the crisis is past, present, or future, the crisis is not incidental to these psalms. Rather, *it is the crisis that generates the words of trust* (compare Pss 27:1-3; 46:1-7; 62:1-7; etc.). Thus, the genre teaches us that danger, evil, and crisis are *part of the life of faith.* In and through crises, faith is tempered and trust matures. These crises come in many forms – physical, emotional, financial, spiritual, social (this is especially true for the psalms), professional. Psalm 23 does not specify the exact crisis its author faced; rather, its metaphorical language can adapt to and speak to as wide a range of crises as there are people to pray the psalm.

The psalm mixes two metaphors for God's guidance in the midst of crisis: the shepherd (vv. 1-4) and the banquet host (vv. 5-6). Each metaphor is deeply rooted in the ancient context in which the Scriptures were incarnated. Each metaphor still speaks powerfully today to those of more recent times. The two images of God do not so much teach about the faithfulness of God as they do *bear* God's faithfulness to the one who prays the psalm. For those who pray the psalm still, it is not that we pray the psalm because it says what we mean; instead, we pray the psalm because *through saying it we come to mean and be what it says.*

Verses 1-4. The psalm launches immediately with its powerful, pri-

mary metaphor and promise: "The LORD is my shepherd." In the ancient Near East, the shepherd was a central image for the king (see Jer 23:1-4). Throughout the Old Testament this royal metaphor is used to portray God's protective and guiding grace. During the exile the great prophet drew on this metaphor to promise deliverance to a people in whom the flame of faith had just about died:

> He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
> he will gather the lambs in this arms,
> and carry them in his bosom,
> and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isa 40:11)

After the introduction the psalm continues to develop the shepherd metaphor, poetically portraying the caring and nurturing actions of God. Notice that immediately following the opening declaration the psalm begins with one phrase in which the psalmist is the subject of the verb followed by four phrases in which God is the subject of the verb and the psalmist is the object. The psalmist trusts that "I shall not want." A better translation would be "need" or "lack." The sense of the verb *ḥāsēr* in this case is that the psalmist will not lack for any basic need (cf. Neh 9:21: "Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they *lacked nothing*"). The reason the psalmist can confess such trust is that God is the author of his or her life, just as God is the subject of the verbs that follow: "He makes me lie down . . . he leads . . . he restores . . . he guides." All these actions describe things that the shepherd does for the sheep *because they cannot do them for themselves* — so it is with God and us! It should be noted that the phrase traditionally translated "paths of righteousness" is ambiguous — it can mean either that God leads in "safe paths" or that God leads in "moral paths" (see fig. 3). Both are possible, and the phrase is probably best interpreted as a double entendre — both meanings are present (this is poetry, one need not limit the sense of the language). All these actions God does "for his name's sake." The point is that God's actions are consistent with God's nature, especially as God has revealed that in the covenant with Israel, in which God's name plays a crucial role (see Exod 3:13-22; 20:2, 7).

The confession in verse 4 that "you are with me" is the linguistic center of the psalm,[1] and more importantly its theological center. As Pat-

1. See James Limburg, *Psalms,* Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 74.

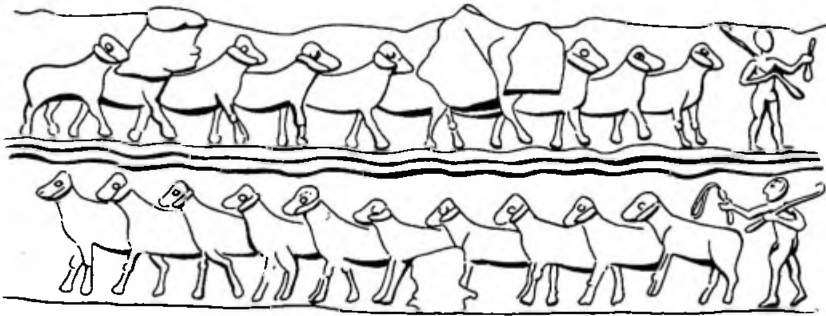

Fig. 3. The language used in Psalm 23:3 for "right paths" *(mā'gĕlê-ṣedeq)* may be related to the word for "calf" *('ēgel)*, "heifer" *('eglāh)*, and, similarly, "cart" *('ăgālāh)*, as drawn by animals of various sorts, especially oxen (2 Sam 6:3-6) — all of which are derived from the root *'gl* (see *HALOT*, 2:609, 784; BDB, 723). In this light, perhaps it is not going too far to suggest that the right paths are tracks beat down by the animals, wagons, and travelers that have gone before (cf. Ps 65:11). The image presented here suggests that such tracks would be well worn indeed, further underscoring the point that the way of the righteous is well traveled and clearly marked out (see Ps 1), not to mention led by a shepherd (Ps 23:1; see Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 229-30).

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rick D. Miller has aptly written, "The fourth verse of the psalm is the gospel kernel of the Old Testament, that good news that turns tears of anguish and fear into shouts of joy. . . . The psalmist has heard that word, probably in the midst of threat and danger, and life is now controlled by it."[2] In the poetry of the psalm, verse 4 is where the psalmist stops talking *about God* (as a third-person subject) and starts talking *to God* (as a second-person object). According to the psalm, the place where God turns from an "it" about which we memorize creedal statements into a "you" with whom we have a relationship and in whom we trust is "in the darkest valley." (It should be noted that the Hebrew word normally translated "shadow of death" is *ṣalmāwet*, which actually means "darkness"; Hebrew does not have any compound words, which was the understanding behind the traditional translation "shadow" [*ṣēl*] of "death" [*māwet*].)

Verses 5-6. The "you" language that suddenly appeared in verse 4 continues into the last part of the psalm. But the metaphor switches to God as banquet host: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Throughout the Psalms, the psalmists insist that social relation-

2. Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 115.

ships — with the poor, with the powerful, with persecutors and enemies — are a matter in which God is intimately involved. The table host as a metaphor for God's redeeming actions is important throughout Scripture (see Luke 14:7-14). The metaphor's power depends in part upon the cultural values of honor and shame (see Luke 14:8). In the context of Psalm 23, the image portrays the Lord as the one who honors the psalmist in front of those who wish him or her ill. Again, the point is that God does this for the psalmist, who cannot do it for herself. In the psalms, it is usually the enemies who "pursue" the psalmist to do harm or cause shame. Here God's "goodness and mercy" literally "pursue" the psalmist (the traditional translation "follow" is too weak a rendering for the Hebrew verb *rādap*). We do not merely receive or seek God's grace; at times it chases us down with the vigor and doggedness of a bloodhound.

In the context of the church year, Psalm 23 is heard each year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, often called "Good Shepherd Sunday." In this context the psalm is an echo of the alleluias of Easter Sunday. In each of the three lectionary years, the psalm is paired with a passage from John 10. In such a context the shepherd of the psalm is likely to be identified with Jesus, a fitting association. But the image of the banquet host can also be emphasized. The image still retains its power — for youth, for example, there are few times during the school day as threatening or as defined by the peer group as the lunch period. Young people can resonate with the promise of the Lord who offers them a place at the table. Any adult who has been similarly left alone or ostracized at the table can also sense the power of the promise.

The psalm is also assigned during Lent in Year A. The Gospel lesson for that Sunday is the lengthy narrative in John 9 of the man born blind. That story, like Psalm 23, is at least partially concerned with the work of God to welcome and honor those who have been shut out by the insiders. Similarly, in the context of the somber, penitential season of Lent, a verse that may be highlighted is verse 4:

> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
>   I fear no evil;
> for you are with me;
>   your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

Again, the connection with the story of Jesus is powerful. The promise of Immanuel, God with us, will ring out all the more clearly against the

backdrop of the narrative of Jesus moving toward his death in Jerusalem. The promise that God is with us precisely in the darkest valley is no different from the promise that God is with us in the dying Savior, tortured to death on the cross.

Rolf A. Jacobson

Psalm 24

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
First Lesson: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
(Psalm 24)
Second Lesson: Ephesians 1:3-14
Gospel Lesson: Mark 6:14-29

One message pervades Psalm 24: Yahweh conquers chaos. According to ancient Near Eastern mythology, the forces of chaos — often personified as the sea — constantly threaten the divinely established order. This psalm claims that Yahweh alone, the warrior-God of Israel, subdued the sea in the primordial battle at creation (vv. 1-2). This victory guaranteed God's continuing dominance whenever the forces of chaos threatened to overtake Israel. As the Lord repeatedly intervenes to reestablish order throughout Israel's history, Israel responds by worshiping him as the ruler of the world, the reigning King of Glory (vv. 7-10). Israel also participates in Yahweh's conquest. By committing themselves to the Lord's law (vv. 3-6), Israel helps maintain the order Yahweh founded.

The three clear sections of Psalm 24 constitute a liturgy for the procession of the ark of the covenant into Israel's central shrine, celebrating the Lord as the victorious heavenly king. The first section (vv. 1-2) describes Yahweh as creator and owner of the world. The second section (vv. 3-6) contains prescriptions for purity for those going up to worship God on Mount Zion. The third section (vv. 7-10) records an antiphonal liturgy accompanying the installation of the ark.

Since the power of God was centralized in the ark, the Israelites carried it on military campaigns to muster Yahweh's strength against their enemies (cf. 1 Sam 4:3). After a successful battle the ark was carried in a procession back to the temple in Jerusalem. God sat invisibly on the ark's

enters into our lives of faith. Even in the dark, we can continue to have a relationship with God, even if the story does not end happily ever after.

Beth LaNeel Tanner

Psalm 90

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
First Lesson: Deuteronomy 34:1-12
(Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17)
Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 22:34-46

Psalm 90 is the only psalm in the Psalter attributed to Moses. The reason for this attribution is most likely connected with the sagacious tone of the psalm or to the fact that Moses prayed for God to "turn" (see Exod 32:12 and Ps 90:13). *Time* is the governing poetic motif of this ancient prayer, which probes the transient nature of human life from the perspective of one who lives in the shadow of the eternal God. The "wisdom" that comes from this perspective of eternity is perhaps best exemplified in the psalm's famous middle verses:

> The days of our life are seventy years,
> or perhaps eighty, if we are strong. . . .
> So teach us to count our days
> that we may gain a wise heart. (vv. 10a, 12)

(Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which begins with "Fourscore and seven years ago," may contain an allusion at this point to the KJV of Psalm 90:10: "The days of our years *are* threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength *they be* fourscore years.")

In form the psalm is a *prayer.* That is significant because it shows that the psalm is not simply a philosophical meditation on human frailty and transience. Rather, it is a genuine prayer that begs for *divine wisdom* that we might live today in light of eternity, *divine mercy* that God might redeem our days on earth so that we may know joy (cf. Eph 5:15-20), and *divine blessing* upon the work of our hands.

The poem starts out with the metaphor of God as the community's eternal "dwelling place." The term "dwelling place" can refer to God's abode in the temple or in heaven (in fact, the temple was seen in the ancient world as the earthly microcosm of God's heavenly abode). The image communicates God's presence, God's eternal nature, and also God's gracious intentions — God's presence in the Old Testament is usually a sign of God's favor. But as the psalm indicates in verse 3, God's presence is a two-edged sword. God pronounces judgment on us: "Turn back [√*šwb*], you mortals." This divine sentence, which echoes Genesis 2:17, names God as the source of human mortality. Thus, the poem sets up a tension between God's eternal presence as gracious blessing and God's eternal presence as judging decree.

The poem continues its prayerful lamentation about the transience of human existence with references to those normal measures of time — the watches of the night, the rising and setting of the sun, the growing of plants. Just as the life of desert grass, which blooms and fades in a single day, seems short to humans, so human life is short in the sight of God. The average life span in the ancient world was actually under fifty years. By citing the measure of life as seventy or eighty years, the psalmist is saying that even comparatively long lives are short in comparison with eternity. And more shockingly, the psalmist sees in all life signs of God's wrath. Even long life, often seen as a sign of God's favor in the Old Testament, is the locus of God's wrath — length of days is merely an opportunity for "toil and trouble" (v. 10) and affliction (v. 15).

And yet the psalm is not merely a pessimistic lamentation about human frailty and divine wrath. It is also an earnest prayer for divine mercy and grace. Just as God had decreed that humans "turn" (√*šwb*) back to dust, the psalmist cries out to God to "turn" (√*šwb*) and show compassion (v. 13). Apparently, "to gain a wise heart" is to seek grace and mercy from God. It is not enough merely to recognize one's condition; one must also seek deliverance from the Lord. And the psalmist trusts that God can redeem even evil times, blessing the years with joy and prospering the work of human hands and hearts. The word translated "prosper" (√*kwn*) has the basic sense of "establish." Normally this word implies both divine action (it is God and God alone who can establish) and permanence: that which God establishes *lasts;* it transcends the fleeting nature of human life. Thus the psalm comes to a close on a note of trust in the gracious and powerful nature of God. God is able to overcome for us what we cannot overcome for ourselves. God can establish us and rescue us from our condition.

In the lectionary the psalm is paired with Deuteronomy 34, the account of the death of Moses, the Lord's greatest servant. The two fit well together: Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses, Moses is reported to have lived to the age of 120 while still vigorous and healthy, and Moses died "at the LORD's command" (Deut 34:5; cf. Ps 90:3); the people at that time were homeless and landless, but God was their dwelling place. But perhaps the most poignant connection between the two texts comes from the agency of God to which both texts bear witness. It was God, after all, not Moses, who delivered the people out of Egypt, and it was God who *established* them in the Promised Land. There is a promise here for all generations of God's faithful people. Home, it has been said, is the place that, when you go there, they have to take you in. God is our home. God still abides with us in all places, redeeming our time, blessing our lives with joy, prospering the work of our hands. As Isaac Watts wrote in his beloved paraphrase of Psalm 90:

> O God, our help in ages past,
> Our hope for years to come,
> Be Thou our guard while troubles last,
> And our eternal home.

Rolf A. Jacobson

PSALM 91

First Sunday in Lent, Year C

First Lesson: Deuteronomy 26:1-11
(Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16)
Second Lesson: Romans 10:8b-13
Gospel Lesson: Luke 4:1-13

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

First Lesson: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
(Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16)
Second Lesson: 1 Timothy 6:6-19
Gospel Lesson: Luke 16:19-31

The emphasis of the second refrain (vv. 4-5) is the justice and resulting societal order that this Great King has brought to Israel. In the ancient Near East a human king's word was law, and the only hope the socially marginalized person had was an equitable king who took the time to show compassion to people on the fringes. In their self-laudatory inscriptions, the ancient kings loved to portray themselves as defenders of the weak. For example, Sennacherib describes himself as "the guardian of the law, lover of justice, who lends support, who comes to the aid of the needy" (Taylor Prism, col. I:i-ix). But we know that these sorts of declarations rarely expressed reality. In contrast, *Yahweh's* word was law in Israel (see Ps 99:4). Even so, the weak still depended upon the human king to enforce that law. As a result, the Israelite kings are regularly praised or condemned for their attention (or lack thereof) to Yahweh's law, particularly as regards the socially marginalized — the widow and the orphan.

The third stanza of this psalm shifts to a review of Yahweh's acts of grace and kindness in the past, and various premonarchic heroes of the faith that exemplify a right relationship with him (vv. 6-9). As should all good preachers, the psalmist rehearses what Yahweh has done in the past to give her current generation confidence that Yahweh will continue to act similarly in the present. And, as with several of the other enthronement psalms, an emphasis on Moses and the wilderness era is visible here.

The last few verses of this psalm are difficult. Although many translators render the final phrase of verse 8 "and the one avenging their deeds," and take the verb from the root *nqm*, this is both an awkward syntactical construction and an awkward complement to the preceding line. To avenge *their* deeds communicates that it is Israel who has done wrong and that Yahweh must right those wrongs.[3] Mitchell Dahood's translation of this verse may be preferable. He understands the word in question to mean "to exempt them from punishment."[4] This interpreta-

3. See Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 35:19; Deut 32:40-43; Ps 79:10; P. King and L. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 38-39; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 10-12, 21-22; Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3-22, for the kinship-based concept of blood vengeance in Israel and Yahweh's role as Israel's divine patriarch and therefore blood redeemer *(gōʾēl)*.

4. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51–100*, AB 17 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 367; he reads the verb as √*nqh* with a pronominal suffix.

tion understands Yahweh to be one who "forgives" and "expiates" his people — a conceptually and poetically appropriate conclusion to the verse.

Thus, having recounted the Lord's faithfulness to Israel in the past, particularly in the era when they had no human king, the third stanza of this psalm concludes by exhorting Israel to prostrate themselves in acknowledgment of God's right to rule. "The mountain of his holiness" (v. 9) is of course Zion, the sacred space at the heart of the nation (even the heart of the world) where Yahweh chose to dwell among humanity. Although geographically Zion is not terribly impressive (the surrounding mountains are actually higher), because the Lord dwelt there, it was understood to be the center of the universe.[5] Moreover, for an ancient Israelite to speak of something as "holy" was to speak of it as set apart, unique, special; it was to define it as something (or someone) to which access must be mediated by purity and ritual. Zion's holy status issued from her royal resident. And it is this royal resident that the psalmist seeks to exalt before the world as she shouts for the last time: "for the LORD our God is holy!" (v. 9).

Sandra L. Richter

PSALM 100

Christ the King, Year A

First Lesson: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
(Psalm 100)
Second Lesson: Ephesians 1:15-23
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 25:31-46

Psalm 100 is a *hymn of praise* (see the introductory essay); in truth, it might be called *the* hymn of praise, because it is well known and loved and because it follows the form of the hymn of praise so precisely. It is familiar in English mostly due to the popularity of William Kethe's elegant metric paraphrase, "All People That on Earth Do Dwell." The basic form

5. See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985), 111-76.

of the hymn of praise is a "call to praise" followed by "reasons for praise." Those elements are clearly visible in Psalm 100:

vv. 1-3a	Call to praise
v. 3b	Reason for praise
v. 4	Call to praise
v. 5	Reason for praise

In the final arrangement of the Psalter, the hymn crowns a series of *enthronement psalms* (i.e., those psalms that celebrate the reign of the Lord [Hebrew *yhwh mālak*])[1] with a final paean of praise. Whereas those psalms emphasize that the Lord reigns over all peoples, nations, and lands (see Pss 95:3-4; 96:1-3; 97:1; 98:4; 99:1; etc.), Psalm 100 calls on "all the earth" to praise the Lord of Israel.

As almost all commentators note, the hymn's distinguishing mark is a sequence of seven imperative verbs: "make-a-joyful-noise," "worship," "come," "know," "enter," "give thanks," and "bless." The verb "know" (Hebrew *yāda'*) is of special significance (see below).

The hymn begins with a threefold call for the nations to join in exuberant worship of the Lord. In three parallel phrases the hymn emphasizes the sheer joy and abandonment with which the nations are called to enter into the Lord's presence. Then follows what is perhaps the key verse in the psalm: "Know that the LORD is God" (v. 3). The Hebrew is more emphatic than this traditional rendering indicates. It includes the third masculine singular pronoun "he" *(hû')*, and it might be better rendered: "Know that the LORD *alone* is God." This is a call to universal acknowledgment of the Lord's universal reign. Some modern readers may misinterpret the call to "know" as an intellectual or mental activity (as compared with the physical activities implied by the other six verbs). Such an approach fails to understand that the Hebrew word "know" does not allow any wedge to be driven between thought and deed. As is evident from the way the word "knowledge" is used in Hosea 4:1 and 4:6, to know is to act. In the context of Psalm 100, the word calls us to "internalize fully" our worship of the Lord — to have it seep and soak into every cell of who we are.

1. See the introductory essay and the essays on Pss 93; 95–99 in this volume; further, James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

The next clause suffers from a textual problem. It is alternatively translated "It is he who made us, and we are his" (so most modern versions, which follow the oral or read version of the Hebrew text [*Qere*] and the Aramaic Targum) or "It is he who made us, and not ourselves" (so KJV, following the written Hebrew text [*Kethib*] and the Septuagint). In spite of the better external witnesses favoring the latter option, the former translation is preferred because it fits the context better — because the assertion that "we made ourselves" is not characteristic of any ancient mind-set, and because "we are his" is better idiomatic Hebrew.[2] The important thing to note here is that the act of creation is the basis of the Lord's reign. The image of God as shepherd and the people as sheep is a traditional royal metaphor that reinforces the claim that the Lord *reigns* over all. Note that the image also implies the *ongoing* nature of God's care.

The psalm ends with another threefold call to worship the Lord and a second reason for doing so. This time the psalmist draws upon traditional liturgical language:

> For the LORD is good;
> his steadfast love [*ḥesed*] endures forever,
> and his faithfulness to all generations.

The traditional phrase confesses that the Lord is reliable, worthy of worship, and able to bear the burden of the faith we place in him.

In the lectionary cycle, the psalm is assigned for worship on Christ the King Sunday, traditionally the last Sunday of the Pentecost season, on which the universal and eternal reign of the triune God is celebrated. As should be clear, the psalm is a perfect choice for this setting, as both its content and its place in the Psalter indicate. The psalm confesses that the Lord reigns because of the once-upon-a-time act of creation and also because of the ongoing caring actions of the Lord.

Rolf A. Jacobson

2. Cf. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 492; Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC 20 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 534; Richard J. Clifford; *Psalms 73–150*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 134.