



*Texts in Context*

**“Come and See What God Has Done”: The Psalms of Easter\***

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“Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power.”<sup>1</sup>

It is possible to agree with Bonhoeffer’s conviction without being naive about the prospect of this happening automatically by a liturgical decision to incorporate the psalms into Sunday morning worship. Not that this is not a good and needed corrective; it is. In many of those worship services the psalms had become nothing more than the source of traditional versicles—little snippets to provide the proper mood of piety in the moments of transition between things that mattered.

Yet the Psalter never went away, despite its liturgical neglect. The church called forth psalms in occasional moments of human joy and tragedy, poets paraphrased them for the hymnals, and faithful Christians read and prayed them for guidance and support in their own lives.

But now many Christian groups have deliberately re-established the psalms as a constitutive element in regular public worship. What will the effect of this be? Some congregations have found them merely boring—another thing to sit through—which suggests a profound need for creative thinking about how and where to use the psalms so people can hear and participate in the incredible richness and dramatic power of the life within them. Surely, if the biblical psalms do not inspire and provoke, it is not their fault.

Nevertheless, the purpose of this exercise is to consider psalms as preaching texts. Such consideration is the inevitable result of a pericopal use of psalms in liturgy, even though they are not meant there to sneak in as fourth lessons,

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\*This essay was written after an extended conversation with Gracia Grindal and Randall Zachman, both of Luther Northwestern Seminary, and Dennis T. Olson, pastor of United Lutheran Church, Frost, Minnesota.

<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970) 26.

but are rather to function as responsive hymns and prayers to the coming of God in Word and Sacrament.

The psalms are, first and foremost, voices of human response. Even Luther, whose inclination was always to seek *was Christum treibet* (what puts Christ forth) and even to evaluate portions of Scripture on that basis, claims “the greatest thing in the Psalter” is the view it provides “into the hearts of all the saints (those who pray the psalms)” —both when these are

“fair and pleasant gardens” and when they are “gloomy and dark, troubled with all kinds of forebodings about the wrath of God.”<sup>2</sup> Yet somehow these responses of sometimes all-too-human speakers came to be heard by the community as Word of God. This is already evident in the canonical shape of the book of Psalms. Psalms 1 and 119 provide an early framework, inviting the reader to meditate “day and night” (Ps 1:2) on these words of God which will be “sweeter than honey to [the] mouth” (Ps 119:103).<sup>3</sup> The New Testament is obviously ready to employ passages from the Psalter as proof or proclamation from sacred Scripture.<sup>4</sup> And most Christians who carry pocket editions of “The New Testament and Psalms” perform no conscious hermeneutical gymnastics in moving from, say, Romans to Psalm 23.

Though not always reflected upon, this move from word of human response to Word of God is worthy of reflection because it is both a foretaste of and is fulfilled in the incarnation. The fact that the compilers of the Old Testament were able to recognize in both the tortured laments and the exuberant praises of their forebears the living Word of God for themselves and future generations provides a marvelous insight into how they regarded Yahweh, the God of Israel. Without compromising his divinity, Yahweh was thoroughly at home in the same human reality which is experienced by both the king in his glory (Ps 110) and the anonymous village woman in her poverty (Ps 113). In Jesus, of course, the church confesses that the human word and the Word of God have become fully and mysteriously identified. What was foreshadowed in the construction of the Psalter becomes realized as Jesus prays the psalms—truly human, sharing our depths even to the pain of God-forsakenness, and truly divine, overcoming at last our separation from the Father through the very suffering which that separation occasions for the Son.

Hearing the psalms as Word of God makes them available to us as preaching texts. At the same time, hearing our own joys and struggles poured out in their voice makes them uniquely accessible to us as human words. An incarnational understanding of the Psalter makes it impossible and unnecessary to choose which dimension will inform our preaching. Exegesis must be careful to pay full attention to both the historical and human context of the Psalter and to its theological witness to God in Christ. There need be no conflict.

The psalm texts examined in this essay come to us in the context of Easter. Since the new lectionary provides no Old Testament lessons for the Easter

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<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, “Preface to the Psalter,” *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 35.255f.; hereafter cited as *LW*.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 513; Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 249.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Matthew 21:42 (cf. Psalm 118:22).

season, the appointed psalms become particularly attractive resources for the preacher who wants to speak of the Old Testament witness to this central event of Christian faith. Many of these psalms have some explicit verbal link to the New Testament or seem to be heard by the compilers of the lectionary as issuing directly from the mouth of Jesus. But we need spend no great amount of time seeking such tangible connections. Over and over again, the psalms speak of rescue from Sheol and death. Present scholarship is virtually unanimous in understanding these passages to speak originally of release from serious illness or political bondage. But the psalmists’ faith in a God who will not finally abandon his people in any situation is not unlike the

church's faith in a God for whom even death itself has lost its sting.

Easter is not, as is sometimes claimed, merely a convenient way to rescue the possibility of faith by pushing God's salvation into the other (and invisible) world. Easter radicalizes a view which is present in the psalms and throughout the Old Testament—that Yahweh is always moving toward a future for his people, despite the forces of disaster and apostasy which move toward death. God surprises. God lives—and so will Israel. Maintaining the connection between Easter and the mini-resurrections of the Psalter will prevent the church from merely spiritualizing what God has done in Christ, divorcing that act from the mental, political, and physical bondages which plague us as really as they did the people of ancient Israel.

*Easter Sunday: Psalm 118:1-2, 15-24*

It is impossible not to venture a step or two along the road of romantic speculation when studying this psalm. Since early times, Psalms 113-118 (known as the “Egyptian Hallel”) have been associated with the great festivals of Israel. At Passover, Psalms 113-114 were sung before the meal, Psalms 115-118 afterwards. Is it possible then that Psalm 118 was the last hymn sung together by Jesus and the disciples (Matt 26:30)? Whether or not this is so, the New Testament relates Psalm 118:22 (“The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner”) to Jesus on several occasions (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7). Whatever else this text may have meant along the way, Peter announces that Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead, is the stone which the builders rejected.

The psalm itself portrays a liturgical act in which all Israel joins an individual in giving thanks for a victory in battle against all odds. It contains a gate liturgy in which the pilgrim now seeks entrance into the presence of God (118:19-20). Entrance is reserved for the righteous (118:20), which this psalm makes clear is the one who takes “refuge in the Lord” (118:8-9). Psalms 15 and 24 restrict entry to the temple to those who are “blameless,” who have “clean hands and pure heart.” They remind us that faith will and must bear fruit in a sanctified life, while Psalm 118 holds out the more profound truth that, even though we are not sinless (118:18), “with the Lord on (our) side there is nothing to fear” (118:6). Access to God is guaranteed, not by our sanctity, but by “the Lord's doing,” which is indeed “marvelous in our eyes” (118:23). With such a view, it is no wonder that this psalm was Luther's favorite, dearer to him “than

all the wealth, honor, and power of the pope, the Turk, and the emperor.”<sup>5</sup> Nor would it break the limits of the psalm's theological understanding to identify the open “gates of righteousness” with the door of the empty tomb, through which the Righteous One walked once and for all.

Already within the psalm the victory of the one is praised because of its saving consequence for all (118:1-4, 23-24). Both life and faith are preserved in this deliverance—life because the rescued one is an actual representative of all (probably the king, whose victory stands for the victory of the nation), and faith because the lament presupposed by this song of thanksgiving (e.g., “Rouse thyself! Why sleepest thou, O Lord?”—Ps 44:23) is now answered. Peter does not need to leave the Old Testament's own self-understanding to announce that the deliverance of one (in this case, the resurrection of Christ) promises salvation for all (Acts 4:12).

*Second Sunday of Easter: Psalm 105:1-7*

Psalm 105 is one of those songs (like Psalms 78, 106, 135, 136) which recite the great deeds God has done for Israel. Narrative texts indicate that the people came together on festive occasions to hear these recitations (Deut 26:5ff.; Josh 24:1ff.). Why? So they might “remember the wonderful works that (God) has done” (Ps 105:5). This remembering is more than a mere reminder (“Oh, yes, I remember!”). It proclaims the event so that the hearer is drawn into it. In the proclamation, the saving work of God is really present for a new generation. In every generation,” says the Passover Seder, “all must feel that they themselves came out of Egypt.” “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” we sing.

The call to remember connects us, who also need to remember, to the text, despite the intervening centuries. In today’s gospel, Jesus says to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29). The Israelites singing Psalm 105 were already in that category—looking back to remember God’s acts of old which they had not seen. Nor have we seen the exodus or the resurrection. Yet we remember; we believe that what God has done in the past is for us in the present. Yes, we were there when they crucified our Lord—and also when God raised him from the tomb!

The lectionary reads only through verse 7 today. In doing so, it includes the calls to praise and to remember, but it recounts none of the specifics God has done that should be praised and remembered. The call to praise without the basis for praise can be pure legalism, but in this case what is intended is that the congregation apply the call to praise and remembrance to the events of Easter. “The wonderful works” are now the resurrection of Jesus and the victory over death for all believers. It is something of a shock for someone interested in the Old Testament itself to see the church jump so quickly from psalm to gospel, but it must be admitted there is already similar precedent in the Old Testament. The first part of this same psalm, praising God for the gift of the land (105:1-15), is used in 1 Corinthians 16:8-22 as a song of praise at the dedication of the temple. Apparently there is something consistent about what God is doing that allows each one of his wonderful works to point to and describe the others. And the

<sup>5</sup>LW 14.45.

church confesses that all of them point to the resurrection. It is here that everything—land, exodus, temple—finds its fulfillment. Throughout the Old Testament, God is on his way to this event. This does not mean that other specific historical events lose their singularity; it means rather that all such events are bound together because it is the same God who is active in each. Using Psalm 105 to praise the God of Easter does not negate what God did in Israel. It heightens those old events—as well as the deliverance still experienced by God’s people—to signs of the resurrection.

*Third Sunday of Easter: Psalm 16*

Peter preached on Psalm 16:8-11 in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:25ff. curiously read last week, not this week). Since then, it is very hard for Christian readers not to follow his example and immediately relate the words of this old psalm of trust to the resurrection of Christ. In fact, exegetes who want to talk about its historical meaning and who think that it originally meant recovery from near-death by a person in Old Testament times rather than the actual death and

resurrection of Jesus sometimes find themselves on the defensive, as though they are people of little faith. They are falsely maligned. If everything in the Psalter so obviously pointed to Christ there would be no surprise in New Testament preaching. It would not “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37), but merely inform. It would have the precision (and the excitement) of balancing a scientific equation rather than the audacity of claiming a whole new meaning for everything that has gone before (removing its veil). Critical exegesis needs to be thanked for holding fast to historical meanings so that the shocking newness of the gospel can be re-experienced. It also needs to be thanked for keeping ordinary people and everyday events in the text. Who wrote this psalm? David? An anonymous Israelite? Who knows? What good thing had he (she?) experienced? Hard to say. The questions are apparently unanswerable, but since there are many psalms which talk like this it seems to recount a not altogether extraordinary experience. Somebody holds on faithfully to God and finds life a joy—nice, but nothing earth shaking. But when Christ’s resurrection, which *is* earth shaking, reaches back to claim this psalm, it draws into itself the ordinary joy of its unknown speaker. All the ordinary joys of life are transformed for those who trust in the resurrection of Christ. Life is seen through new glasses where every experience of goodness is a foretaste of the “fulness of joy” and the “pleasures forevermore” (16:16). God finally promises for his people. For the Christian, such a view is not blind naivete; it is the gift of living with eyes open to see what God is doing here and now in a world of pain and death. It is the confidence one gains by taking refuge in God, rather than in self (16:1-2).

#### *Fourth Sunday of Easter: Psalm 23*

Psalm 23 is another psalm of trust. These apparently spring from the psalms of lament, which regularly include a confession of trust (e.g., Psalms 13:5; 22:3-5, 9-10). Those confessions function something like our creeds, remembering and professing who God is and what God has done. They talk back to the lament, refusing to allow it the final say, even though those who

pray them know full well that they “walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

This setting is important to understanding the psalm. It is no romantic idyll where God and I walk untroubled through fields without thorns and dandelions. The psalmist’s trust is hard-won, tested by the reality of death and the threatening beasts who make rods and staffs necessary. So it is with Easter. What we proclaim is life in spite of death, life in the teeth of death. The appropriate facial expression is eyebrows raised in wonder, not a forced smile which dare not admit the ongoing reality of chaos and pain.

It is no accident that Psalm 23 is frequently read or sung at funerals. At the coffin death cannot be denied, but precisely there—in the midst of our questions of “Why?” and “How long?”—the psalm speaks of the presence of God. The psalmist said more than he knew, for God was never closer to humanity than in the suffering of Jesus Christ.

The shepherd was a frequent royal image in the ancient Near East. Biblical and traditional royal language is not popular these days because it is generally seen as both sexist and hierarchical. But if we forget that the Bible proclaims God as king, we can never understand the subversive claims of texts like Psalm 23, which fundamentally alter the way kingship is to be understood. Kings have real power, but here it is exercised in gentleness. The God of Israel gathers lambs in his arms (Isa 40:11). “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John

10:11). It is on the cross that Jesus is finally identified as King of the Jews. This is what biblical kingship looks like. Thus, all seats of power are challenged by these texts, but only if we are willing to hear that they do indeed speak of power.

*Fifth Sunday of Easter: Psalm 33:1-11*

We speak of creation and enter into debates about theories of how it was done. Psalm 33 speaks of creation and calls Israel to a total trust which is able to forsake weapons of war and rely solely on God (33:16-17). Theoretical debates are safer! We should be grateful that the pericope leaves out that offending section of the psalm!

The psalmist does not seem interested in theoretical debates. In fact, two distinct traditions about creation are recorded back-to-back. On the one hand (33:6, 9), the psalm presents the doctrine of creation by the word (from Genesis), according to which God need only stand back and speak for everything to come into being. On the other, it resorts to the mythical language of the “Song of the Sea” (Exodus 15), according to which God has to get involved in the fray, actively battling the forces of chaos.<sup>6</sup> Truth cannot apparently be exhausted in either picture alone. Word creation emphasizes God’s sovereign majesty, while the mythological struggle recognizes the ongoing reality of chaotic disorder. Both themes are carried over into the New Testament. John 1 identifies the creative word with Christ; the resurrection accounts partake more of the battle imagery of ancient mythology. As Luther wrote:

<sup>6</sup>Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Waco: Word, 1983) 272f.

It was a strange and dreadful strife,  
when life and death contended.<sup>7</sup>

Both pictures seem necessary to produce the security of faith called for by the psalmist. In Christ, God’s creative word continues to speak, accomplishing that which God purposes. Faith is created within us by the gospel. How could we on our own conjure up a faith which would agree that the war horse cannot save? We may be growing skeptical about nuclear weapons, but we don’t want to stand there naked! If we are to have that kind of faith, God is going to have to create it by his word—out of nothing.

Yet, since the enemies of God (and of God’s people) are real, not imaginary (33:10), the battles are not over; so there is comfort in the picture of God with rolled-up sleeves taking on the opposition. Do we join the battle in the kingdom of this world? Other biblical texts suggest that we must, but Psalm 33 stands there like an Old Testament Sermon on the Mount, calling us to turn the other cheek, to take no thought for the morrow, and deliberately relating all that to political reality. That is only possible if God fights for us, of course, which is precisely what the psalm promises.

*Sixth Sunday of Easter: Psalm 66:1-7, 16-20*<sup>8</sup>

“Come and see what God has done: he is terrible in his deeds among (people)” (66:5). “Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for me” (66:16). Like Psalm 118, Psalm 66 plays with the crucial relationship between individual and community under God. The result is a striking witness to the *pro me* character of the gospel. The psalm

begins with a hymn praising God's redemptive work for Israel (66:1-12), but then turns into an individual song of thanksgiving (66:13-20). Is this just sloppy editing, or is there something intentional about this structure? The "Come and see"/"Come and hear" link suggests the latter. So what is going on?

In the hymnic opening, Israel is called to praise Yahweh for his work on behalf of all. Verse 6 seems to refer to both the crossing of the sea and of the Jordan, representing the whole history of salvation by these two basic events.<sup>9</sup> The mood is strong and objective. God does what God does; in response one can only cringe (66:3) or worship (66:4).

Part 2 of the psalm is, on the other hand, personal and soul-searching. An individual brings a thanksgiving offering in response to what God has done for him or her. With the sacrifice comes honest self-examination (66:18); but there is no pride or self-pity. God is the focus, so the prayer is brought out of self and moved to praise. God's act is not for this person alone, but is given as a sign for all, to bring all to joy (66:16).

<sup>7</sup>Stanza 2 of the hymn, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands" in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) number 134.

<sup>8</sup>The versification in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* translation is different; thus the Lutheran lectionary refers to Psalm 66:1-6, 14-18. The more common RSV verse divisions are used in this section.

<sup>9</sup>A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 1.474.

The Easter gospel works much the same way. Something glorious and objective has happened. Death has been defeated and all of reality renewed. Everything is thrown wide open. It has just happened, that's all, whether we like it or not or believe it or not. All the earth is called to worship—or to cringe, if it is on the side of bondage and death.

But now, on this last Sunday before the Ascension, we are reminded that the objective reality is not enough without our subjective involvement. All that God has done is done for us. Christ is risen for us. Death is defeated for us. Life is renewed for us. God is not content to have it done in general. He means to have each one of us involved in particular. Yet, although everything God does is for us, the focus is not on us. At the same time that we are assured of personal deliverance, we are given the gift of allowing this deliverance to be for someone else. God works in me for the sake of you, so I am twice blest: the work in me is real, but I am freed from dwelling on it, from corrupting it with my pride.

I can only risk letting go of the deliverance God has won for me because of Easter. If death itself is defeated, there is no more room for fear. So now, in presenting my deliverance to you, I am most fully delivered. "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:39). What was true for Christ now becomes true for me. This is the heart of the matter. Because God is God, we can find it already in Psalm 66, but it is the light of Easter's dawn which first lets us see it in all its clarity.