



The Autumn Leaves: Pages from the Psalter for Late Pentecost

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Imagine that you are the musical director for a major symphony orchestra. Your immediate task is to plan the fall series of six weekly concerts. You have a good deal of freedom in your planning, but there is one somewhat unusual restraint. Long ago the symphony board of directors established the rule that each program must include four old standards. Apparently they wanted to be sure that the community got a balanced musical menu.

On your desk is a pile of manuscripts with works by Bach and Handel, Mozart and Haydn, Stravinsky and Mahler. You sort them out into six piles with four in each pile. You have decided to highlight one of the four each week, with fresh instrumentation, a new arrangement, a different interpretation. You try to project yourself into the fall: the opening of school, a major Columbus Day celebration, the election, the autumn leaves at their peak. As you once again study these old scores your goal is to allow them to come to life, so that the listeners will go on their way with a melody in their hearts.

The task of the preacher is something like that. Long ago, four texts were assigned for each Sunday. Season by season they lie before you: a few prophetic words, some letters, some stories and psalms. My assignment for this issue of *Word & World* on the music of the church has to do with the last group. Sorted out on my desk are the pages containing the psalms for this fall season—the autumn leaves,

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so to speak. How can these old classics enliven us, convict and comfort us, so that those hearing them might go on their way refreshed, with a melody in their hearts?

17th Sunday after Pentecost: Psalm 51

We have all learned that the titles were later additions to the original psalms. Because they were late, however, does not mean that we ought to ignore them. Some modern translations do that: the Good News Bible relegates the titles to footnotes and the New English Bible leaves them out altogether! These titles provide important clues to how these psalms were understood at an early stage in the history of their use, and can therefore be of help as we try to appropriate them for our own time.

The title for this psalm suggests that it be understood in connection with an event in David's life. It was the spring of the year, but it was autumn in the life of the king. He was no longer the dashing young musician nor the daring hero of the battlefield. No longer did the women sing, "Saul has slain his thousands, but David his ten thousands."

It is the spring of the year, “the time when kings go out to battle,” but now David stays at home. After his afternoon nap he sees the beautiful Bathsheba bathing next door—and the rest of the tawdry affair that began with adultery and ended with murder is known to all. After the prophet’s “You are the man” hit the target, David was remorseful and confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam 12:13). And now, suggests the editor of the Psalter, this old psalm fits just such a situation.

The psalm begins with a request for forgiveness. This request is rooted in God’s “steadfast love” or *hesed* in Hebrew, which is given classic definition in the story of Hosea’s love for his unfaithful wife (Hosea 1-3) and the picture of a parent’s love for a rebellious child (Hosea 11). It becomes part of a slogan running through the psalms and the entire Bible: “for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps 136!).

One could write an essay on the biblical notion of sin by looking at the vocabulary in this psalm. Behind three words are three pictures. “Transgressions” (v. 1) has the sense of rebellion, like a child rebelling against parents (Isa 1:2). The literal meaning of “iniquity” (v. 2) is to be twisted (Isa 24:1), bent out of shape or bowed down (Ps 38:6). The word translated “sin” (vv. 2, 3, 4, 9) occurs in a non-theological context in Judg 20:16, where it refers to seven hundred left-handed men with slingshots who could fire a stone at a hair and not miss. To sin, in other words, is to be off target, to miss the mark.

Balancing these three words for sin are three words for forgiveness, each with a different picture. Just as one washes dirty clothing (Exod 19:10, 14), so the one who has sinned wants to be washed with a divine detergent that will leave him whiter than snow (vv. 2, 7). The psalmist wants to be cleansed (v. 2), just as one is made clean from a terrible skin disease (2 Kgs 5:10, 12, 13, 14). He asks that his iniquities be blotted out or wiped away (vv. 3, 9), as tears are wiped away (Isa 25:8).

In the words familiar from the weekly service, the psalmist asks, “Create in me a clean heart, O Lord.” The verb “create” occurs in the Bible only with God as subject, and the result is always an entirely new thing (Genesis 1). Only God can create a new heart! Twice the one who feels guilty, dirty, and crushed (vv. 5, 7, 8)

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asks that God put some happiness back in his life (vv. 8, 12). Here is a tie with the parables in Luke 15:1-10, both of which follow the pattern: lost, found, and joyful celebration.

18th Sunday after Pentecost: Psalm 113

Election time is drawing near. We shall be remembering the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s first journey to America. In Minnesota, these are the days “when the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame.” One of the local radio stations will give daily reports on where the fall colors are the best. Not only politics and history, but nature, too, is newsworthy these days.

All four texts assigned for this Sunday are rich with possibilities for preaching. The word about “a quiet and peaceable life” in 1 Tim 2:1-2 is especially appropriate as we think about the coming elections.

In this season of remembering our nation’s history and preparing for its future, all in the context of the color of autumn, I suggest preaching on Psalm 113.

This is a typical hymn, with a call to praise (vv. 1-3) followed by reasons for praise (vv. 4-9), all framed with “Hallelujah,” or, literally, “Praise the Lord.” The gathered congregation is invited to praise God throughout all time (v. 2) and throughout all space (v. 3). Let us not accuse these psalmists of thinking too small!

Praise is a reasonable thing to do, and the psalm provides two reasons. God is great, high and exalted (vv. 4-5). God is also good, stooping down to care for individual persons. The psalm which begins by stretching our imaginations as high as the heavens and as wide as all space now focuses on the particular. This mighty God helps the jobless to find work and a position of dignity in the community (vv. 7-8). The Lord has been hearing the prayers of the unemployed for a long time! God also hears the prayers of the childless couple. The psalm concludes with an unforgettable scene: a young Hebrew mother who had been childless is now playing happily with her children in her home. When you have meaningful work, when you see a young wife enjoying her children, you have reasons for praising God and saying Hallelujah!

There is more. This psalm speaks of a God who is high and exalted, but who also stoops down to care for people. This is the God who sent Christ Jesus, a ransom for all (1 Tim 2:6).

19th Sunday after Pentecost: Psalm 124

It was fall and there was a nip in the morning air when the aging apostle wrote to young Timothy, asking him to bring his winter jacket (2 Tim 4:13, 21). He may have been watching the autumn leaves drift by his window as he looked back on his life and wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (v. 7). Only Luke was with him. For this reason, the lectionary has assigned 2 Tim 4:5-11 to this day honoring Luke.

The tone of the psalm for the day is thanksgiving. More specifically, the psalmist gives thanks for a victory won in battle. This was apparently a serious struggle where the life or death of the community was at stake (vv. 1-5).

The Lord is to be blessed, or better praised, first for a negative reason: “He has not given us as prey to their teeth,” and then a positive one: “We have escaped like a bird from a snare.”

The theology behind this psalm is basic for the entire Bible. The Lord is first

described as the one who has delivered from danger. The primary example of the Lord’s delivering activity in the Old Testament is always the exodus. This psalm speaks of another rescue from enemies. The Lord is also described as the one who made the heavens and the earth. Here are the first two articles of the creed, telling of the God who has created and who delivers. This latter theme is, of course, expanded upon in the story of the good news of deliverance through Jesus Christ.

Reformation Sunday: Psalm 46

A couple of Octobers ago, three of us made the half-hour hike up the winding path to the Wartburg castle in Germany. The autumn leaves were on the ground and a chill was in the air. As we stood looking at that castle, we came to a new understanding of Luther’s famous hymn. The Wartburg is a “mighty fortress,” a sturdy, secure place of refuge, indeed.

As is the case with Psalm 23, the theme of this psalm is trust. The psalmist fears neither natural disasters (vv. 1-3) nor historical disasters (vv. 4-7). The writer of Psalm 23 said that he

would not fear “for thou art with me.” The same reason for confidence is given here, though in this case the community speaks: “The Lord of hosts is with us” (vv. 7, 11).

That refrain is central to the psalm, and central to the refrain is “with us,” in Hebrew, *immanu*. The preposition translated “with” is an important one throughout the Bible. It may link the individual to God (Judg 6:16; Ps 23:4; Jer 2:8; Acts 18:10) or it may speak of the Lord and the community (Ps 46:7, 11). Jesus himself was given a name containing that preposition: Immanuel, or “God with us” (Matt 1:23). His last promise to his disciples expressed the same theme, “I am with you always” (Matt 28:20).

The God in whom we trust despite natural disasters and historical threats, the God who will finally bring an end to wars (Ps 46:9), the God whose “withness” takes its ultimate expression in the sending of the one named Immanuel—these are some of the themes that suggest themselves from this psalm for these days of autumn.

All Saints Day: Psalm 34:1-10

“Lord, I want to be in that number,” goes the Dixieland classic, “when the saints go marching in.” That song understands “saints” to refer to Christians entering into heaven. Some of the texts for this Sunday have this same orientation. Matt 5:1-12 is framed by references to the life of God’s people in heaven (vv. 3, 12; also 10). The focus in Isaiah 26 is on the hope of resurrection (v. 19) and Revelation 21 offers a vision of the holy city, the new Jerusalem.

The psalm, however, gives us a more down-to-earth understanding of “saints.” We understand why it was selected for this day when we read v. 9 in the RSV translation: “O fear the Lord, you his saints” (NRSV, “you holy ones”). Since “saints” is a key word linking this psalm to the theme for the day, we need to define it precisely.

The basic meaning of the Hebrew root *qdš*, here translated “saints” or “holy ones,” is “separate” or “other.” God is described as holy, or “wholly other” (Isa 6:3). All other holiness is derived from association with God, such as the “holy ground” where God reveals himself (Exod 3:5) or the “holy nation” that God has

chosen (Exod 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9). The English word “saint” comes from the Latin *sanctus* and thus means “holy one.”

The saints referred to in this psalm are not in heaven but on earth. The same is true as the word is used in the New Testament. Paul regularly addresses the Christians to whom he writes as “saints” (Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:2, 1 Cor 1:1, etc.).

The psalm is a thanksgiving song. The singer vows to praise the Lord forever and calls others to join in this praise (vv. 1-3). He tells of his own experience of answered prayer (vv. 4-6) and from this experience formulates a general statement about the Lord’s care (v. 7). Following this are two invitations, the first of which is to give the faith a try (v. 8). Then all the saints, or all the people of God, are invited to “fear the Lord,” that is, to come before the Lord with awe and reverence (see again Isaiah 6). Verses 9 and 10 should not be understood as a simplistic declaration that saints are immune from trouble; vv. 17-20 of this same psalm make that clear. This notion of proper reverence for God is frequent in wisdom teaching (Prov 1:7, etc.), and in fact the psalmist continues in the manner of a teacher of wisdom, addressing hearers as “children” and beginning with a question (vv. 11-22).

It is certainly proper on All Saints Day to remember those who have already gone marching into heaven, and who gather around the throne to praise the Lamb. But the psalm also reminds us of the saints still on earth, who continue to need the Lord's help and to praise the God who answers their prayers.

22nd Sunday after Pentecost: Psalm 121

The psalm for this Sunday lends itself to preaching. It has always been identified as a "traveler's psalm" and has been used in the congregation or family circle before setting out on a trip.¹

In ancient Israel the psalm was very likely used as a ritual for setting out on a journey. The one leaving expresses the anxiety that is always present at the start of a trip (v. 1) but then expresses confidence in the Lord (v. 2). Those staying at home address the traveler with the encouraging words in the remainder of the psalm.

The Lord is pictured as a night watchman who neither slumbers nor sleeps (vv. 3-4). The chorus from Mendelssohn's *Elijah* catches the central theme: "He, watching over Israel, slumbers not nor sleeps." Once in a while, says Luther in a sermon on this psalm, it may appear that the Lord has forgotten about us. When we feel this way, "we should remain steadfast in faith and await God's help and protection. Because even though it appears that God is sleeping or snoring...this is certainly not so, despite the way we feel and think. He is surely awake and watching over us...Eventually we'll learn that, if we can only hold fast."²

Verse 6 speaks of the dangers of the day and of the night. Sunstroke was a real danger in that part of the world. Elisha once brought back to life a young man who had been struck down by the sun (2 Kgs 4:18-37). Judith's husband died of sunstroke (Jdt 8:2-3; see also Jonah 4:8 and Isa 49:2, 10). Belief in the harmful effects of the moon's rays persists into New Testament times as is indicated by the word

¹See also my piece, "Psalm 121: A Psalm for Sojourners," in *Word & World* 5 (1985) 180-187.

²Erwin Muelhaupt, *D. Martin Luthers Psalmen Auslegung*, vol. 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965) 456, my translation.

seleniazomenous, "moonstruck," in Matt 4:24, translated by the *New American Bible* as "lunatics," from the Latin for moon, *luna*.

The Lord keeps Israel. This psalm also says that the Lord keeps *you*, the individual. The promise of this keeping extends further than a single journey. The concluding verses declare the Lord's promise to watch over you for a lifetime, from this time and forevermore (vv. 7-8).

All of life, in other words, is viewed as a journey. The believer is always on the way, always "on the road again," a sojourner (Ps 39:12, RSV). This is a dynamic picture of the life of the believer, reflected also in Jesus' call to "follow me" and in the picture of life as a sojourn in Hebrews 11 (note vv. 8-10, 13-16).

So there they are. The late Pentecost pages from the Psalter, the autumn leaves. May the warmth of their words fire you and inspire you through the cold of the winter.