

The Resurrection of our Lord

What Makes the Rejects Sing?

Psalm 118

The Resurrection of our Lord analysis by Ed Schroeder

A Crossings Matrix for Psalm 118, the lectionary psalm for Easter

Psalm 118 is the most-frequently quoted Psalm in the NT, specifically two passages. One is the Easter-focused words about the stone, rejected and then rehabilitated (vv.22-23). The other is the Hosanna chant of the Palm Sunday parade (25-26). Psalm 118 was Luther's favorite, especially the Psalmist's gutsy words: "I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord."

In days gone by our Crossings Community had a semester-long course based on this psalm. We built it on the image of the rejected stone and the rejecting builders. Our course title: "What Makes the Rejects Sing?" Much of what follows comes from what we learned then. If you've not used this text before for centering Easter, try it. The N.T. writers did not cite it by accident as witness to their Risen Lord.

Peace & Joy! Ed

Introduction:

Klaus Westermann says (Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible) many of the terms for praise in the Psalms are hard to render

into just one term in European languages. They are multivalent. For example the verb YADAH (5x in Ps. 118, vv.1, 19, 21, 28, 29) and its noun form TODAH is praise, give thanks, confess, tell everybody, “hype,” and more. St. Jerome chose “Confitemini” as his Latin verb for the psalm’s opening word: (colloquially) “Do Todah, y’all.” From that Latin word comes our English term “confess,” which is itself a multivalent verb. For example, we confess our sins, we confess the faith.

A clue to this multivalence inheres in the Hebrew term. Todah is an act on the part of the believer-receiver in response to a prior word/act from God. So the response is cued to the distinctive act/word from God that triggers it. Simple example: Says God: “You are sinner.” We: “We confess our sin.” Or again, God: “This is my Son, meant for you.” We: “We confess our trust in your Son meant for us.” In both cases the receiver is saying “yes” to the prior divine word. The Greek NT term for confess—both for confessing sin and faith—is “homo-logia” (literally: saying the same thing). So when I confess, I am “same-saying” what God previously said to me. Perhaps the “todah” of the Psalmist in 118 is closest to our idiom of “standing on a soap-box” and then telling everyone within earshot: “Look what God did for/to us!”

The Crossings course on Psalm 118 went like this:

Question: What makes the rejects sing?

Answer: Rejected stones never fit the plans that builders have for their construction projects. That is true of human rejects too. They don’t fit the plans of society’s builders, or church builders, or individuals building their own lives. So stones that don’t fit are necessarily rejected. Yet the rejects have an ally in Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the

Father of Jesus, the Christ. So the builders, not the stones, are the ones with the big God-problem. At Easter God rehabs his rejected Son, which is good news for all rejects. Easter grounds God's full-scale program to rehabilitate rejects into his own new building program. That project has a future so bright that the rejects already now are singing and doing their Todah.

The Text's Diagnosis Of Rejects and Rejectors

Who's got the problem? Initially it would seem to be the rejects. But given their eventual ally, it is the builders who are also in great jeopardy. And who of us is not a builder?

Stage 1 External

Working definition: Rejection is foreclosing a future for someone without that someone's consent. All of us are at work on our own building projects. So we necessarily have to reject (in some way) others who "don't fit." To be sure, the rejected ones suffer, but it's no fun either to "have to" reject someone (i.e., fire an employee, fail a student) who just doesn't fit the blueprints. Even we who get rejected also have a building plan in mind, a future towards which we want to move. Otherwise it would not be so painful when someone forecloses that future by rejecting us.

Stage 2 Internal

Even worse than that, we are imprisoned in our own building plans. We couldn't stop rejecting the misfits even if we wanted to. We believe that we "have to" do it. Says Luther: we do it "ex officio." It's our job assignment. As teacher I "have to" tell a student: "You failed the final exam, you failed the course." No student I ever knew heard that as affirmation. For the rejects, stage two is the temptation to "believe" the rejection as the last word about themselves, maybe even God's last word.

Stage 3 Eternal

The God-problem of the builders is that God rejects rejectors, forecloses their futures—eventually totally—and also without their consent. Also for the rejects who “believe” their rejection as ultimate, what they believe comes true. Fixated on being rejected, they thus “reject” trusting God’s “lasts-forever mercy” (Hebrew: “chesed” 5x in Psalm 118, vv.1, 2, 3, 4, 29). When you don’t believe it, you don’t have it. Not having God’s mercy, we have its opposite.

Prognosis Easter’s Good News for Rejects and Rejectors

Stage 4 Good News for Stage 3

At Easter God’s Christ, himself a Good Friday reject, is rehabbed by the Master Builder. Good news not just for Jesus, but for other rejects as well. Why? Because the resurrected Christ becomes the cornerstone for a whole new building project. A building for rejects only, a new creation that gives rejects new futures they never dreamed of. Good news for the builders is: Join the rejects. Since the cornerstone is himself a rehabbed reject, all rejects “fit” the blueprints for the program. But will it last? Yes. The “chesed” behind it “endures forever.”

Stage 5 Good News for Stage 2

In place of the false faiths in the hearts of both the builders and the rejects, there now arises: “calling on the Lord” and from that calling comes “freedom, help, salvation, victory, righteousness, and (Luther’s favorite) the confidence that I shall not die but live.”

Stage 6 Good News for Stage 1

“Todah” and singing in the “tents” (=an image of being on the move into those newly-opened futures). “Recounting the deeds of

the Lord.” Psalm 118 bears the marks of once being a processional hymn sung while going up to the Jerusalem temple. Christians founded on the cornerstone of God’s new temple sing their Todah on their way out into the world. “Go in peace,” we regularly hear at the close of the liturgy, “serve the Lord—out in the world.” For which our own liturgical Todah is “Thanks be to God!”

Postscript

To last week’s [Sabb. #56 on Phil. 2](#), Gary Simpson (St. Paul, MN) has this add on:

Hi Ed, A quickie addition to your note on Christ’s “emptying.” Luther works the kenosis question in Two Kinds of Righteousness (Phil. 2 is his text) and does so in the way you have noted. He interestingly does think that the Son left something behind (though not, of course, on account of incarnation itself) and he leaves “it” to the Father. Says Martin: “The term ‘form of God’ here does not mean the ‘essence of God’ because Christ never emptied himself of this. Neither can the phrase ‘form of a servant’ be said to mean ‘human essence.’ But the ‘form of God’ is wisdom, power, righteousness, goodness—and freedom too; for Christ was a free, powerful, wise man, subject to none of the vices or sins to which all other men are subject. He was pre-eminent in such attributes as are particularly proper to the form of God. Yet he was not haughty in that form; he did not please himself (Rom. 15:3); nor did he disdain and despise those who were enslaved and subjected to various evils.

He was not like the Pharisee who said, ‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men,’ for that man was delighted that others were wretched; at any rate he was unwilling that they should be like him. This is the type of robbery by which a man usurps things for himself—rather, he keeps what he has and does not clearly ascribe to God the things that are God’s, nor does

he serve others with them that he may become like other men. Men of this kind wish to be like God, sufficient in themselves, pleasing themselves, glorying in themselves, under obligation to no one, and so on. Not thus, however, did Christ think; not of this stamp was his wisdom. He relinquished that form to God the Father and emptied himself, unwilling to use his rank against us, unwilling to be different from us. Moreover, for our sakes he became as one of us and took the form of a servant, that is, he subjected himself to all evils. And although he was free, as the Apostle says of himself also, he made himself servant of all, living as if all the evils which were ours were actually his own."

Well, there's bushels of theological stuff here that could be investigated and harvested. An oft neglected theme is Christ's relinquishment of self-sufficiency to the Father. Wow! That certainly turns out to be joy-filled Good News for us. But notice in the Pauline text under consideration (2:9-11, which seems to be the second of a two act drama) how "God" [the Father?] also takes this news of Christ's non-self-sufficient mind-wisdom-practice: the Father glories in it and even waxes gloriously in it before all creation—such willing non-self-sufficiency. Is the text suggesting a confessional and, indeed, doxological act on the Father's part? With this sort of glorying going around and with such a cosmic scope, one might wonder whether even the Father might not be willing to relinquish the self-sufficiency stamp?