

5 Lent Year C

4/3/2022

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

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Our Psalm today is the seventh of the collection of psalms known as the *Songs of Ascent*.

There are 15 total of these... all grouped together here...

Psalms 120 through 134.

These psalms are pilgrim songs...

Lyrics for the journey...

They would be sung as the Jewish pilgrims ascended up to Jerusalem for the Passover or other feast days.

They are all different...

With various themes.

Some are about worship, some about the providence of God...

Others are about security, and others about humility.

Our psalm... number 126 is about joy.

Laughter, gladness, and joy are mentioned five times in these seven verses making up our psalm.

The song celebrates the joy that comes from the past and the joy that looks toward the future.

Our psalm shows up in the liturgy quite frequently...

It appears as our psalm on Thanksgiving day...

as it celebrates harvest in the final verse:

*Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,
Will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.*

It also shows up in the season of Advent and of course now in the season of Lent.¹

Both seasons of the church are penitential seasons...

Meaning their focus is on repentance, confession, waiting, and giving of oneself.

So why a psalm that is seemingly all about joy, laughter, and happiness during a season like Lent?

That doesn't seem to fit.

Well, the psalm is a psalm of two stories.

And these stories are split by the middle verse...

Verse 4 where the psalmist wrote:

The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.

¹ See Advent 3B and Lent 5C

You see, everything that precedes this verse is looking back.

When God blessed Israel...

Probably looking to the moment that ancient Israel returned from Exile in Babylon and made the journey back to the promised land to rebuild Jerusalem.

The psalmist says it was like a dream...

It was unbelievable how God restored their fortunes...

The psalmist writes that even other nations said:

The LORD has done great things for them. (v. 3)

Babylon was truly a horrible place and experience for God's people.

Jerusalem was sacked...

Destroyed...

And the Babylonians would take all the best of the people back to their city to work for them...

They would leave the poor, the unskilled, and the lame in a demolished city.

Those that were captured had to march six-hundred miles across a desert with the taunting mockeries of the soldiers.

They were used and abused in unspeakable ways.

But eventually... decades later... they were released to go home...

They journeyed back...

It was a miracle...

It was an act of God.

The LORD restored the fortunes of Zion...

There was good news that brought joy.

The psalm celebrates this past event...

In the first, three verses.

But in the last three verses it takes a different tone.

Instead of the past statement: *when the LORD restored the fortunes...*

We get a hopeful statement: *Restore our fortunes, O LORD...*

Verse 6 mentions tears...

Verse 7 mentions weeping.

The psalmist is now looking from the point of pain toward a future of joy.

The song is really about joy remembered (the first part) and joy anticipated (the last part).

The psalmist is speaking from an already-not yet perspective. They have received joy in the past... but also anticipate it in the future.

This is why the psalm speaks to the seasons of Lent and Advent... The penitential seasons...

In Advent we wait for the Lord to arrive... There is anticipation of the joy of Christmas and the joy of the second coming of Christ Jesus.

In Lent we experience the grueling disciplines, the self-sacrifice, the focus on giving and confession... yet with an anticipation of the Holy Week when we celebrate our salvation on Good Friday and the resurrection of our Lord on Easter Sunday.

This psalm speaks to our past in the ways we remember how our Lord has brought us through the difficult moments of our life.

It also speaks to the pain we live in the here and now, but with the hope that one day all things will be restored... all things will be made right.

This is why the psalmist speaks of the watercourses of the Negev.
The Negev was a barren wasteland in the south of Israel.
It is a network of ditches that have been cut into the soil by wind and erosion.

It is a harsh place...

Where the sun bakes the ground and anything that is on it.

But occasionally there is a sudden rain...

And when it does the ditches are filled with life-giving water.

The psalmist cries out:

Restore our fortunes O LORD, like the watercourses of the Negev.

For us... years of waiting and being drought-stricken suddenly are interrupted by God's invasion of grace.²

Psalm 126 is a cry of hope...

A hope for joy...

The prayer for these waters of grace to flood.

The writer knew the dark moments of life.

Carrying with them the brokenness of their past.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1980, 2000), 99.

You see, Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow. Pain and hardship still come, but the deep joy found in our savior remains.³

Scholar and pastor Eugene Peterson writes in his book

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

(a wonderful book I commend to you)...

He says:

A common but futile strategy for achieving joy is trying to eliminate things that hurt: get rid of pain by numbing the nerve ends,

get rid of insecurity by eliminating risks,

get rid of disappointment by depersonalizing your relationships.

And then try to lighten the boredom of such a life by buying joy in the form of vacations and entertainment.

There isn't a hint of that in Psalm 126.

In Psalm 126 there is joy in the midst of pain.

He then writes:

There is plenty of suffering on both sides, past and future.

The joy comes because God knows how to wipe away tears, and,

in his resurrection work, create the smile of new life.

Joy is what God gives, not what we work up.⁴

³ Ibid., 100.

⁴ Ibid., 100.

Where this psalm speaks to us differently than the message of our world is where we find joy.

The world says run from things that uncomfortable...

Focus on things that our only positive...

Follow your own heart and path...

Focus on what fulfills you and discard what brings pain.

Much of our society preaches that our purpose in life is to make ourselves happy.

But true happiness...

True joy...

Real joy...

A deep, deep joy...

Comes from the Spirit of God...

The fruit of following Jesus is an inner joy...

Even in the midst of pain and suffering.

Once again – Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow.

It is living in the real world with the hope of Jesus Christ.

This psalm speaks to our life.

Because we too live in a now-but-not-yet perspective.

The psalmist celebrated when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion and yet hoped for the day the Lord would restore the fortunes.

We too, as Christians, as baptized in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as people washed in the blood of the lamb...

We are saved from sin and death by the redemptive work of Christ Jesus on the cross...

But we also know that our salvation isn't completely worked out.

We still suffer, sin, and die.

But we know the future will bring a realization of the restoration of all things.

And so, we celebrate...

We rejoice...

In God's work in our life...

And we hope...

And we pray...

For the completion of our salvation.⁵

Psalm 126 speaks to this moment in our Lenten year.

It says celebrate the great triumphs of God in your life.

⁵ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 425.

The times that God rescued you.

When he carried you through the difficult moments of your past.

Your family tragedies...

The pain from abuse...

The suffering because of mistreatment...

He has lifted you up to this moment now...

And we rejoice because the Lord has done great things...

But it also speaks to the pain and suffering we experience in our life
now.

Our current weeping...

The things that bring us tears now...

And in this pain...

We cry the song of the psalmist:

Those who sowed with tears, will reap with songs of joy.

*Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy,
shouldering their sheaves.*

May God's joy always sustain us...

Through his son, Jesus Christ our Lord...

Amen.