

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Psalm 126

*¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*

*² Then our mouth was filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”*

*³ The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

*⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

*⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.*

*⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

“Let us be grateful. Not for the material things given to us, but the small ways that we give to others.”

Gratitude, that is our theme for today as we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving this week. Psalm 126 presents us with an opportunity to consider this topic more deeply. The psalm was likely composed several years after the Israelites captivity in Babylon, in overwhelming gratitude for God’s restoration, and in prayer for God’s continuing of restorative work in their lives. It is a song that reminded them of what they had gone through and of God’s mighty work to set them free, something for which they felt they could never offer enough gratitude to God for having done.

Their freedom story from Babylon sounds almost miraculous. One day they were captives of the Babylonian Empire, and then seemingly overnight, that mighty empire collapsed. The pagan Persian King Cyrus captured the capital city of Babylon with very little effort, and the Israelites were set free to return to Jerusalem.

Isaiah prophesied this. We can read about this in Isaiah 45:1-8. God anointed the Gentile ruler, Cyrus, whose kingdom spread over 2,000 miles, making it the largest of any kingdom, even the Babylonian kingdom. Cyrus was anointed by God because God had this special task in mind for him to free God’s special people, the Israelites, from the Babylonians.

The people knew the prophecy, yet likely wondered whether it would ever come to pass. Imagine their surprise when it did. It was like a dream too good to be true. Their gratitude was felt in their whole being. It tells us in verse two of Psalm 126 that as they look back on that day and celebrate, they remembered their “mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with songs of joy.”

Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, author, pastor and evangelist, wrote of this saying: “The mercy was so unexpected, so amazing, so singular that they could not do less than

laugh, and they laughed so much, so that their mouths were full of it, and that because their hearts were full too.”

We read in the second half of verse two that the joy and laughter poured out of the Israelites, so much so that those around them could see it and could not help but also witness God’s mighty gracious hand at work in the Israelites lives.

Likewise, gratitude for all that God has done in our lives should emanate through our being, testifying to the good ness of God. As Christians, do our spirits radiate with joy and laughter? Or do people experience you as a miserable unsatisfied person who claims to be a follower of Christ? Do people see the joy in your life and say, truly God is at work in you? Do they see your joy and want it for themselves? If so, that’s an expression of gratitude that God welcomes and blesses.

Remembering their past journey and the joy they felt at the time they received their freedom could have become mere nostalgia for them. Ots of times when we reflect on good times, we might say, “Those were the days; wonderful but gone forever.”

But Psalm 126 points out that gratitude is not a final state of accomplishment. Trials will arise again, and we may need a reminder that God is always be available to get his believers through them. Psalm 126:4, tells us that many of the Israelites were aware of this reality. Their return to their homeland was not without challenges. They had to rebuild their lives in the ruins of the ancient city of Jerusalem. The restoration of their lives and their beloved city had only begun. They knew they were going to need God’s help. Gratitude for what God had already done gave them confidence that God would continue to help them.

Likewise, gratitude motivates us to reach higher in our spiritual lives to learn to know God and to walk in the ways of Christ, to embark on the journey and embrace the hard work of restoration in our lives. While we do not look forward to difficult times, we are not naïve about the future. We will sin and need forgiveness. We may have relationships that need mending. We may find ourselves lost in circumstances and cycles that we can’t seem to escape on our own.

Remembering with gratitude, God’s goodness to us in the past when we were experiencing rough times, creates a longing inside us, to seek out God once again, to help us with restoring our broken lives. It can be hard work, but our gratitude assures us that God will be faithful to us again.

Not everyone buys into this idea. Some people would rather find an easier way to get through the troubles of life, even if it means sacrificing their relationship with God. The perceived vulnerability and threats to their security and prosperity, as a result of what they see as their personal rights, hard work and accomplishments, makes them uncomfortable.

This was true for some of the Israelites. They chose, when given the opportunity, not to return to their homeland. They had become quite comfortable and were actually prospering in Babylon. They didn’t want to return and do the long-term work of restoration in their destroyed beloved city. They apparently preferred being comfortable where they were, rather than sharing the joy of rebuilding with those “roughing it” in Jerusalem.

Sometimes our impatience gets the best of us, and we want the broken things in our lives fixed now if not sooner. **This can invite discouragement with God and doubts about God’s care.** The Psalmist may be acknowledging this honest feeling of impatience as he calls for God’s continued help when he says in verse four, “restore our fortunes like streams in the Negev.”

The streams of Negev were to the south of the city of Jerusalem. When the rain came and flowed down from the surrounding mountains, the stream rose like a rushing flash flood. The psalmist prayed for a mighty, sudden work of God to further the work of restoration among

God’s people. Knowing that God’s timing is not always our timing yet trusting God; he was willing to accept that it would come after a long time of hard work and waiting. That’s what it takes sometimes. Our impatience circumvents the mighty work of God in our lives.

There is a legend of a man who found the barn where Satan supposedly kept his seeds ready to be sown into the human heart. On finding these seeds of discouragement more numerous than the other seeds, he learned that those seeds could be made to grow almost anywhere. When Satan was questioned, he reluctantly admitted that there was one place in which he could never get the seeds of discouragement to grow. "Where is that, Lucifer?" he was asked.

Satan paused for a moment and replied sadly, "That would be in the heart of a GRATEFUL person!"

Finally, the joy of our gratitude inspires us to want to embrace opportunities to bless others. Not only those who obviously have significant needs. As disciples of Christ, we want the downtrodden, the broken, the lost, the lonely, EVERYONE, to be filled with the same joy and laughter of gratitude we know as a result of God’s care.

The gratitude we know makes us bold and ready to embrace the discomfort that sometimes comes with walking side-by-side with those who are suffering. It makes us sensitive to the ideal of lifting one another up, building each other up, even those who are different from us, and those we find hard to love. In doing so, we fulfill God’s purpose for our lives, to be a light, to bring joy into the lives of others, which gives them a loving hug from God, which may be exactly what they need to know God is near.

So, true gratitude is much more than mere words of thanksgiving that we offer to God. Gratitude is a quality similar to electricity: it must be produced and discharged and used up in order to exist at all. Gratitude, thanksgiving, is something that we should offer to God on a daily basis. Sometimes, admittedly, on trying, even rotten days, we may find it hard to feel gratitude for anything, but really, there is always something. If you can’t “feel” gratitude for anything, trust God’s faithfulness and love towards you, and give thanks.

Give God thanks for the big and the small things. Look for and express your gratitude every day. Know the joy and laughter that comes with the freedom gratitude supplies as it leads us to acknowledge the presence of our all-powerful, loving, and faithful God in our lives. Allow gratitude for all that God has done for you mold you and grow you. And, let your gratitude shine so the world will see the joy of God living in you and be inspired to seek out this amazing God we know. Be grateful, every day, not for the material things given to us but for the small ways that we give something to others. Amen.