

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Psalm 126 – NIV

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

² *Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs 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 are filled with joy.*

⁴ *Restore our fortunes, Lord,
like streams in the Negev.*

⁵ *Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.*

⁶ *Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.*

There is a sound in our house that fills me with absolute delight. It's the sound of Don's laughter. He will be reading something or watching something and suddenly burst out into laughter. When something tickles his funny-bone, which happens a lot, he doesn't merely chuckle—he laughs out loud. I love it. When this happens, and I am not a party to what he is seeing or reading, I often ask him what is so funny, and he shares it with me. My reaction usually is much more reserved compared to his burst of laughter.

We have had discussions already about why I don't seem to find things as funny as he does. Actually, I often do find the same things funny; but I just may not respond the same way naturally. I wish I did.

I've had previous neighbors share with me that they were going to miss hearing Don's laughter occasionally. Until we moved into this house, we lived in townhouses, making it possible to hear occasional loud sounds. I love this about Don, and I often wish that bursting out in laughter was more often freely expressed by me. Oh, I'm happy and I laugh, but not as freely as Don does.

The great Christian devotionals writer, Oswald Chambers, once wrote, "Laughter and weeping are the two most intense forms of human emotion, and these profound wells of human emotion are to be consecrated to God."

In Psalm 126:2, it says, *"Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, The LORD has done great things for them"* (NIV). The life of the believer is one which is rightly characterized by joy, peace, and, yes, laughter.

Laughter and joy are great gifts from God. We are not only called into a life of reverent piety, but we have also been given the great gift and joy of knowing God!

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. During Lent, Christians reflect on Jesus' final walk to Jerusalem. We remember the hardships Jesus went through even as he healed the sick, ate with the outcasts, and taught God's truths. Jesus loved everyone, even the most unlovable people. What did that get him? Unimaginable suffering and death on a horrible cross. A sentence given to those accused of the most heinous crimes. A punishment that Jesus did not deserve; yet he endured this for us.

As a result of this, I don't think many of us think of Lent as a joyful time. Instead, we recognize our need for repentance. We admit our need to do something to turn our focus towards Jesus; so, we make sacrifices by giving something up—things like desserts, Facebook, television—things that really don't hold a candle to the suffering Jesus endured, but when their absence is felt, they can serve as a reminder to remember what Jesus did for us.

Lent feels like a solemn time—not a joyful time. We know it leads up to a great day of joy—Easter; but Lent itself is felt to be a dark time. There just doesn't seem to be all that much to feel good about during the actual walk to the cross called Lent. But today's scripture, Psalm 126 shows us something different about the attitude and spirit of a Christian.

The psalm opens referring to a past experience—a less than pleasant experience. We're not sure exactly what that experience was, although some believe it to be the captivity of the Jews in Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah warned the people that this dark time would come, but they did not listen.

We read in Jeremiah 25:8-11: ⁸ *Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words, ⁹ I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon," declares the Lord, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. ¹⁰ I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹ This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.*

That's exactly what happened. The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and took the brightest and best of the Jewish population to Babylon. The old and infirmed were left to die. Those taken remained in captivity for seventy years. None of those who were carted away lived to see their freedom. They died in captivity. The captivity ended in 537 B.C., when Cyrus the Great let the people go back to Judea.

But as I said, we are not certain this is the event the psalmist is referring to. It is evident from the recording of the Jewish history in the Old Testament, that they had a recurring theme of loyalty to God—falling from God and returning to God. So, this could be referring to any time when they were lost and out of favor with God.

These opening verses of Psalm 126 invite us to recollect moments in our own lives when we experienced tragedy, misfortune, and a feeling of lostness. However, this exercise is not intended to be used to make us feel bad; nor is it intended to cause us to get stuck in the mire and mucky memories of our past. You may remember that we reflected on that lesson last Sunday.

The words "fortunes" and "dreamed" that the psalmist used here are to remind us that during those dark times, we dreamed of getting out of the messes we were in; and that God, indeed, did get us through those difficulties and into better days. So then, remembering the experience and the feelings associated with it—remembering our hope, remembering our restoration, remembering our joy—when we finally are freed, points us to our need for God and God's help, if or when, we fall onto hard times again.

In verse three the psalmist turns our focus to the present—remembering the great things God has done for us gives us joy; noticing the good things God does in our current everyday lives gives us joy. This takes some effort and discipline on our part, especially, if what is happening at the present moment is difficult.

A saintly woman suffering for weary months in painful illness said to her pastor: "I have such a lovely robin that sings outside my window. In the early morning, as I lie here, he serenades me." Then, as a smile brightened her thin features, she added, "I love him, because he sings in the rain." That is the most beautiful thing about the robin. When the storm has silenced almost every other songbird, the robin sings on and sings in the rain. That is the way the Christian who is with Christ may do. Anybody can

sing in the sunshine; you and I should sing when clouds pour out their rains, for Christ is with us. We should sing in the rain.

What is immediate can **feel** overwhelming. Recalling Jesus' promise to be with us always, and trusting him to keep this promise, even when we don't feel like it, invites us to get into our disciplined self and purposely look for his presence, even in small ways. This gives us incentive to stay focused on God and God's will for our lives; giving us hope, endurance, strength and guidance to keep us from doing something foolish and making matters worse.

In verse four the Psalmist redirects us once again, to think about the future, reminding us that "No matter how often we proclaim that God 'has done great things for us,'" we will still find ourselves in need of God's help and deliverance in the future.

The Psalmist says in verse 4, "Restore our fortunes, Lord like streams in the Negev." The Negev is a desert where the stream beds lie dry most of the time; yet they can become rushing torrents when the seasonal rains arrive. This imagery communicates the people's neediness, and their confidence in God's desire and ability to take care of them.

During an earthquake some years ago, the inhabitants of a small village were generally very much alarmed, but they were at the same time surprised at the calmness and apparent joy of an old woman whom they all knew. At length, one of them addressing the old woman said, "Mother, are you not afraid?" "No," said the woman, "I rejoice to know that I have a God who can shake the world."

We too will always need God. One thing is certain, there will be pain, grief, and tears in our lives in the future. We too can have confidence that God will get us through those times. "God's ability to restore life is beyond our understanding. Forests burn down and are able to grow back. Broken bones heal. Even grief is not a permanent condition. Our tears can be seeds that will grow into a harvest of joy because God is able to bring good out of tragedy. We must be patient as we wait. God's great harvest of joy is coming.

Frederick Buechner wrote, "Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not, God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go to next."

Lent may feel to us like a solemn dark season; but it can also be a season of joy. Yes, it reminds us that we have at times made a mess of things in our lives, but because of Jesus, that's not where we need to be, or who we are now. That should bring us joy. The anticipation we feel knowing that Easter is coming, knowing that death did not destroy the love of our lives, Jesus, assures us that we are not alone now nor will we ever be alone. Even death will not destroy us. Now that's a reason for joy!

At A conference in a Presbyterian church in Omaha, people were given helium filled balloons and told to release them at some point in the service when they felt like expressing the joy in their hearts. Since they were Presbyterians, they weren't free to say "Hallelujah, Praise the Lord." All through the service balloons ascended, but when it was over 1/3 of the balloons were unreleased. Let your balloon go.

Amen.