

Stressful Victory

Third Sunday in Advent—December 13, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Psalm 126

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

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."

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

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

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

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

In Disney's animated cartoon *Winnie the Pooh*, there are two memorable and loved characters who readily find a place in our hearts. I am thinking of Tigger the bouncing tiger and Eeyore the ever-discouraged donkey. Tigger is always happy while Eeyore is always the picture of gloom, and each seems to be completely oblivious to the other. Each of these two has a place in our hearts, for we understand joyful exuberance, and we are all familiar with sadness. These emotions are a part of us and a part of daily life. The real challenge in our lives is to somehow integrate these two polarities into one life. Think for a moment of the simple question, "How are you?" Usually, we answered that question by saying that we are well. "I am just fine!" we answer, but then we think to ourselves, "but oh what troubles I've known at work, and I'm still upset about the latest argument with my family, and my doctor tells me I should lose weight." Occasionally we may offer a more candid answer and tell someone that life has been hard lately, but we will get through it. Having given that answer we soon question ourselves— "I shouldn't be complaining! After all, I've been well these days and the family is growing." Like either Tigger or Eeyore, we can see one side of the story, but are not always good at putting together the bigger picture that is our life.

Enter the psalmist! One of the great beauties of the psalms is the psalmist's ability to take the joyful and the sad, and put it all together into one song. There are several psalms which do this work of integration, but few do so well and so briefly as does

the 126th Psalm. These are poems which help us get a balanced and healthy understanding of our lives.

The psalm starts with good news and the recollection of a recent memory. *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 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."* God's rescue of the nation of Israel was joyfully remembered. Most believe that the singer is referring to Israel's return from exile in Babylon, and this was a truly amazing work of God. The nation had been so reduced in strength and numbers that they could easily have become extinct as a people, but God returned them to their homeland, and their neighbors took notice. Some scholars believe that the psalm may refer to another act of deliverance. Either way, the message is the same, and it is wonderful. God rescues His people!

This is our song as Christ's people, for Christ the Savior has come and rescued us from sin and death. Through Jesus' atoning death on the cross and victorious Resurrection and triumph over death, we have full forgiveness and restoration as God's people. We have become God's victorious people, and one would think that we should be bouncing like Tigger on a much more frequent basis. Indeed, we are a victorious people through Christ, and we are called to live like winners. The term "victorious living" is a popular one among many in holiness and Pentecostal traditions of the Christian Church, and these groups frequently preach the importance of living that victorious life. Live like a winner, because we are winners! There is much positive to be said for this emphasis, and I would suppose that the word victorious should be a bigger part of our vocabulary. It is with joy that I remember an Easter morning many years ago when during the children's message I led the young people in a parade around the sanctuary. First, I gave out badges which proclaimed, "He Won! We Won!" Then we joined together in a victory parade around the sanctuary. Rather than leave the marching to the children I really should have invited all the congregation to rise and join the parade, for in Christ we are all victors.

While it is a wonderful thing to seek a victorious life in Christ, it must also be noted that some have taken that message to an unhealthy extreme. Our epistle lesson begins with Paul's exhortation to *Rejoice always* (1 Thessalonians 5:16), just as Paul and Silas sang hymns in the dark prison in Philippi (Acts 16:25). We are to be a people of praise, even in hard times, but some take this teaching too far. I have known people who were experiencing tremendous loss and suffering, but dared not express that pain, for they felt that as people of faith they must always be rejoicing. God never wanted us to deny life's real hurts, or to feel guilty for crying out in pain. This brings us to the other side of the matter. We are a people of joy and victory, but what about those other experiences of life which cause us pain? How are those pains and sadnesses to fit into a victorious life? Here is where the psalmist's guidance is so very helpful

Christ's victory is very real, but, affirms the psalmist, our pains and troubles are also very real. The song begins with a celebration of deliverance, but it takes a turn. *The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.* Note how the psalmist speaks of their rejoicing, but he speaks in the past tense! *We rejoiced.* As we might say in our day, "That was then, but this is now." Times have changed. Now there is a plea for help. *Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.* Once again Israel needed to have their fortunes restored. The specific trouble is not given, but the reference to the lifeless desert of the Negeb may indicate a drought and resulting famine. This was a matter of life and death in ancient times. The prayer was earnest and bold, for the trouble at hand was very real.

While the Bible's main theme is God's work of redemption and our eternal salvation in Christ, this Holy Book also affirms the reality of suffering and sadness. The pains we know in life are real. One of my favorite verses is John 16:33 where Jesus affirms life's tragedies as well as the triumph. *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.* Jesus begins by affirming the reality of our pains and sadness. Consider Jesus' life on this earth. He did not preach a rosy story of an easy life with God and act as though he was untouched by life's pains. We are told that Jesus wept. We read of his anger, hunger and loneliness. We see his anguish and misery as he is betrayed, humiliated, tortured and crucified. Jesus had the perfect faith, yet he also felt every ounce of the pain, for pain in this life is real. And so we have many sad psalms of lament, and we have books in our Bible written by weeping prophets.

The Bible affirms the reality of suffering and our need to lament and honestly deal with that hurt and sadness. Throughout this COVID crisis I have tried to preach and present a response to this tragedy which is full of hope, yet also laments. We will most certainly get through these difficult days by God's power and therefore we should have joy. But the ache and depression also move us to pour out sorrow. There are times when a smiling public service announcement on the television and encouragement to take a walk and smell the roses, feels like an insult to hurting folks. There are times like these when we need to lament as hearts full of pain need to find expression, and bottling up that hurt only makes the pain worse. I think of a widow I knew who I believed was "one good cry away for recovery." The path of healing requires that we face the sadness and work through the pain. Solomon was correct when he told us that *there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.* (Ecclesiastes 3:4).

Joy and sorrow are both very real. The question before us is how to put them both together in the same life, and here is where the psalmist comes to our rescue. He guides us into a truly victorious life of faith which faces and deals with all of life's realities. The psalmist begins with great faith in God's ability to rescue, and to do so quickly. *Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.* The bleak picture is presented of the Negeb desert, but he also speaks of *watercourses* in that desert. How can there be watercourses in the desert? I remember as a boy visiting

many desert areas in our country's southwest. These areas were extremely dry, and the heat and dry air could make one terribly thirsty in just a short while. On many occasions I remember hiking along low areas and through small canyons or valleys, and along these paths would be the most amazing signs. Hikers were warned that if it should begin to rain the area must be evacuated without delay, for sudden downpours could quickly create raging rivers where there had recently been dry dust! Situations can change very rapidly in the desert, and I suspect that this was what the psalmist had in mind when he spoke of watercourses. He was looking for God to rescue quickly.

Having spoken this prayer and expression of faith, he offers a picture which so beautifully joins sorrow and hope. *May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.* The picture is presented of the sower planting seeds in a hungry time. It took great restraint and control in those days to put aside an adequate amount of seed grain for planting, even if it meant going hungry for a while. The planter went out hungry, tossing out the seed in hope, and confident that the hope will be realized! The psalmist then repeats and expands upon this claim. *Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

The psalmist, and the rest of the Bible as well, affirm the reality of both joy and sadness, goodness and troubles, but the two are never viewed as equals! Victory is eternal while the troubles we know at the moment are temporary. As Paul boldly asserted in the Second Corinthian letter, *For the light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all (4:17).* Viruses pass, but Resurrection life is forever.

The psalmist finds hope not only in the knowledge that troubles will pass away, but that these very troubles and painful times will be transformed into joy. The sorrow of sowing with a gnawing hunger, will give way to the joy of harvest and a full stomach! *Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.* Are you feeling victorious in these days of seemingly endless COVID depression? If the answer is "no," don't be discouraged. Even when hearts are heavy and hope seems dim, our spirits can still hang on to the Good News. Faith is a battle, and the psalmist gives great insight as to how that battle is to be waged. 2020 has been a year of genuine stress and sadness, but it has also been a year of victory in Christ, and that victory is forever, though for now we battle on.

The conflict is well summarized by an Easter sermon I heard early in my pastoral service by an experienced old timer. Like any sermon it has three parts. It began with the affirmation that *in every garden there is a tomb.* God has placed us in the beautiful earth with its bounty and human fellowship, and for this we must be glad. But our garden is presently not perfect, as in our fallen world there is sadness, trouble and even death. In every garden there is a tomb, but the Good News is that *around every tomb there is a garden!* Death and trouble may seem to overshadow all other things,

but let us not be given to despair. Christ died and was buried, but his death paid for our sins and his burial was followed by Resurrection and Christ stepping out of that grave and into a lovely garden. Then comes the third and final point. *In every garden there is a tomb, and around every tomb there is a garden. Be sure to live in the garden, not in the tomb!* For now, we live in the tension between good and evil, life and death, hope and despair. Let us be sure to live on the garden side of that divide, walking with the Savior in joyful fellowship, and staying especially close through the difficult times. *For those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*