



“We Were Like Those Who Dream...”

Psalm 126

Third Sunday of Advent

December 11, 2005

Ever noticed how you can read a scripture one time and get one meaning out of it, and read it again another at another time in your life, and get a new meaning from it? I think the same is true depending on WHERE you read a scripture. For example, imagine this 126th Psalm being read in Darfur, or Bosnia, or Rwanda. Imagine for a moment that you are a refugee or an exile living in one of those places as a refugee. Let me invite you to read this with me responsively now, as you imagine life as a refugee.

If you were living in exile or if you were a refugee, you would read this psalm very differently, wouldn't you? Words like, “those who sow in tears...those who go out weeping...” take on a sharper edge. In fact, I think that any refugee would read the whole Bible differently, and understand it more deeply than most other readers. Why? Because the Bible is a book for exiles and refugees. Much of the Bible, especially the first five books of it, was revealed to and compiled by exiles. You learned this in Bible study: how the Babylonians surrounded Jerusalem, how they broke into the city in the year 586 B.C., how they burned the city and carried many of its people away back to Babylon. There those refugees and exiles had to make their home. Another Psalm, 137, tells more of what that was like:

By the rivers of Babylon –
There we sat down and there we wept
When we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
And our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

So they wept, until there were no more tears left. And they tried to make a life in that foreign land. Then, fifty years after they had been marched to Babylon, something amazing happened. A new king, Cyrus of Persia, told them they could go home. The first three verses of Psalm 126 remember the joy of that day:

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;

You can just imagine them shouting “Yahoo! We’re going home!” (Or whatever that may have sounded like in Aramaic.) It felt too good to be true. It felt like they were dreaming. But sometimes the too good to be true does indeed come true.

But as you read further, there comes a sudden change in the psalm:

Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
Like the water courses in the Negeb.

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

“Restore our fortunes”? “Those who sow in tears”? Why such a letdown? What has happened? We don’t know for sure, but here is one theory: Imagine the people of Israel, at first joyfully returning down the highway back home to Jerusalem, until they get to the city walls. Then their faces fall as they see what is left of Jerusalem: fifty years of neglect, blackened walls, orphans in the streets. The joy of God’s deliverance has turned to despair at the disaster that faces them. You see, this psalm was not written from a mountaintop of joy, but from a valley of despair.

It is therefore a perfect psalm to read at Christmas. There are a lot of people in this room and in this land that have known life at the top of the mountain, but who now are sewing tears in the valley. There are a lot of people who have known times almost too good to be true, but who are now living in the depths of sorrow. Many of you look back to good times, many of you remember mountaintop days of the past, but you look up at them from the depths of a valley of grief, and loss, and pain.

It will be Christmas soon. The prime directive of our culture this season is to be jolly. The loudspeakers at the mall sing “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” But, truth be told, there are some of us who would like to rip those loudspeakers out by their wiry roots.

We who remember wonderful Christmas dinners when everybody was at the table, now face a Christmas table with empty chairs. There will be empty places at our tables, places emptied by death, by war, by incarceration, by natural disaster, by addiction. Some of us are haunted by the sight of other tables we have seen in the Gulf Coast, tables caked with mud and slime that will never serve a Christmas dinner again.

And some of us remember Christmas as a time when we were right with God in a close and trusting relationship, but now Christmas reminds some of us that we are no longer on speaking terms with God.

That’s the story for many of us at Christmas: we’ve known life when it was good and near perfect, when we didn’t realize how happy we were. We’ve known life when we felt so close to the power and the deliverance of God. But we find ourselves now in a

valley far from that mountaintop, a valley of grief, loss, and pain. Our joy has dried up. Our hope lies parched and lifeless.

We have known life on the mountaintop. But now that we have fallen back down into the depths again, what are we to do? This psalm is here for times like that. We do what the one who sang this psalm did. He dared to sing in the valley. He sang to remember the goodness of God that he once knew. He sang of his dream that someday the goodness of God would lift him up out of the depths again. That is what that singer did back then. This Christmas, that is what anyone in the valley of sorrow can do now. Let's look closer at how that psalmist did it.

Look at verse one for the first thing the singer did:

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

First, the singer remembered the high and holy memory of when God saved his people.

Look at verse four for the second thing the singer did:

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

The psalmist cried out to the Lord: please God, rescue us again as you did back then!

His words paint a vivid picture of a natural occurrence in that harsh land. The Negeb was a rugged region in south Palestine that was full of dry ravines and valleys. They were called "wadis." The wadi was bone dry most of the year, until the rains came. But when the rains came, those dry valleys were filled with miraculous, wild, turbulent streams of water. "Restore us" sang the psalmist, "like the watercourses in the Negeb." I'd like to hear that on the loudspeakers at the mall. "Restore us. Our life in this valley is dry as a bone. Come and let your grace rain on us until we are like streams in the desert!"

So we are at Christmas. When we feel our life is stuck in a deep, dry, dead valley, here is what we can do. We can remember back to the times when God came through for us in the past. And looking back to that, we can look forward to the next time God will come for us, the next mountaintop experience. Someday, our tears will give way to joy, our weeping to shouts of joy. God has done it before for us. God will do it again.

So our present pain bracketed by our memory of God's past faithfulness, and our confidence in God's future faithfulness. Whatever valley we find ourselves in at present, we can remember the faithfulness of God, and we anticipate the faithfulness of God.

It will all come in time, like the grizzled old preacher of Ecclesiastes wrote:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to weep, and a time to laugh
A time to mourn, and a time to dance (Eccles. 3:1, 4)

It will all come in time. Like the grizzled old apostle Paul wrote: “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6)

Our old world is in the midst of violence, disappointment, oppression, sin, and pain. Yet we believe that God is a God for whom the least, the last, and the lost will always be important. We believe this because of what God has done already, not least in his Son, whose birth gives us hope, whose death shows us forgiveness for our sin, and whose resurrection shows us a way out of death. We dream that God will rescue his people again. This is our Christmas dream, like sugarplums dancing in our heads.

Let me give you an example of how one believer has been living life in the valley while looking back at the mountaintop of God’s grace and looking forward to the next. This week I received this letter from a grieving friend:

Dear Doug,

Without laboring a point, this has turned out to be one of the most stressful years of my life, and not only because of Mom’s death, which was God’s gift to her she so devoutly and trustingly prayed for ... Many things have come together (perhaps I should say fallen apart?) at my workplace ... My colleagues and I are under stacks of paperwork, and under a microscope to such a degree that nearly every one of them I’ve talked with has contemplated (or actually is) retiring, moving, transferring, or just plain quitting. The main thing keeping me going is ...a faith in God that is growing through closer adherence to the demands for prayer and Bible reading, brought on precisely by the trials this year have brought.

This son is living in the valley of grief for his mother, yet remembering the past grace of God, and because of that, believing that God will be gracious yet again. There is much pain in his words, but there is music too, the same music that was in this psalm.

My prayer for him is that his tears will someday grow into a harvest of joy. That after all, is how our psalmist ended this song:

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. (Psalm 126:5-6)

Have you ever cried so much that you felt your tears were watering the ground? Imagine what it would be like if the Lord were to turn those tears into seeds before they

hit the earth. Imagine those tears planted in the soil, then by God's grace growing until they grow into a harvest of joy. I believe that does happen. I believe God takes the tears we've shed and transforms them into a harvest of joy.

"Those who go out weeping..." We've had a lot to go out weeping: weeping for abilities lost, weeping for a job that is lost, weeping as a caregiver who is just burned out, weeping as a parent for a special needs child, weeping for a miscarriage, weeping for a divorce, weeping for a national disaster, weeping for war. There are tears in many of our eyes.

But we with tears in our eyes can look back to all the times that God came and wiped the tears from people's eyes before:

- When God wiped the tears from the eyes of the exiles, and brought them home
- When Jesus wiped the tears from the eyes of the demon possessed, and set them free
- When Jesus wiped the tears from the eyes of the lepers, and made them whole
- When Jesus wiped the tears from the blind man, and made him see.

With tears in our eyes, we look back to how Jesus wiped those tears then.

With tears in our eyes, we look forward to the day when it will be done again...

...to the day when Revelation says, "God will dwell with them and wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 21:4)

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

-- Douglas E. Murray