

Christ Church Episcopal, Harwich Port

Sermon for October 28, 2012

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Mark 10:46-52

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Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Psalm 126 says, “Those who go forth weeping shall come home with shouts of joy.” Like the reading from Jeremiah, Psalm 126 appears to be about returning from exile. All of the scripture lessons for today have restoration or return from exile in common. They are readings about salvation and God’s grace in delivering God’s people. They offer hope for God’s people, both in the 7th century BCE and today.

The prophet Jeremiah prophesied around 586BCE, the time of the Babylonian exile. This part of Jeremiah is from the ‘book of consolation,’ which is about salvation. This prophetic speech is one in which God speaks in a prophecy of salvation. God will bring those who are scattered, that remnant of Israel, back to Zion, to Jerusalem, including the blind and lame, the pregnant women, even those in labor who have difficulty traveling. As we have heard in Isaiah’s prophecy during Advent readings, the road back will be smooth and water will be easy to find. Yahweh, God, gives a reason for what God plans to do and why God can be trusted, for, Jeremiah has Yahweh speak these words: “I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.” (Jer. 31:9). God loves God’s people like a parent loves the children and wants the best for Israel. While some consider Jeremiah to be more lamentation than hope, this passage functions as a map for survival, and a radical articulation of hope. The vision of restoration is linked inextricably to the memories of disaster and destruction earlier in Jeremiah.

This is a gathering of survivors, happy merely not to stumble... and eventually to enjoy good food and company, to laugh and dance (Jeremiah 31:12-13). Newly restored, the people relish ordinary life. But at the same time, they remember the sons and daughters, and fathers and mothers, who did not survive. They will never forget the trauma of their past, but they will enjoy a certain peace. And that will be enough.

In Jeremiah's restored community, the lame and the broken will no longer be relegated to the edges of society, left to glean the leftovers. Instead in this new society, they -- the blind and the lame, and the pregnant and laboring women -- will no longer live on the periphery. They will be revered as--and at--the heart of the community. Images like this one encourage Israel to view its marginality as the core of its communal identity. Instead of decrying and lamenting their marginal status (as an exiled people in Babylon or as a people stifled under Persian rule), their vulnerability should, according to Jeremiah, now define them. God's act of gathering the people back to the land restores them to blessing but not necessarily to power, at least in a traditional sense. Nationalism, military might, and full treasuries -- even temple glories -- are not objects of hope for Jeremiah. Instead Jeremiah sees hope in the faces of the broken and the forgotten. There he finds the essence of Israelite identity... and the basis for his particular image of renewal.

That takes us back to the Psalm and forward to the Gospel lesson about healing blind Bartimaeus. In this psalm, the notion of reversal occupies a central place, inviting the reader to recognize that restoration by God does more than simply restore what was lost. The kind of divine restoration envisioned in this psalm means much more than compensation. Instead, such restoration suggests a radical reversal of reality, both past and yet to come. And strikingly, scenes of celebration and joy accompany each reversal of reality.

The opening verse recalls what might have been considered the most significant reversal of reality in the mind of the community. The psalmist remembers the time "when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion." As in Psalm 85, the psalmist uses the phrase "restore the fortunes" to refer to the return from exile. Following the announcement of this great reversal, the psalmist recalls the effects it had upon the faithful: *"We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy."*

I love this psalm especially because it offers radical hope for a lost people. The mourning and grief that suppressed the singing of the songs of Zion while in a foreign land (cf. Psalm 137) has been radically reversed. Mourning has given way to laughter and joy. When we have been held captive in different ways, we wonder if we will ever be free again. The psalmist helps us to understand that God offers us radical hope.

Drawing from the language of verse 1, the psalmist pleads in verse 4 for God "to restore our fortunes." Rather than explaining what that coming restoration would look like, the psalmist opts for a simile. God's work to restore God's people is compared to a dry wadi in the Negev. For months on end, the wadi remains a wasteland where survival of any living thing remains in doubt.

But in a moment, as the sky opens up and the torrents of rain begin, the wadi turns from a life depriving site to a life sustaining source. That is what restoration looks like. That is what the community longs for -- to know the great works of God and to relish in the full, life-giving power that will come with this reversal.

The psalmist adopted the agricultural imagery in an effort to reinforce the notion of restoration and reversal found throughout the psalm, but even further, such imagery introduces the idea that restoration may not be instantaneous. Those who sow, do so without guarantee, but in anticipation of what will come. The psalmist prays that what began in tears and weeping will end with shouts of joy and arms filled with proof of God's great work in their midst.

Psalm 126 reminds us that "the Lord has done great things for us." Even further, like the dreamers of old, we are called to live expectantly, fully convinced that the tears and weeping of our day will not have the last word. The God we serve is the God of restoration *and* reversal.

That brings me to the gospel story of Jesus healing the blind son of Timaeus. This phrase by which Jesus opens the blind man's eyes will be familiar. "Your faith has made you well" is most often associated with the gospel story of the woman who has been suffering from a hemorrhage (cf. Matthew 9:22; Mark 4:34; Luke 8:48). It also appears in Luke 17:19 when Jesus cleanses ten lepers, and one in particular, who returns to thank him, hears these same words.

Faith can make us well, but being well does not always mean curing in what our concept of being well is. This is not magic, or superstition, or some simple fix, of course. It seems clear, to me at least, that when Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well" he is not saying that these people somehow *believed* their way into wellness. Rather he is pronouncing their wellness, declaring it, making it happen for them. It is Jesus who heals, and faith that receives that healing. And so it is, or can be, for those who hear this story and this good news. Faith can make us well. Faith can open our

eyes, unstop our ears -- even raise us from death. This is the power of the promise wherein faith and forgiveness, faith and wellness, meet; this is the power of Jesus' word for salvation.

How much I am reminded of this faith in Bev Winchell's life and death. Bev could not be restored to the quality of life she wanted or needed and she had courage and faith enough to choose quality of life over length of days. She was able to choose wholeness and wellness in the life to come over struggling in this life. This is also the great reversal, although it seems not to be that for those of us here. Faith can restore us and bring us home, like the psalmist said. For some, that restoration is in this life and for others, in the life to come.

What in your life needs healing? What in your life holds you captive? What in your life longs to be free? We see the great image in Psalm 126 of the gatherers bringing in the sheaves of wheat and having a festival. We see the great reversal that happens so much in scripture. We see the blind ones healed, the lame ones walking, the barren ones giving life. We see that smooth path that God has provided. This passage reminds me that the Christian Church is a community of blind people seeking clarity of sight so that we might in turn help our brothers and sisters see. Who could you help see this week? What scales need to fall from your own eyes that you might see more clearly the path God would have you follow?

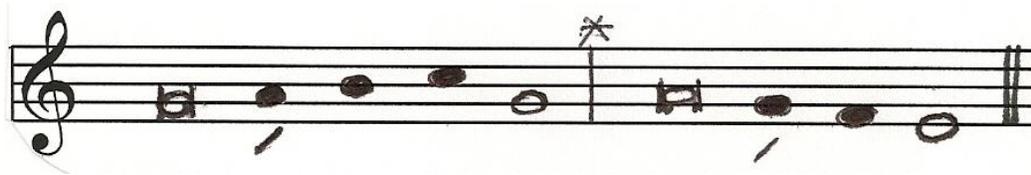
The psalmist and Jeremiah and Mark believed that God would restore them. May we be reminded as well that those who went out into exile would be restored one day and that we, too, might come home rejoicing as well. Amen.

(The Psalm setting on the next page was composed by Judith Davis)

PSALM 126 IN PARTS



CANTORS



- I 1 When God restored the fortunes of Zi/on, *then were we like those who dream.
- II 2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *and our tongue with shouts of joy.
- I 3 Then they said among the nations, *"God has done great things for them."
- II 4 God has done great things for us, *and we are glad indeed. [**R**]
- I 5 Restore our fortunes, O Go/d, *like the watercourses of the Negev.
- II 6 Those who sowed with te/ars *will reap with songs of joy.
- I 7 Those who go out weeping, *carrying the seed,
- II will come again with jo/y, *shouldering their sheaves. [**R**]

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