

“Shouts of Joy”

Psalm 126

This third Sunday in advent is traditionally known as Joy Sunday. Appropriately, our readings for this morning are sprinkled with the words joy and rejoice. To begin, I'd like to return to our opening Psalm and notice what made the worshippers sing, and even shout (NRSV, ESV), for joy:

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

²Our 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.”

³The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

Scholars aren't certain which particular restoration by God of his people is in view here, but it is likely the return of the people from exile, in the late 6th c. B.C. Dt. 30:3 for instance speaks of the Lord “restoring the fortunes” of his people by gathering them from the places to which they had been scattered. As they looked back upon their return, they could hardly believe that it had happened. Such restoration was like winning the Super Bowl; it was like a dream come true and it had filled them with laughter and joy. As one commentator puts it, God's people were “delirious with joy;” they just couldn't stop grinning and giggling! What's more, the nations around them couldn't stop talking about what this God had done for his people.

But now, as the second stanza of the psalm describes, grins had turned to tears, and laughing had turned to weeping, as people began to voice a need for a fresh infusion of God's mercy:

⁴Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the desert.

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

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

If the return from exile is in view, then this time of weeping had come because the returnees began to realize that, although they may be home, all is still not well. There was much destruction that needed to be repaired, of their homes, of their city, and of their Temple. The people suffered opposition and oppression from their neighbors. Economic hardship abounded. Things were not as they had been. Even when repairs on the Temple had been completed there had been weeping, as many of the older generation saw that it was far from its former glory (cf. Ezra 3:12).

And yet, based upon the great things God had done for them in the past, they were able to look to the future with hope. They were able to anticipate times of restoration, times that looked like water streaming into the desert, and sown seed becoming a rich harvest, times that would turn their present experience of weeping back into singing.

The psalmist gives voice, as we put the two stanzas together, to the Advent reality that our lives are bordered on the one side by the memory of God's actions on our behalf, and on the other side by the hope of God's promises still to be fulfilled. In between we find that we are not always “delirious with joy” and we need those promises to carry us forward. We need that pink candle on our wreaths to

remind us that in these short dark days, our hope is not lost and one day our groaning will end with the birth of something incredibly new. What might that look like? The prophet Isaiah helps give us vision.

Isaiah 65:17-25

Isaiah 65 is often paired with Psalm 126 to be read and reflected upon in the season of advent. In it, the prophet, like the psalmist, is reflecting on the return of God's people from exile, and the fact that all is still not right with the world. What he shares with us is God's vision for a new kind of world – a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. What will this new Jerusalem, created says God, to be a joy, look like? We often wonder what eternal life will look like. Here are a few of its components:

1. "No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days or an old person that does not live out a lifetime" (v. 20). There will be no more infant mortality and people will not be cut off in the prime of their lives by the scourge of illness or the violence of war.
2. "They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit" (v. 21). No one will take away what they have built or planted.
3. "They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune" (v. 23). The work of their hands will be meaningful, and their children will contribute helpfully to the world.
4. "Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear" (v. 24). Our relationship with God will be intimate. Nothing will hold it back or prevent it from maturing.
5. "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food" (v. 24). Enemies will lay down their weapons and even corrupt Israelite leaders (often depicted as lions or wolves that savagely devoured the people) will seek the common good.
6. And while it appears in this vision that there will still be death, Revelation 21, which takes this vision to its ultimate end, and pictures this new Jerusalem as the joining of heaven and earth, as Jesus has instructed us to pray, reveals that ultimately death will be taken away. God, who will come to dwell with his people, "will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

It doesn't get much better than this! Joy and delight will have the day. Both of these texts, as well as our psalm, cling to and rest in the hope for God's delivering, transforming presence that will renew and restore the entire community.

So, if that's what the future promises to hold, how might we live in the present? How might we live so that the nations, as the psalmist described it – those who live around us – will see positive things when they look at us, not negative, and want to be a part of the community for whom God does great things and fills us with joy?

One way, it seems to me, is to promote and labor toward that which is promised to be a part of God's new creation.

- Can we labor for the protection of infants in the womb as well as the protection of young children from horrors like child abuse, gun violence, or malnutrition?

- Can we labor for our elderly, that they can age safely and well in place, with adequate health care and communities that help guard against loneliness?
- Can we labor against the oppression that limits workers from receiving a fair wage? Can we labor for the building of affordable housing, welcoming such in our communities, to help people break out of the cycle of poverty?
- Can we labor to share the good news of our relationship with Jesus, and how the Holy Spirit enables one to have an intimate, prayer-filled relationship with the God who is making all things new?
- Can we labor for peace, and the laying down of arms, and the refusal to support leaders who are corrupt?

This new creation, envisioned by Isaiah and further revealed in Revelation by John, began with the resurrection of Jesus. What God did for Jesus after his death he promises to do for the entire world. With this in mind, after his great discussion about the resurrection and its implications with the church in Corinth, Paul concludes like this:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. [1 Cor. 15:58]

This phrase, “labor in vain,” which we heard in both Isaiah and 1 Corinthians, is actually the name of a road in Ipswich. Do you know it? It is one of our favorite walks. It begins just past the town hall and leads out to a lovely marshy area that is part of the Ipswich River, as well as a view of the Neck. Taking in the beauty of the walk reminds me, as Paul puts it, that our labor in the Lord is *not* in vain but, as we join in the beauty of what God is doing, it becomes the source of great hope and joy.

So, as Advent calls us to look ahead in this season, may we take this vision of new creation to heart, ponder its beauty, and ask the Lord how we might participate in how he is working to bring it about.