

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Psalm 126 (NIV)

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

<sup>2</sup> *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.”*

<sup>3</sup> *The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.*

<sup>4</sup> *Restore our fortunes, Lord,  
like streams in the Negev.*

<sup>5</sup> *Those who sow with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.*

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

A thirty-eight-year-old scrubwoman (cleaning lady) would go to the movies and sigh, "If only I had her looks." She would listen to a singer and moan, "If only I had her voice." Then one day someone gave her a copy of the book, *The Magic of Believing*. She stopped comparing herself with actresses and singers. She stopped crying about what she didn't have and started concentrating on what she did have. She took inventory of herself and remembered that in high school she had a reputation for being the funniest girl around. She began to turn her liabilities into assets. Eventually, Phyllis Diller made over \$1 million in one year. She wasn't good-looking and she had a scratchy voice, but she could make people laugh.

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 Psalms 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 is a great gift from God. We are not only called into a life of reverent piety; we have 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.

Because 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 onto 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, can serve as a reminder to remember what Jesus did for us.

Lent can feel 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. In Jeremiah 25:8-11, the prophet Jeremiah warned the people of this dark time:

*<sup>8</sup> Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words, <sup>9</sup> 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[a] them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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. They remained in captivity for seventy years. None of those who were carted away lived to see their freedom. They died in captivity. It 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, a feeling of lostness. However, this exercise is not intended to make us feel bad nor is it intended to cause us to get us stuck in the mire and mucky memories of our past.

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 were 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. Like, remembering the great things God has done for us that give us joy; noticing the good things God does in our current everyday lives, again, 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—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 because 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 and gives us 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 and reminds 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 neediness of the people 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 that's not where we are or who we are now. That should bring us joy. The anticipation we feel knowing that Easter is coming, and that death did not destroy the love of our lives, gives us Jesus' assurance 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! Amen.