

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Psalm 126

*¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*

*² 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."*

*³ The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

*⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

*⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.*

*⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

While at the grocery store picking up a turkey, little Billy of the Family Circus told his mother, "Thanksgiving should come AFTER Christmas, then we'd have more things to be thankful for." We can chuckle at little Billy's comment about thankfulness, but it does invite us to an opportunity to pause and consider our own attitude about our own feelings of thankfulness. We all have things for which to be grateful. We shared some of them with each other this morning. Yet even as we give thanks to God, it is also good to ponder why we are grateful and how, or even whether, our gratitude influences our Christian walk.

Today's scripture reading opens a door of opportunity for us to consider this topic more deeply. This psalm is titled "A Song of Ascents." It is the seventh in the series of fifteen songs sung by pilgrims coming to Jerusalem. It was likely composed several years after the Israelites captivity in Babylon, in overwhelming gratitude for God's restoration, and in prayer for God's continuing of restorative work in their lives. It is a song that reminded them of what they had gone through and of God's mighty work to set them free—something for which they felt they could never offer enough gratitude to God.

It was almost miraculous how it all happened. One day they were captives of the Babylonian Empire, and then seemingly overnight, that mighty empire collapsed. The pagan Persian King Cyrus, captured the capital city without firing a shot and the people were set free to return to Jerusalem.

The prophet Isaiah said this would happen. We can read about this in Isaiah 45:1-8. God anointed the Gentile ruler, Cyrus, whose kingdom spread over 2,000 miles, making it the largest of any kingdom—even the Babylonian kingdom. Cyrus was anointed by God because God had this special task in mind for him to free God's special people, the Israelites, from the Babylonians.

The people knew the prophecy, yet likely wondered whether it would ever come to pass, and it did. It was like a dream come true—a dream too good to be true. Their gratitude was felt in

their whole being. It tells us in verse two of the song that they remembered their "mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with songs of joy." They were so very happy.

Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, author, pastor and evangelist, wrote of this saying: "The mercy was so unexpected, so amazing, so singular that they could not do less than laugh, and they laughed so much, so that their mouths were full of it, and that because their hearts were full too."

We read in the second half of verse two that the joy and laughter poured out of the Israelites, so much so that those around them observed it and could not help but also recognize God's mighty gracious hand at work in the Israelites lives.

Our gratitude for all that God has done in our lives, and for all that God has given us, should always be evident. It should give witness to others of the glory and the work of God in our lives. Do our spirits exude joy and laughter? Are you happy in the Lord? Do people experience you as a miserable unsatisfied person who claims to be a follower of Christ? Or do people see the joy in your life and say that God is truly at work in you? Do they see your joy and want it for themselves? If so, that's an expression of gratitude that God welcomes and blesses.

Remembering their past journey and the joy they felt at the time they received their freedom could have become mere nostalgia for them. Those were the days, we say—wonderful but gone forever. But we find in Psalm 126 that this was not the case.

Gratitude is not a final state of accomplishment. There's always more need. Verse four in today's reading tells us that many of the Israelites recognized this. They acknowledged they were still having problems. They were still trying to rebuild their lives in the ruins of the ancient city of Jerusalem. The restoration of their lives and the great city had only begun, and they knew they were going to need God's help.

Our true gratitude, at a deeper level, gives us an awareness that God's work in and through us is not finished. We can always grow in our faith. We all sin and need forgiveness. We may have relationships that need mending. We may find ourselves lost in circumstances and cycles from which we long for freedom. Gratitude motivates us to reach higher in our spiritual lives to learn to know God and to walk in the ways of Christ, to embark on the journey and embrace the hard work of restoration in our lives.

Remembering God's goodness to us in the past when we were experiencing rough times creates a longing inside us to seek out God once again to help us with restoring our broken lives. It can be hard work, but our gratitude assures us that God will be faithful and will be with us again.

We need to recognize, however, that not everyone welcomes these upshots of gratitude. The perceived vulnerability and threats to their security and prosperity as a result of what they see as their personal rights, hard work, and accomplishments makes them uncomfortable. This was true for some of the Israelites. They chose not to return to their homeland. They had become quite comfortable and were actually prospering in Babylon. They didn't want to return and do the long-term work of restoration in their destroyed beloved city. They apparently preferred being comfortable to sharing the joy of rebuilding with those "roughing it" in Jerusalem.

Sometimes our impatience gets the best of us, and we want the broken things in our lives fixed now if not sooner. The Psalmist may be acknowledging this feeling of need as he calls for God's continued help when he says in verse four: "Restore our fortunes like streams in the Negev." The streams he speaks of were to the south of the city. When the rains came and flowed down from the surrounding mountains, the stream rose like a rushing flash flood. The psalmist was praying for a mighty, sudden work of God to further the work of restoration among God's

people. He claims most assuredly that it would come after a long time of hard work and waiting. That's what it takes sometimes. Impatience circumvents the mighty work of God in our lives

And finally, the joy of our gratitude inspires us to want to embrace opportunities to bless others—not just those who obviously have significant needs. Most assuredly we want the downtrodden, the broken, and the lost to be filled with the joy and laughter of gratitude as a result of God's care offered through our words and actions. But we want all people to be filled with the joy and laughter of gratitude for God's blessings. We don't want to hog it all to ourselves. Gratitude makes us bold and ready to embrace the discomfort that sometimes comes with walking side-by-side with those who are suffering. It makes us sensitive to the ideal of lifting up one another, building each other up so as to reach the person God created us to be.

So, true gratitude is much more than mere words of thanksgiving that we offer to God. Gratitude is a quality similar to electricity: it must be produced and discharged and used up in order to exist at all. Thankfulness is something that we should offer to God on a daily basis. Sometimes, admittedly, we may need to look for it.

Fridays are my study and sermon writing days. Often, I do some of my reading a few days before Fridays arrive, if I have the opportunity to do so. Some weeks I know it will be a difficult writing day because the scripture is one that I need to wrestle with; and other weeks I feel confident that the writing process will go smoothly. I was feeling on the confident side of things this week. But that was not to be the case as sometimes unexpectedly happens.

I actually got the meat to the sermon written in reasonable time, but I felt it needed an illustration. So, I turned to my books and my online illustration resources and read one illustration after another. Not one that I read resonated within me for the filling of that empty space in the sermon. I began to get frustrated. I thought maybe moving from my home office space to a brighter space in our sunroom would ease my frustration.

But as I sat there in my comfortable space, our dog Royce began to be obnoxious with his prodding me for attention. I began to get angry and grudgingly I decided to take him for a walk. I thought, just maybe, something will come to me while we were walking. Nope, that didn't happen. By now I was experiencing full-blown frustration and I was angry with myself for being unable to find what I wanted. Poor Don thought I was angry with him which was far from the truth. I was miserable to be around.

I decided to run an errand to Martin's for something I forgot to get when I went for groceries this week. I was angry with every red light and with the traffic trying to get in the line at the Chick-fil-a for one of their "scrumptious" sandwiches. I went in the store and got what I wanted. I returned to the car and found that if I hoped to make good time getting out of the parking lot, I was going to need to drive to an exit at the other end of the parking lot to avoid getting stuck in traffic at the Chick-fil-a, again!

My frustration obviously was not dissolving. Everything irritated me now. Things were not looking good. As I approached the intersection at Halfway Blvd. and Virginia Ave., I hoped the light would stay green, and it did. With a silent sarcastic voice I said, "Thank you God, something went right!" And "Bazinga!" as Sheldon on the show Big Bang would say, it hit me. I had lost touch with the very thing I was preparing to preach on.

My sarcastic thank you for the light staying green was a symbol of my ingratitude for what God had already given me for the sermon through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit. My inability to grasp gratitude on those moments did nothing to exude joy through me. In those moments, I had lost the joy of knowing I had something to share with you this morning. It distracted me from furthering my ability to listen for God's leading.

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Upon recognizing this, I turned my attention to looking for reasons to be grateful, instead of focusing on my frustration. Immediately, the frustration and anger began to melt away, and I realized, I was living my illustration. God is so good!

Give God thanks for the big and the small things. Look for and express your gratitude every day. Know the joy and laughter that comes with the freedom gratitude supplies as it leads us to acknowledge the presence of our all-powerful, loving and faithful God in our lives. Allow gratitude for all that God has done for you to mold you and grow you. And, let your gratitude shine so the world will see the joy of God living in you. Be inspired to seek out this amazing God we know. Be grateful, everyday! Amen.