

A couple weeks ago in the adult Sunday school class we were talking about a pretty common spiritual dynamic. We human beings have a remarkable proclivity to say to God, "God, you've done great things for me in the past, but what have you done for me lately?"

In the adult class we were talking about the feeding of the 5,000 in John. A remarkable miracle. But the next day the people track Jesus down and basically say, "What are you going to do for us today?" We liked the what you did yesterday. But how about today?

In response to such an attitude we have the joyful and hopeful words of Psalm 126. I don't preach on the psalms too often. But Psalm 126 is the third most common psalm in our cycle of readings. And it's short, memorable, and packs a ton of wisdom into its 7 short verses. So I want to take a look at it today.

It begins by talking about what God has done in the past. The psalmist looks backward with a thankful heart at the way God has acted before. Perhaps he's referring to Israel's return from exile. Perhaps it's something else. But the attitude is overwhelmingly joyful.

"1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, \*  
then were we like those who dream.  
2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, \*  
and our tongue with shouts of joy."

What an amazing statement. When God acted in the past it was like a dream come true. Our mouths were filled to the brim with laughter. And the only thing our tongues could do was sing and shout for joy.

Even Gentile nations recognized it:  
3 "Then they said among the nations, \*  
"The Lord has done great things for them."

And the psalmist agrees with what the other nations say:  
4 "The Lord has done great things for us, \*  
and we are glad indeed."

The first half of Psalm 126 is a tremendous statement of praise for God's mighty acts in the past. It's giddy and bubbly and overflowing with joy. When God intervenes, nothing could possibly be better.

But then, there's the second half of the song. The first half says we celebrated our good fortune in the past. But now, in the second half, things are not so good.

Thus v5 asks for God to intervene again:  
5 "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, \*  
like the watercourses of the Negev."

The Negev is deep desert in southern Israel. Like west Texas, it contains numerous stream and creek beds that are dry most of the year. Only in times of rain do they run with water.

That's what the psalmist is asking for. Rain on us again. Restore us again. Let life flow through us again.

And then, the final two verses. They've been rather enigmatic for western Christians. In fact, most commentators and scholars don't really know what to make of them:

6 "Those who sowed with tears \*  
will reap with songs of joy.  
7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, \*  
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves."

What does that mean? Why would you weep when you plant seeds? Again, that's something that's been hard for American Christians, even scholars to understand. But the meaning is clear to Christians in the Third World. In fact, it's one of their favorite verses.

The great expert on the Christian church in the developing world, Philip Jenkins, writes the following:

"The social background of global South (Christians) allows them to see dimensions of the text that have been largely lost in a postindustrial world. I was once talking with some West Africans about the Bible passages that made particularly good sense in an agricultural society... They were evidently moved by the verse (from Psalm 126), 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.'"<sup>1</sup>

When Dr. Jenkins talks about this incident he says he was rather mystified as to why that was one of their favorite verses—it was always rather enigmatic to him. But he says the African Christians' explanation just blew him away. He continues,

"My friends understood the reality of the situation. When the psalm was composed, they realized, times must have been very hard, and food short, a situation with which they could identify. People would have been desperately tempted to eat their seed corn but resisted the temptation because they knew, if they did that, they would have nothing to eat the following year... (They) part in sorrow with every measure of precious seed cast into the ground. It is like taking bread out of the mouths of their children; and in such times many bitter tears are actually shed over it."<sup>2</sup>

Now, just step back and think about that for a second. What an amazing act of trust. You take seed that could be used to feed your hungry, crying children. And with tears you plant it in the ground, trusting that God will give it growth, and that there will be a future harvest to keep your family from starving. Then consider the emotions when the harvest does come.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, p.72

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 73

6 "Those who sowed with tears \*  
will reap with songs of joy.  
7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, \*  
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves."

The joy of the harvest would be tremendous indeed.

Psalm 126 in its seven short verses provides a wonderful lesson about trusting in God. First, look back with thanksgiving for what God has done in the past: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, \*then were we like those who dream."

Second, ask God to act in the present: "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, \* like the watercourses of the Negev."

Third, move forward trusting that God will take the difficult things you do today and bring them to fruition: "Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, \* will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves."

This pattern is an important reminder as we approach Holy Week. In our lives there are always going to be periods of suffering and struggle and even crucifixion. Such dark times can be spiritually fruitful or spiritually paralyzing. Psalm 126 suggest that we should move through such dark times looking both backward and forward.

Not backwards in a nostalgic way, thinking that things will never be as good as the "good old days." Rather, backwards in a mode of thanksgiving for what God has done in the past, with an anticipation that God will act in the future.

In the midst of the tears of Crucifixion, we must trust in the joys of Resurrection. Good Friday is coming. But Easter will follow.