

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Thanksgiving Day (USA) • November 20, 2018

Joel 2:21-27 • Psalm 126 • 1 Timothy 2:1-7 • Matthew 6:25-33

I want to do two things tonight. First, I want to talk a little bit about Psalm 126. Kind of go through it slowly and unpack it piece by piece. And second, I want to talk about Christmas. That part will make more sense in a few minutes.

So let's do the psalm. So to understand the psalm, we need to remember the exile. We talked a little bit about the exile on Sunday. In 587 BC, the Temple is destroyed and the Israelites go into exile and they become a diaspora people. This is the Babylonian captivity. It's a crisis for the Israelites. They don't know if they're ever going to go home again. They start having kids who have no memory of their home. It seems like the covenant itself is up for grabs. Maybe it's over. Maybe God has abandoned them.

And then about fifty years later, something happens. The Babylonians are conquered by the Persians. And the Persians don't have any use for all these Israelites who have been deported, so they free them. They say, "You can go home now." So that's the background for this psalm.

So let's look at verse one. "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." This homecoming, this liberation from Babylon, is unthinkable in their minds. It's so unlikely that it doesn't even seem real. It's only possible as an act of God. It's like a dream. The Hebrew word for this restoration is *shavot*. So *shavot* isn't just about the restoration of their home. *Shavot* is the restoration of the covenant. They thought they covenant was over, but now they realize that God is still faithful to them in this act.

So think for a second about a time when you had a restoration like this. I had a conversation with someone this week who was talking about a relationship with a family member that wasn't great. And over the past year, it's gotten better. To the point where they said, "I couldn't have imagined a year ago that our relationship would be where it is today." There's a *shavot* in our relationship. I couldn't have dreamed it and yet here it is.

Let's go to verses two and three. "Then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The LORD has done great things for us and we are glad indeed." So what's going on here? This restoration, this *shavot*, is so amazing that all the nations of the earth watch this caravan of Israelites going home and they can't believe what they're seeing. Two things are worth noticing there. One is that the nations use the proper name of God, YHWH. So this isn't just that the Israelites caught a lucky break. It's that God has restored them. And people see that it's the God of Abraham and Isaac in particular.

The second thing is a little more subtle. When I was talking to Rabbi Wajenberg this morning, we were going through this psalm together, and he noticed that our translation is funny. Because he noticed that the phrase "The LORD has done great things for us" is actually "The LORD has become great through this action." Now, obviously God is great before it happens. But there's a way in which this *shavot* makes God great in the eyes of the nations because they can see God's power. There's actually an old Luther quote where he kind of gets at this idea by saying that God has "become great" by "becoming least." So for us, that's seen most clearly in Good Friday. But for the psalmist, God has become great by coming alongside the least powerful nation and liberating them from slavery.

So let's do the second half. There's a pivot here. Now we go from thanking God for something that's happened in the past to asking God for another restoration, another *shavot*. Because they get home and it seems like a dream like everything's going to be perfect. And then it's not. They still have problems. One problem, which is both a metaphor and not a metaphor, is drought. The

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Negeb in verse four is a river that dries up completely. It's not like the Mississippi that's always there. It's a river that's only there when God sends rain on the earth.

And the second image here is of farmers crying as they go out to plant seeds. Now why would they do that? They're crying because they're planting seeds for a harvest they're never going to reap. It's a drought. They're putting in all this effort and nothing is ever going to come of it. And this image of going out and coming in means something else too.

Now maybe you can think of a time in your life like that, too. You put in all this effort and you know it's not going to pay off. You expect to be disappointed. Maybe you have a relationship like that. Or a job. Or a belief. And you're saying, "I'm going through the motions, but I don't think anything's going to come of it." And yet, the psalmist still asks God to restore this person's fortunes.

On what basis do they have to make that request? Well, look at the language. "Those who go out weeping... will come again with joy." What does that language remind you of? It's the deportation from Israel to Babylon and then this restoration, this *shavot*, back to your community and the covenant. So the plea for help is connected to the thanksgiving in the beginning.

Now let's zoom out for a second. The psalms, remember, are poems or songs that are meant to be used by worshipping communities. These are not meant to be read in private. And Psalm 126 is what's called a "psalm of ascent." The psalms of ascent are psalms that were used by the Jewish community whenever they would go to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Now what strikes you as odd about that? This psalm is written in the first person. "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream." We. Were the people who used this psalm the same people who came back from exile? No. They are using someone else's words. They are taking on someone else's experience.

If you read through the psalms as a community, you'll notice that the words of the psalmist rarely fit your own emotion. You will be happy and then sing a song of lament. You will want to give thanks to God and then sing a song asking for something that you already have. That's not a bug. That's a feature. That's something we can learn from.

So what does this have to do with Christmas? You came to a Thanksgiving service and now I'm about to talk about Christmas. Why? It's because the holidays are one of the times of the year when we really struggle with how to hold ourselves together. For some of us, the holidays are great. We get together with friends. We celebrate with family. We have nice memories. And for some of us, they're terrible. Some of us lost a loved one this time of year. For some of us it's the first Thanksgiving or Christmas without someone who was always there.

That, in and of itself, isn't surprising. What is interesting is the way we respond to it. I was updating our website yesterday and putting the Advent information on it. And I included some information about Blue Christmas services that were happening in town. Blue Christmas or Longest Night Services are liturgies for people who are grieving during the holidays. And for the first time, they struck me as rather odd. How do we deal with grief? We create a service for people who are grieving and we set it up like a month before Christmas and then we can get it out of the way before the party starts. What does that say about our Christmas liturgies? They are so narrowly defined that they can't have any space in them for lament or despair. We can't have any of that. It's just all major key. The emotional vocabulary of our liturgy is so small that we have two options: happy and sad.

How do the psalms deal with a variety of emotions? They say that we're going to do all of them together. If you are happy, you'll read the psalms of lament with the people who are lamenting. If you are lamenting, you'll read the psalms of praise with the people who are giving thanks. Because the way the psalms envision liturgy is communal.

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So how does the way of the psalms become our way? How do we use words from experiences that aren't our own? One, which we just heard, is aspirational thanksgiving. We practice giving thanks. When Gail and Lani were here on Sunday from Hope and Healing after an Addiction Death, one of the things they talked about were gratitude journals. When people are grieving, they give them a journal and tell them to write down whatever they're thankful for. And if the answer is "nothing," then they say, "Well, just leave it blank and come back to it tomorrow." Thanksgiving isn't a reaction. It's a spiritual practice.

The second one is a little more complicated. It's accompanying lament. Coming alongside people who are in distress or grieving. Maybe you've had that experience where you're grieving a loss and people start avoiding you. They're so scared of saying the wrong thing that they don't say anything at all. And it's even worse! You think *Just say something. Don't act like you don't know what I'm going through.* Accompanying lament is coming alongside people who are grieving. That's what the psalms let us do. The psalms don't fix people's grief. But they tell us that no one should have to grieve alone.

When we accompany people in their grief, we lead them to thanksgiving. And when we give thanks for how God has been at work in our lives, we are drawn nearer to the places where God seems absent. And it's in those two actions, aspirational thanksgiving and accompanying lament, that all the people of God's creation are compelled to say, "The LORD has done great things for them."

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