

WEEPING AND LAUGHING, TEARS AND JOY

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
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.”
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negev.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

Psalm 126

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

The old saying claims that “time heals all wounds.” Have you heard that before? Well, in the eight years I served as the facilitator of a support group for divorced or separated people, people who were grieving the end of a relationship, we found that this is only partially true. It is true that healing of deep wounds, whether they are physical, emotional, or spiritual, requires time; healing rarely comes quickly, and patience is necessary. But while it is true that it takes time to heal, it is not time alone that does the healing. We know that without proper attention to and treatment of a physical wound, it will only fester over time, and the result can be deadly. And the same is true of the less visible wounds we carry. We need to pay close attention to our wounds and to our tears.

Psalm 126 is ultimately about laughter and joy. “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy.” The psalmist is remembering the return of Israel from exile, when a people and nation that had been utterly defeated and dislocated, were brought back from a kind of death to life. It recalls a time when laughter was not even a possibility, when life itself seemed impossible and the people lived a kind of lingering death, the joyless existence of exile.

This painful memory, this deep wound is recalled in order to give meaning to an equally impossible return to life. It looks back to a time of laughter, a time in which life was so joyful it seemed too good to be true, like a dream from which we were afraid we would awake. Have you ever had a dream so beautiful and pleasant that you didn’t want to awake, or, if you did wake up, you ached to return to sleep and resume the dream? That is the kind of dream-like existence the psalm celebrates, a joy that cannot be explained or extrapolated from the

experience of those who were living it; a life so good that it could only have come as a gift from God.

So Psalm 126 is certainly about laughter and joy, but it also makes a curious claim as well: that sometimes laughter and joy emerge from weeping. It points to a way of healing and restoration that leads through the waters of human tears, in the same way that the water running through the arid Negev brings new life and causes the desert to blossom. The psalm makes a curious claim that runs throughout the Psalter, that joy and weeping are intimately interwoven and cannot be easily separated. And that they both come from the same deep well.

A few years ago, some of us watched a documentary film called “Being Mortal,” based on the book by Atul Gawande, which is largely about the ways we prepare for the end of life. One of the people documented in that film was Jeff Shields. At the time of the film he had already gone through three years of treatment for a rare form of leukemia. A bone marrow transplant, chemotherapy—none of it had worked. He had run out of options for remission.

So, in conversation with his doctors and his wife, he decided to stop all the therapies and spend his last days at the farm surrounded by his family and all the things he loved most in this world. And in those last few days, a curious thing happened. Jeff’s wife Genie describes it well: “In those last weeks, you know, as his space narrowed and narrowed to that bed, it grew in terms of the people he was drawing in. But that’s another one of those paradoxes. You know, as your world comes closer and smaller and smaller, it becomes bigger and bigger. And—and he was seeing that.”

And then, just hours before he died, Jeff Shields left these profound words for his family and for the world: “The last couple of weeks, I’ve been surrounded by family and friends and it’s been terrific. You know, some of the best days of my life, I must say.” He acknowledged the rapid decline in both body and mind, and in bouts of confusion, but his very last words were, “I’m still a happy guy.”

How is it that a man who has gone through such suffering and is already grieving the end of his life can say that these are “some of the best days of my life,” and that he is a “happy guy”? I don’t know anything at all about Jeff Shield’s religious or spiritual life. It doesn’t really matter. What I do know is that for many of us, his words moved us deeply and we heard in them this odd mixture of weeping and laughing, tears and joy.

It reminds us that the church, particularly in the season of Advent, is called upon to point to the light, and share in the joy that is coming into the world through Christ. But even as we journey toward that light and joy we carry with us the losses that we have endured, the griefs that we share, the loneliness we endure, the brokenness of our world. We brings tears and sorrows, our own and those of others.

We come into this community not as an escape from the realities of the world, not in denial of the pain and suffering of the world, and not as a superficial salve to our aching hearts. We have joined ourselves to this community because we ourselves have been through the flood waters that threaten to sink our fragile boats; we are a part of this community because we have experienced a kind of deliverance and healing that goes beyond what our technological culture can offer.

We have joined ourselves to a community that speaks the truth about grief and speaks truth about joy. It truthfully and openly declares that the life we experience is often unfair and cruel and painful. But it also truthfully and openly declares that the Lord restores the fortunes of defeated people and gives them a dream, a new beginning that was unexpected, a beginning that could have come from no other place than from the One who does great things.

And this is not a private experience; it's not limited to our community of faith. There is a very real sense in which this aching and longing for that dream of laughter and joy is not confined to our little tribe, but is the aching and longing of the whole world. It seems to me that there are no shortages of places and people longing to hear some good news, no lack of the brokenhearted that wait to be bound up. It seems that there are plenty of captives of all sorts who dream of release and liberation, and more than enough people who mourn without comfort.

But it also seems to me that there are no shortages of stories and of people, from Hebrew exiles to John the Baptist, from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians from prison to Jeff Shield's parting words—stories that point to moments of light that break into the darkness of our world, stories that recall the faithfulness of God. And saints like Henri Nouwen who remind us that joy is “the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take that love away.”

We are called—not only in Advent, but in every season, every day of the year—we are called to bear witness to the joy we have experienced: a kind of joy that is more satisfying than a “holly jolly Christmas,” and goes much deeper than the shallow promises of our consumer society.

The words of Psalm 126 remind us that often the seeds of this kind of authentic joy are watered with the tears of grief and weeping.

Let us pray:

God of abiding love,

your word, spoken by the prophets and sung by the psalmists,
restores your people's life and hope.

Fill our hearts with the joy of your saving grace,
that we may hold fast to your great goodness

and in our lives proclaim your justice in all the world. Amen.