

WEEPING AND LAUGHING

*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 Negeb.
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 in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:4-7

At the end of Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*, after we have witnessed the unravelling of a family and kingdom, the final lines are spoken by the Duke of Albany to the few remaining survivors, and to the audience. He says:

*The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. (V.iii.323-24)*

For many people this is a difficult time of the year. Sometimes it is difficult to navigate between the forced jollity of the holiday season and the sad weight of loss and memories. Scott Black Johnston sums up the conflicting emotions that swirl around this year like the blowing snow that banks up outside the door.

He says, “At the same time that we journey toward beauty and wonder, we carry with us the deaths of loved one, and deep grief grips our hearts. At the same time that we celebrate this ‘family’ holiday, we are keenly aware of the brokenness of our own families. At the same time that children experience the excitement so strong that they are vibrating with anticipation, we carry in our hearts worries about paying the bills and frustration at their less-than-angelic behavior. At the same time that we annually dust off the word ‘merry’ for repeated use, we are gripped by depressions that cannot be drowned by glass after glass of good cheer. At the same time that we toast each other’s good health, we are aware of those whose health is not good, those who carry the burden of debilitating illness. At the same time that we profess to be following the light of a star hovering over Bethlehem, we are moving step by step into the darkest days of the year. As the carol goes, we have entered the bleak mid-winter.”
(“Luminarias,” Dec, 24, 2006)

And our own more recent experiences of darkness just adds to the heavy weight of sadness that we feel for the whole world, as new variants of the covid virus extend this intolerable pandemic; as powerful storms take lives and destroy homes and businesses; as families in Oxford, Michigan face a holiday with overwhelming grief; as people continue to treat deadly weapons as Christmas toys; as . . . we could go on and on. I know that there has never been a time when there wasn't some kind of horror unfolding in the world, but if you keep up with what is going on around the world, across the nation and down the street, it seems that sometimes the weight of sadness is just too heavy to bear.

And so we go to church.

Maybe we have come here today because we want to affirm our faith in the goodness God and of creation. We want to affirm that this world is a world of order and coherence and justice and fairness.

Or, maybe we have come here today hoping to find a sanctuary and, at least for a brief moment, to forget about the suffering in the world, to find a salve for the pain in our own hearts. And especially in the weeks of December, it may be that we have come here to be uplifted after a hard week. And so we resist those somber Advent hymns with their mournful lonely exiles. We want to jump right into the joyful and comforting carols of Christmas, and to be bathed in the warm candlelight of manger scenes and to sing "Gloria in excelsis" with the angels and to laugh with the shepherds.

And who can blame us?

Lord knows we have plenty to escape from, and we can all use a bit of respite.

But then, somewhere in the cracks of the service and through the seams of the liturgy, the weight of this sad time will creep in by way of some word, some image. And soon we will have to go back out into the cold and snow; and tomorrow we will have to face up to the fact of another Monday morning. Soon we will once again be confronted with the harsh reality of a world that is marked by incoherence and unfairness and cancer and poverty; hunger and AIDS; and the senseless deaths of bright young men and young women.

And so, even though we go to church, it may be that even here, we feel a clash between what we think we *ought* to say and what we *really* feel, between what we *want* to affirm, here in the warmth and security of this sanctuary, and what we have *experienced* in the real world, to which we will return in a short while.

But then we happen to notice that it's the third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of Joy. We see the pink candle glowing with flame, we hear Paul's shout-out to the Philippian church, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, Rejoice." We hear the psalmist affirming that the Lord has done great things for us so that our mouths are filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. And so we put on a brave face. We grit out teeth, blink back the tears, and try to convince ourselves that "all things work for good." And when we ask each other how we're doing, I'll say "fine" and you'll say "fine," because we think it's what we *ought* to say, regardless of how we really feel. We'll tell ourselves that "weeping lasts for the night, but joy comes with the morning," and until then we'll have to muddle through somehow; that this is the life God has given us and we have to just have faith and accept things the way they are.

And to that I say . . . "Baloney!"

The Bible knows nothing of that theology. At almost every occasion of joy and gratitude and laughter in the biblical narrative, there is also a remembrance of a season of weeping and grief and sorrow, of crying out to God in protest and complaint, and petitioning

God in sometimes desperate language to show up, or at least speak up; to intervene and make things right and restore the fortunes of God's people.

Psalm 126 is ultimately about laughter and joy. But it is a laughter that still remembers a time of weeping, of sowing the seeds of joy in tears and going out with weeping.

The psalm makes reference to the return of Israel from exile, when a people and nation that had been utterly defeated and destroyed and dislocated, were brought back from 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 joy-less existence of exile. This painful memory is recalled in order to give meaning to an equally impossible new reality of return to life and laughter, a time in which life was so joyful it seemed too good to be true. The psalm says that the experience was such a change from the reality they had known in exile that it was almost unreal, 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 from God. The second half of the psalm petitions God to restore the community to that kind of joy.

But this is a particular kind of joy—the kind that still remembers the pain and the weeping. The psalm is about joy, but it is not a blind denial of grief, not a stoic acceptance of things as they are. It insists that this kind of joy can only be experienced after the grief has been honestly acknowledged, openly addressed and brought to speech. Joy of this kind only comes when we are truthful, when, as Shakespeare's lines suggest, we obey and lean into the weight of this sad time and speak what we feel not what we think we ought to say. It comes when we break the silence and acknowledge the reality of the sorrows that we carry around with us and when we acknowledge the dissonance between what we experience in the world, life-draining illnesses, demoralizing inequalities, indifference to suffering, the unfairness of it all; and what we dream of, the songs of contentment, joy and laughter, justice and equity for all people.

So this psalm is certainly about laughter and joy, but it also makes a curious claim as well: that the way to healing and restoration is through the waters of human tears, in the same way that the water running through the Negev brings new life and causes the desert to blossom. The psalm makes the curious claim that runs throughout the Psalter, that laughter and weeping are intimately interwoven and cannot be easily separated, that they both come from the same deep well, the well of God's presence among us in all times and under all circumstances.

The message of the church is that we come into this assembly 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 own aching hearts. We have joined ourselves to this community because we, and all those who have come before us, have been through the flood waters that threaten to sink our fragile boats; we are a part of this community because, over and over again, we have experienced a kind of deliverance and healing that has surprised us, a healing that goes beyond what our technological culture can offer.

We have joined ourselves to a community that speaks the truth about grief in the face of a death-denying and grief-denying culture; and it is also a community that speaks the truth about joy in the face of an anxiety-ridden, consumer-driven society. 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, who restores the fortunes of defeated people and gives them a dream, the one who liberates captives, and comforts the grief-stricken, and brings good news to the oppressed, and binds up the brokenhearted—the only one who can speak the word that a sad world aches to hear—that one has come among us as one who weeps with us, as Jesus wept over the death of Lazarus, and so honors and validates our own weeping. The one who laughs with us, as when God laughed with Sarah when she heard that long after it seemed possible, she was to give birth to a child, and so opens up utterly new ways of being that give us a reason to laugh again.

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

Let us pray:

Like the psalmist, Lord God,

we, too, have dreams,

we, too, have hopes,

we, too, look for restoration of good fortune,

so that we may once again laugh the laughter of deep and satisfying joy.

Lord God, here in the depths of winter,

while we live our life of tears,

as we struggle under the weight of unbearable sadness,

intervene in our world and in our lives with a new word:

a word of grief shared,

but also a word of resurrection.

In the meantime, we wait—expectantly but confidently.

For as long as it takes, we wait for your surprising gift,

the Word who came among us and is immersed in our world. Amen.

*(from a prayer by David Grant, in *Grant Us Your Peace*)*

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