

Harvesting Joy
Psalm 126; John 1:6-8,19-28

This week of Advent we lit the candle of joy. In normal years, - let's say years prior to 2020, it may not have been so difficult to see the joy in our lives, or to find the joy that we attain through our faith in Christ. But these past years have been quite different, haven't they? We have all had to adjust to a pandemic reality and individual health issues, open wars, political unrest, a raise in hate, mass shootings. Joy seems like a precious commodity right now. When times are tough, and things seem bleak, it can seem like we will not experience joy again.

In preparing this this message I came across this story...*Some time ago, the American Southwest experienced a devastating drought. Centuries-old pinyon trees (a type of pine tree similar to a juniper) that covered the hills throughout northern New Mexico became susceptible to bark beetles and died by the thousands. The once green landscapes turned grey with dead trees. For longtime residents, it felt like a death in the family...Then one summer, it rained. Within days, fields of wildflowers sprang up. People could not believe their eyes. Every patch of ground was covered with yellow daisies, purple asters, and other flowers not seen in over a century. But the rain alone was not the reason for the color. The needles of the dead pinyon trees provided mulch and nutrients needed by the long-dormant seeds. The trees would never be restored, but their death gave birth to new beauty as far as the eye could see.*

"We cried as we went out...we celebrate as we bring in our crops" (Psalm 126:6).

Psalm 126 may seem a little out of place for the third Sunday of Advent. Granted the psalm speaks of joy...even "songs of joy", but with the images of seeds, and sowing, and sheaves of harvest, it seems better suited for Thanksgiving than Advent. It has more in common with "Come, You Thankful People" than "Come, O Long-Expected Jesus."

However, a closer reading reveals its Advent message. The psalm looks for signs of God's promise in dark and difficult times. It first reminds them of things past, in the joy and laughter the people knew when God brought them home from exile. Even other nations acknowledged God's mighty deeds on their behalf. Their remembrances of things past can resonate with us during Advent - when we look back at Christmas' pasts to recall long ago joys and better times. Like the psalmist, we can remember "when our mouths were filled with laughter"... our family was all together, our church was full, our nation was more cohesive, and the world seemed, if not joyous, at least a safer place.

But Psalm 126 is not just an exercise in nostalgia. The remembrance of things past has a present purpose. Recalling God's deliverance long ago leads directly to the call for God to use that same transforming power now. Verse 4 even asks God to demonstrate greater power than before. If translated literally, verse 4 calls for "streams or torrents" in the Negev - a desert whose very name means "dry," "parched," "the hottest place around"...Isaiah 35:10 predicted that "sorrow and sighing will flee away". While Psalm 126 proclaims such sadness will be transformed into "songs of joy". In promising such joy, the psalm offers an important insight into its nature. This is no jingle bells joy bought with a credit card or holiday gathering. The seeds of this joy have been planted in sadness and watered with tears. This honest joy can only come after weeping has lagged into the darkness of night.

Such an understanding of joy is vital in the life of faith, particularly in Advent. For all their celebrations in more normal times, the weeks leading to Christmas can be a time of sorrow. Sometimes we experience Advent as a personal sadness, remembering a loved one who has died or a relationship that has ended. It can also be a sorrow we share as a nation, or as churches when our preparations for the Prince of Peace make us realize how far we have strayed from that path. The sorrow we experience can separate us from God,

particularly if we confuse Advent's true joy with our culture's teachings about happiness and prosperity.

In contrast, Psalm 126 acknowledges the reality of sorrow. It remembers and points to God's power to transform sorrow into joy. The joy the psalm both remembers and anticipates is a particular kind, namely, the joy of the harvest. One could make the argument that the psalm is better for bringing in the sheaves than preparing for the birth of the Messiah, were it not for the fact that for the Hebrews, harvest joy was celebrated far more than good crops. When the people of Israel brought their first fruits to the temple, they not only thanked God for the abundance of that particular year, they also gave their thanks for God's deliverance in the past. In Deuteronomy 26, they remembered God's faithfulness and transforming power that went all the way back to Abraham, that wandering and childless Aramean of whom God had made a great nation. Their harvest prayer also recalled how God's power had transformed them from Pharaoh's slaves to sowers of their own seed, a free people in a promised land. The natural power of God to turn seeds into grain would be miracle enough. But Psalm 126 makes an even greater statement. The seeds are not ordinary seeds, but seeds of sorrow. The fruit they bear is not grain or wheat, but songs of joy.

This image, "sow in tears, reap with songs of joy," incorporated an ancient Near East belief that weeping while you planted made the crops more productive. By linking that understanding to the celebration of God's deliverance, the psalm changes an agricultural practice into a powerful theological statement. It affirms both God's power and the people's faith. They "will return with songs of joy." Thus the psalm not only calls upon God to use that transforming power, but also calls us to be open to its possibilities. It challenges us to trust God's joy, wherever we encounter it, in a stable in Bethlehem, at an empty tomb, or in acres of splendid daisies.

In our own time of sorrow and darkness, it is my hope and prayer that we remember the joy that arises in the harvest that our tears water. May we always remember the joy that follows the sad times of life, and the hope that this time too, shall pass. May that hope and joy reflect the light that John speaks of...the light that soon will enter the world yet again at Christmas. May it be so. Amen.