

“Between Memory and Hope”

I.

On occasion I have been accused, by friends and family alike, of being a font of useless information. Since I have this reputation to live up to, I thought we might start this morning’s sermon with a brief history of Advent. (Don’t worry: the emphasis is on the word *brief*). As church holidays go, Advent and Christmas are somewhat late inventions—the earliest reference to Advent that scholars can find comes from the later half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Back in those days, Advent was a pretty grim affair—the church treated it as a penitential season, much like Lent, to prepare for the big feasts of Christmas and Epiphany.<sup>1</sup>

But it wasn’t all fasting and self-examination. The Third Sunday of Advent—that would be today—was traditionally known as *Gaudete* Sunday, from the Latin *gaudere*, which means “rejoice.” In the middle of its bleak midwinter penitence, the church carefully carved out one Sunday for some joy.

I think it’s a tough sell. I don’t know about you, but by the Third Sunday of Advent, I’m not feeling the joy anymore; I’m pretty much ready to strangle somebody. The novelty of the season has begun to wear off; the stress starts taking its toll. Just look at us: we’re spending too much, and eating too much, and doing too much, and worrying almost all of the time. We’re a mess! We may have a lot of intense emotions at this time of year, but joy is rarely one of them.

I guess that is why we have this psalm as our text for the day. It points us in the right direction. In six short verses, the psalm suggests that joy may be nearer than we know. You just have to know where to look.

II.

Psalm 126 reflects the realities of a specific time and place. The place is Israel, the time about 500 years before the birth of Jesus, and the mood is mixed. The author of this little psalm has seen a lot—both the dramatic deliverance of God’s people and the deep disappointment that followed.

The deliverance, in this case, was the end of Israel’s exile. Six hundred years before Jesus was born, the Babylonian Empire was the biggest, baddest nation on the block, the uncontested sole superpower of the Ancient Near East. Empires live for conquest, and so in the year 587 Babylon did what Babylon does best: it conquered the nation of Judah and destroyed the holy city of Jerusalem—flattened its walls, burned its buildings and tore its temple to the ground. Most of the population was carried off into exile; forced to live as foreigners some six hundred miles from home. The experience of exile traumatized God’s people like nothing had before.<sup>2</sup>

But seventy years later, something remarkable took place; something that, in time, Israel would come to call a miracle: Babylon fell. A bigger, badder bully—the empire of Persia—claimed for itself the title of Ancient Near Eastern Heavyweight Champion and forced Babylon into an early retirement. Then came the miracle: Cyrus, the king of Persia, decreed the end of the exile. The prison gates swung open wide. God’s people could go home.

So they did—some of them, anyway—and the Psalm opens recalling the giddy joy of that great homecoming day:

*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 return from exile was one of those “pinch me moments,” when life seems too good to be true, when you find yourself laughing, even at jokes that aren’t funny; when you feel like you just might burst into song.. Against all odds, Israel returns from exile. Only God could have done such a thing.

And Israel is not alone in its amazement; even other nations—even the pagan nations—notice this mighty act of deliverance:

*Then it was said among the nations,  
‘The LORD has done great things for them.*

To which Israel can only answer in an astonished echo:

*The LORD **has** done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.<sup>3</sup>*

The return from the exile is a dream come true. So you might expect the psalm to end at verse three, to go out on a high note: “And they all lived happily ever after.” But life rarely works that way, and neither does the Bible. The exile may have ended, but the letdown was yet to come. And so, at verse 4, the mood shifts significantly. The psalmist’s attention turns from the happy memory of deliverance past to the urgent need for deliverance in the present:

*Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

The end of the exile brings on a brand new batch of problems. All is not well in the New Jerusalem. The city still lies in ruins; the people probably came back from exile with the clothes on their backs and precious little else; they are hungry and anxious and insecure. The home they thought they had turned out to be a barren patch of wilderness, “like the watercourses of the Negeb.” The Negeb is the dry and desolate southern region of Judah. On average, it receives less than eight inches of rainfall annually. But when the rainy season comes, for a brief time the desert is drenched and the dry river beds run over with life giving water.<sup>4</sup>

That is how the psalmist feels –like a desert in need of a deluge, like thirsty ground that yearns for a drink. You did it before, O God. Now we need you to do it again. *Restore our fortunes, O LORD.*

But strangely enough, Israel often does best in desperate moments like these. In the last two verses of the psalm, the writer looks forward to what *will be*.

*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.*

This ending exhibits the kind of theological genius that got Israel through every exile time. In a bold and daring act of imagination, the psalmist re-imagines the current crisis as a season of opportunity –as a seed time, a time to plant and water and wait, to do what we can, and then live in the hope of a harvest to come.<sup>5</sup> So there may be weeping for now, but joy is on the way. There may be scarcity right now, but soon we will shout for joy as we carry in the sheaves. God *has* delivered us before; God *will* deliver us again. And so the psalmist ends up on a note of joy.

### III.

Joy is a funny thing. I'm not sure we understand it. We tend to think of joy as some sort of emotional high –like riding a roller coaster, or falling in love. We equate it with endorphins...and then wonder why life fails to deliver it. We wonder why joy eludes us.

But here is the thing: joy is not the byproduct of goose bumps or head rushes. Joy is not an end in itself. When we treat it that way, we will always fail to find it. And the open secret is this: joy is actually easy to find. You just have to know where to look. To hear the psalmist tell it, joy resides in a very specific place. Joy has an address. Call it the intersection of memory and hope.<sup>6</sup>

The psalmist's joy emerges out of *memory*. The entire first half of this psalm focuses, not on the present, but on the past. It recalls what God has done before –the end of the exile, the time when God restored the fortunes of Zion. The psalm calls it all to mind; remembers the emotion; lingers lovingly over every little detail.

God's people live by memory.<sup>7</sup> Have you ever noticed how much time we spend around here telling stories? We do it in worship, we do it in Stepping Stones, we do it in classes for adults. Every time we gather, we get these stories out, and dust them off, and tell them one more time. We remember the story of God parting the Red Sea waters, making a way out of no way, leading an entire people out of bondage and into freedom. We remember the stories of our ancestors in the faith, the constant failures of God's people and the constant faithfulness of God. Most of all, we remember the story we will tell again at Christmas time, about a God who came all the way down to us, about that baby born in a manger. We remember how the child grew up and got to work, showing us the love of God in a human life. We remember how that love proved threatening to the powers-that-be; how they did him in on a Friday afternoon. And then, of course, every Easter we recall what happened next.

We *remember* –not because we want to live in the past, but because these stories are true. They show us the world as it really is; they help us keep our heads on straight.

But that is not all that these stories do. Notice how, in the psalm, memory leads right into *hope*. After remembering the end of the exile, the psalm asks God to do it again. And then the last two verses look into the future -imagining what that salvation will look like, envisioning the fulfillment of all that God has promised.

Memory gives birth to hope. Stories of our past inspire visions for the future. God has done it before, and God can surely do it again. So we pray for the reign of God to come, the will of God to be done, on earth as it is in heaven. And before you know it, we're noticing all the things that could be different in this world; we're dreaming dreams, having visions, getting glimpses of better things. We start to see what is possible; start to yearn for what God has promised. We become a people of hope.

Memory and hope –isn't that what Advent is all about? It is a season to share these old stories and sing these old songs and let them do their deep work within us. Memory and hope. And when we find that sweet spot—when we live between the recollection of all that God *has* done and the anticipation of all that God *will* do—when we take up residence at the intersection of memory and hope, we won't have to go looking for joy.

Joy will just find us.

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<sup>1</sup> "Advent," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Edited by F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingston. (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.20-21.

<sup>2</sup> "Exile." *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Paul J. Achtemeier. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp.315-316.

<sup>3</sup> A point made clear to me by Brueggemann et al in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary on the NRSV –Year B*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), pp.21-20.

<sup>4</sup> "Negeb," Ibid, pp.745-746.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on The Book of Psalms, Volume V*. Translated by Rev. James Anderson. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), pp.95-103.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this formulation of the matter to J. Clinton McCann's insightful treatment of the Psalm in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume IV. (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996), pp.1194-1196.

<sup>7</sup> See Brueggemann et al.