12-13-20, The Holy Way

Sermon on Psalm 126

1. Introduction
2. This is a psalm whose date of writing is disputed. Some commentators suggest that is was written as late as the 300’s BCE. Others suggest that it was written in the late 500’s or even earlier.
3. It is a brief psalm which is made up of two parts, one of which looks back to the past and one of which looks forward to the future.
4. The description, which is counted as Verse 1 in the Hebrew Bible as it is used in Judaism, is “A psalm of ascents.” It is believed that these 15 psalms were sung by those traveling up the road to Jerusalem for the holy days to worship in the Temple
5. Prayer
6. The text
7. (v. 1—3) **Looking back with joy** When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. [It isn’t definite what event or events this refers to. If it was written in either the late 500’s (after the end of the Babylonian Exile) or in the 300’s, the event is God’s restoration of the city of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. If it was written earlier, the event is uncertain. It may just refer to God’s continued faithfulness.]
8. (v. 2a) Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
9. (v. 2b) Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”
10. (v. 3) The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced
11. (v. 4—6) **Looking forward with confidence and hope** Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses of the Negev. [The Negev is a desert area in the south of Israel. Where we have arroyos in our Sonoran desert, the Negev has wadis. These watercourses are dry for much of the year, but when the rains come, they are filled with life-giving water, which is the source of life in all deserts.]
12. (v. 5) May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
13. (v. 6) Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.
14. What shall we take away from this text this morning?

As I said earlier, our theme for this third Sunday of Advent is joy. This psalm looks back to a time when God did a marvelous work of restoration, causing joy and dream-like wonder for God’s people. And it goes on to invite God to continue to bless God’s people in such a way that our tears of sadness may be replaced with unrestrained joy.

I think there are clear parallels in this psalm to the lives we live in relationship with God. Looking back to the birth of Jesus, his life, his atoning death, and his resurrection, God has done a marvelous work of restoration in the past. We could never even begin to earn or deserve this gift of grace. And yet this is what God, in God’s wisdom, mercy, and grace has decided to do. And by this gift, we are filled with joy and hope.

We also look forward, knowing that, after our time is completed here on earth, we will come to know God fully and will spend eternity in joy and peace with our Lord. But what happens in between? Is life just a time for putting one foot ahead of the other and wishing it was done? No! Absolutely not!

In John 10 Jesus is describing himself with the metaphor of being the Good Shepherd. And, in verse 10, he says, “I came so that they (his followers) may have life and have it abundantly.” Jesus is the source of our life, our joy, and the abundance in our lives.

So, how can we experience this joy? Well, one certain way is to get to know our Good Shepherd better. And how can we do that? There are several ways to do this. One is to make it a practice to study God’s word, which introduces us to Jesus. Practice reading the Scriptures regularly. Participate in a Bible study. We do one on Zoom every Wednesday morning from 9:00 to 10:00; call me or email me if you’d like to be a part of it, and I’ll send you a Zoom invitation.

Another way to get to know Jesus better is to make a new commitment to regular prayer. As we encounter our risen Savior in prayer, we understand better and better who Jesus is and what he has done for us. Some people set aside a particular time and space in their homes for prayer. Others make it a practice to be praying regularly as they are going about their various tasks during the day. Either of these approaches can be a good one, and I encourage you to find out which, if either, is the better fit for you. Regardless, prayer is one of the very best ways to get to know Jesus better.

And here’s another way to experience joy in your life: be a source of joy in someone else’s life. Write a card. Make a phone call. Do a kind act. Offer to help someone else. If you’re comfortable with Zoom, schedule a virtual visit with someone who’s living alone. Volunteer to walk dogs or cuddle cats at the Humane Society. Volunteer to help immigrants at Casa Alitas or another shelter.

One of the surest things you can do to bring joy into your life is to intentionally bring joy into someone else’s life. Another is to deepen and enrich your relationship with the source of your salvation and your joy. Be a part of it.

We look back to Jesus birth, life, death, and resurrection and we are like those who dream. We are overwhelmed and overcome by God’s love. We look forward to entering into the glorious presence of God, and we are overwhelmed and overcome by the prospect. And now, in the midst, in the life, the truly abundant life we have in Jesus, we experience joy and we seek to share joy with others. May we ever be faithful in our walk with the preacher from up in Galilee. May it be so. Amen