

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

This Day of Joy

Psalm 126

Sunday, December 17, 2023

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Hodie, a celebration of Christ's coming to us this day. Traditionally sung at Christmas to welcome the birth of Christ, we have been using this ancient Latin text to remind ourselves in Advent that we should expect Christ to come to us today. When we accept Christ coming to us, we should sing out joyfully, celebrating Christ's presence. The text tells of the rejoicing of the angels joined by the righteous, echoing the song the angels sang over the fields of Bethlehem, 'Glory to God in the highest!'

Today, this Third Sunday of Advent is a day dedicated to rejoicing. Traditionally, the third Sunday of Advent was called Gaudete Sunday or Rejoicing Sunday. The Latin word for rejoicing was the first word spoken to start the worship service: Gaudete, Rejoice! This time of year, you may hear another Latin text from the 16th century, Gaudete, which also calls for rejoicing in the presence of Christ. A British folk group turned that Latin carol into a hit in the early 1970s.

Gaudete Sunday arose because, in parts of the early church, Advent was a time when those who might join the church on Christmas day would go through a season of preparation. They were taught parts of the worship service and what would happen at baptism. It was similar to Lent, the season before Easter when candidates to join the church prepared for their baptism and membership. This meant Advent was often associated with penitence and fasting. So, this day was marked off to remind Christians that we always have reason to rejoice because Christ is with us.

Since the third Sunday of Advent was meant to be different in tone, many churches used different paraments in their worship services; instead of purple or blue, rose or pink was used. This is why you often see Advent wreaths with three purple or blue candles and one pink candle.

Our last scripture reading for today is a Psalm celebrating how God comes to us and fills us with rejoicing. It is Psalm 126

- 1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,[a] we were like those who dream.
- 2 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."
- 3 The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.
- 4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.
- 5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
- 6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

This psalm is about joy remembered and joy anticipated. Both joys are seen as a gift of God, the result of God's intervention. The joy remembered is the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple. After the city had been destroyed, many thought they would never be allowed to return and worship God in the Temple. It seemed like a dream. "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." What seemed impossible and wishful thinking for humans, God was able to accomplish. That miraculous intervention of God also gave a new spirit and a new voice to the people. God filled them with laughter and gave them shouts of praise. Others looked on and marveled, saying the Lord had done great things for them.

Psalm 126 is one of the pilgrim psalms, a set of psalms worshippers would recite as they made their way to worship in the Temple. The psalmist is remembering

these events of the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of Jerusalem. The singer could look out and see the rebuilt walls while climbing the steps into the sanctuary.

Recalling the rebuilt city reminds us that the Bible is filled with unexpected restorations that God brings about. When Jacob thought his son Joseph was dead, he is surprised to see him sitting as the second to Pharaoh in Egypt and weeps tears of joy. When the Israelites thought their lives were doomed to slavery, God provided a way to freedom through the Exodus. When Mary and Joseph thought they had lost Jesus in Jerusalem, he was restored to them in the Temple. When the disciples thought Jesus was dead and their mission was done, Jesus was resurrected.

Memory is an important part of our worship life. In times when we feel hopeless and see no way forward, it is important to remember the things God has done for us, to remember that God can do what we think is only possible in dreams. This is part of why we worship and read these stories from the scriptures. The memory of God's past restoration gives us hope for God's anticipated intervention in our lives, even when it seems like a dream.

I wonder sometimes if one of the problems we suffer in the church today is our dreams are too small. Are we too cautious and careful, calculating only what we think we can do? Are we ready for the kind of unbridled joy that erupts when something happens that only God can bring about?

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter."

One of my favorite stories of restoration in the Bible happens in the book of Acts. Peter is in prison, and the church is praying for his release. Miraculously, Peter is freed from his cell and goes to the house where the

church is praying for his release. He knocks at the door and asks to enter. The servant is so shocked that she runs to the other believers and says, "Peter is at the door knocking!" They say, "No, he can't be. We are praying for him to be released from prison!" When they finally let Peter in, he tells them that when the angel came to tell him he was free to leave the prison, Peter thought it was a dream.

The prophet Joel associates dreaming with the gift of God's Spirit. "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your old shall dream dreams" (Joel 2:28). Joel goes on to talk about this outpouring of the spirit as God's restoration and the nations will see it.

But this memory causes the psalmist to confess that more is needed than just the construction of walls and buildings. This is where hope and anticipation enter the psalm. The psalmist realizes that the people need renewal. Like rain that renews the earth, so our souls long for the renewing presence of God. Many are in tears. However, the psalmist is convinced that God can once again intervene, and those sowing tears and weeping will reap harvests of joy.

This day, this day of rejoicing, calls us to dream, to dream of lives not limited by what we can accomplish or even by what we can think and imagine but by the joy of God's presence breaking loose in our midst. Good Christian Friends, Rejoice!