

Joy before the World

Psalm 126, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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*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, NRSV)*

On the road to restoration.
That’s the theme for this third Sunday of Advent.

Almost three years ago, I was driving east on Wilden Avenue.
My car: A 2000 Honda Civic LX.
It’s color: Vintage Plum.

According to the owner’s manual,
the 2000 Honda Civic LX belonged to the sixth-generation of Civics.
It included a 1.6 liter 16-valve Single Overhead Cam
with a multi-point programmed fuel injection engine,
power-assisted front disc and rear drum brakes,
variable power-assisted rack and pinion steering,
and side impact door beams that provided, and I quote,
“sure driving confidence and peace of mind. “

And, believe me, on that day, on Wilden Avenue, I had both . . .
until, that is, my 2000 Honda Civic LX, that engineering and technological marvel,
was brought to a standstill.

And do you know what did it?
It wasn’t a blown tire, or an engine malfunction,

or a problem with the fuel pump, the alternator or transmission.
It wasn't anything like that.

It was a piece of plastic of quarter,
the part that holds the windshield wipers in place so they can move as wipers do,
back and forth, back and forth.
When this broke that day,
it left my windshield wipers appearing like touchdown Jesus on the library at Notre Dame.

But unlike the one whom that mural represents,
the upraised arms on my windshield made it so that I couldn't see.

It was raining that day,
and I pulled off the road a couple times to manually wipe the windshield.

But then it rained harder, and, I won't lie,
because I didn't have far to go,
I briefly thought about rolling down my window and sticking my head out.
But then I thought about how far I'd have to stick my head out
and about how rain blowing directly in your face
probably isn't a safe way to drive.

I pulled off the road and stopped.

Although everything else was functioning properly,
the rain and a little piece of plastic made my car useless.

I couldn't drive because I couldn't see.

I couldn't see past the rain.

When you can't see past the rain,
the world appears dull, depressing, and permanent.

I feel like that sometimes, especially these days.

I imagine the same is true for many of you, too.

Maybe you feel that way right now.

What is it that is making it difficult for you to see, to move forward,
to have hope, to have joy?

Maybe it's not one thing you can identify.

Maybe it's everything.

You know, if you read between the lines of Psalm 126,
you might think that the people of Israel were having a hard time
seeing past the rain.

This psalm begins with a memory,
a memory of what it felt like when Judah's exiles returned from Babylon.

Let me paraphrase Psalm 126.

When God returned the exiles of Zion,

We laughed, we shouted with joy,

and the nations around us said,

"The Lord has done great things for them."

The Lord has done great things for us,

and we rejoiced."

The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Immediately after this verse comes these words:

“Restore our fortunes, O God.”

Obviously, something has gone wrong.

The joy that everyone felt upon the exiles’ return home
is very different from the present reality at home.

It was hard to see, to move forward, to have hope, to have joy.

Today is Gaudete Sunday in the church calendar.

Gaudete is Latin for “rejoice,”

and the third Sunday of Advent is set aside as a day to rejoice at the nearness of Christ’s coming.

That’s why the candle for this Sunday is pink, different from the other Advent candles.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says,

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Rejoice. Always.

But what if you’re having a hard time seeing past the rain?

Maybe you can tick off all the reasons why you should feel joyful or you should feel thankful,
but, in truth, you don’t feel joyful or thankful.

What if you feel stuck, caught in circumstances that you can’t change,
like you’re stopped on the side of the road with cars whizzing past you,
(and then, you come to worship,
and you feel like a failure in faith
because 1 Thessalonians says, “Rejoice always”)?

What if you feel like something has broken,
and you can’t see past the rain?

Before I go on, I want to say

if you have felt the way that I just described for an extended length of time,
like several weeks
and you can’t seem to pull yourself out of it,
talk to someone.

Talk to a trusted friend or family member.

Talk to one of us pastors.

Talk to your doctor because, if you need it,
medication or counseling, or both,
can help you.

In fact, they both can play a part in the miracle of healing.

Depression is not a spiritual failure --

it’s a medical condition that can be treated.

I tell you this because someone once needed to tell it to me.

To be clear, neither talking nor medication nor counseling can take away the rain,
but it can help fix a small piece that allows you to see your way through it.

So that you won’t be stopped at a standstill.

So that you can move forward.

So that you can get back on the road to restoration, to wholeness, to joy.

In the second half of the psalm, the writer pleads to God,
 "Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
 like the rivers spring to life after a long, dry season.
 May those who sow in tears reap with joyful shouts."

In other words, like a child begging for one more push on the swing
 (and then one more) (and then one more),
 the psalmist says, God, you did it before, now do it again.

Then, surprisingly, in this psalm's last verse, Israel's plea becomes God's promise:
The sowers who go out weeping shall come home with joy as reapers.
Shall come home with joy.

I find it significant that the psalmist describes God's acts of restoration
 with the metaphor of the rivers' rise and fall
 and the farmers' sowing and reaping.

Based both on Israel's past experience and the observed routines of life,
 we, the people, have reason for hope.
In times when we lament what is happening in our world, in our church, and in our lives,
 we are called to bring our fears and sorrows before God
 with the expectation that God is acting in us, through us, and beyond us.

Remember?

Just as dry riverbeds become flowing waters,
 just as sowers become reapers,
 so it is that weepers will become dreamers, laughers and joyful shouters,
 that's the promise of God.

God has done it before. God will do it again.
Christ has come. Christ will come again.
That's the joy of Advent, right?
Grounded in the joy of Christ's coming, we can look forward to fulfillment of all things in Christ.

But, even so, what if that promise brings you no joy in the present?
What if you can't do what 1 Thessalonians says?
What if you can't rejoice always, you're finding it hard to pray even intermittently,
 and you are having difficulty giving thanks in your present circumstances?
What then?

We need to remember that these words were written to a church, not an individual.
It's the church's work to rejoice always, to pray continually, to give thanks in all circumstances.
This is God's will for the church.
At times, there will be those of us who will find it hard to rejoice, hard to pray, hard to give thanks.
And so, together, we carry the prayers of those who can't pray,
 and we seek to be a cause for joy and thanksgiving
 for those who are finding it hard to find either.

In Isaiah, chapter 60,
we find the words of the prophet.

*"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
 because the Lord has anointed me;*

*he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.”*

*“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness . . .
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.”*

Jesus opened up the scroll and quoted from these words
saying, today, this is fulfilled in your hearing.

And so, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,
fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy set before him,

Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For the joy set before him
is the joy set before us.

Before, meaning preceding us.

Before, meaning ahead of us.

This Advent,

many of our neighbors,
many of us,
are looking for hope, for reason for joy.

Together, by the Spirit,

may we be reason for joy
to those who are sick
to those who are looking for racial justice,
to those who are isolated,
to those who face financial hardship,
to those beloved people, people just like us,
created by the joy of God
and for the joy of God.

Don't you know?

As the rivers rise and fall

as the sowers come back as reapers

as the earth brings forth shoots

as gardens bloom

the rains shall cease, and there shall be joy in the morning.