"Songs of Joy"

Psalm 126

Psalm 126:2 – "Then was our mouth filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy".

When are our tongues filled with shouts of joy?

When our children do their homework and get good grades?

When the Browns score a touchdown? When we joyfully sing favorite Advent and Christmas hymns? When a child is born?

Is there a difference between happiness and joy? They do have different definitions. Happiness is a momentary feeling of elation stimulated by some external event that has occurred in one's life. The key word is "momentary". Joy, on the other hand, is a stream that flows deep and steady and is not too much affected by whatever turbulence we are experiencing on the surface of our life.

On our Advent wreath we light the four candles of peace, hope, love, and joy. The Advent of our Lord is the Advent of joy. No matter how harsh life's winter may be, no matter how deep the cold, how distant the sun's warmth, how desolate the landscape, we have this joy.

Emmanuel, our God, comes to be with us. There is joy that comes as we prepare for this celebration. Joy seeks to express itself in music and songs. "Hark the glad sound! The Savior comes".

Today the psalmist remembers a time when the Lord had restored "the fortunes of Zion." Perhaps the memory is a recent one, given that this is probably a postexilic psalm and the author is referring to the recent return of many Hebrews from the Babylonian Captivity.

You can imagine the joy of the exiles when they approached Jerusalem. You can understand why they thought they were dreaming. When they realized that their good fortune was the real deal, their mouths were "filled with laughter" and their tongues "with shouts of joy." The writer is reminiscing. "Back then," he says in so many words, "we were so blessed. Our hearts were full." Clearly, *their joy was linked to their good fortune.* We hear similar words today. Back then, before the virus, we were so blessed. We could worship in person, eat out at a restaurant, and not wear a mask. We were so blessed.

Of course, the writer of this psalm had a ton of providential stories to relate. The history of the Israelites from the crossing of the sea and their survival in the desert for 40 years was full of memorable examples of God's mighty power. A pillar of fire by night, and a cloud by day. Manna and quail. Water from a rock. The Ten Commandments. The victory at Jericho. The slaying of Goliath. The kingdom of David. The prophet Elijah. The contest on Mount Carmel — and so much more.

Yes, the Israelites had it going. But things got messed up, and now, the remnant in Babylon has been long forgotten by God, or so it would seem.

And then, their "fortunes" were restored! They are back in Jerusalem, even though it is now a decrepit city kneeling in the ashes of 100 years of war and destruction.

This is what the writer recalls. Weeping in Babylon; rejoicing in Jerusalem.

What the author of Psalm 126 now suggests is that he'd like *to experience this joy again*. "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" (vv. 4-6). He recalled God's mighty deeds of the past; he's calling for a fresh visitation of the divine presence in the here and now.

Don't we have times in our lives when we look back with fondness to a simpler time, perhaps a happier time? It was a time when everything was going right. There was love, a relationship, children, a good job, good health — everything one could want to be both happy and full of joy. Our relationship with God seemed special, too. We were in sync. Perhaps we could even use the words of our writer: "We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy." Our lives were together. The pieces all fit.

Then something happened. The pieces flew apart in a jumble and tangle, and you wonder how things got to be as they did. So, you look back at another time. It's probably fair to say that most of us have had moments similar to this. Call it nostalgia if you want.

But now, we're calling on the Lord to restore our joy. "Do something to make us happy, Lord." Since this is what the writer is praying, it's probably okay if we pray the same prayer.

It is much better to ask the Lord to make us happy, give us joy, than to seek joy elsewhere. Does that even work? Can we find joy elsewhere?

Not that we're lacking suggestions. Internet sites offer a myriad of options to get our joy jumping. One site suggests that we keep a journal, create something artistic, give thanks, practice forgiveness, exercise, power down our gadgets, volunteer, watch the sun rise, send snail mail to a friend, do a good deed, read a novel, light a candle, take a warm bath,

listen to running water, take risks, make the bed, spend time with happy people, drink tea and grow your own vegetables.

All good ideas. But they don't address how to experience that special joy that comes when we receive what the apostle James calls "every good and perfect gift" that comes from above. This is the type of joy we seek. Something that's enduring — even if it is contingent upon the Lord's good favor.

How would you ask God for this kind of restoration, for this type of joy?

The writer uses three beautiful metaphors: *drought, sorrow and farming.*

First: "Lord, restore us like a barren desert that is flooded with streams."

Second: "Lord, restore us by turning sorrow into joy."

Third: "Lord, restore us by rewarding our sowing with reaping."

When the deserts of our lives are flowing with water; when our tears are tears of joy not sorrow; and when we can reap a harvest, the fruit of our labor, then joy will be our portion.

So, on Joy Sunday, let's not get hung up on whether the gladness in our hearts is joy or happiness. Christmas is right around the corner. It's festive. Decorations are up. Christmas trees are decorated in spite of Rona. It's a beautiful time — even for unbelievers in the secular world:

Sleigh bells ring, are you listening?

In the lane, snow is glistening

A beautiful sight

We're happy tonight

Walking in a winter wonderland

But for believers, the happiness we experience now is at Mach 5. Something else besides bright lights, office parties, rum cookies, fruitcake, and wine is going on now.

One night long ago, an event occurred that was both terrifying and exciting. The Lord of heavens stopped by in a village, and this Lord stayed for about 33 years. His arrival was announced by angels and notice a particular word that appears in the proclamation. Here is the text:

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:10-11).

Joy. Great joy. For all people.

One final word. So often, the public characterization of Christians is that of dour and sour, gossiping church ladies, or a bunch of grumpy old men in suits, or of protesters who spew hate-filled messages while waving banners with Bible verses on them.

On Joy Sunday, let's be reminded that the essential nature of a Jesus person is — among other things — joy. Let's put joy on display. Let's give the world some Jesus joy.

Actually, let's give them Jesus. The joy will follow.

May the peace of God . . .

#267 – Joy to the World