

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“The Lord Has Done Great Things for Us” (Psalm 126)
December 13, 2020
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I love road trips, *really* love road trips. I love watching the changes in terrain and geography, love seeing the skylines of big cities and the courthouses of small towns, love seeing the different farm crops and seasonal wildflowers, and of course, love choosing the music for the road. Driving across Minnesota means listening to Bob Dylan, New Jersey means Bruce Springsteen, the Mississippi Delta means the blues, Memphis means Elvis Presley, Alabama means Hank Williams, Virginia means Patsy Cline, Massachusetts means James Taylor, Southern California means the Eagles and the Byrds and Fleetwood Mac...and of course Georgia means the Allman Brothers and Otis Redding and Jennifer Nettles. You gotta have songs for the road.

The idea of having songs for the road is nothing new. In biblical times the Israelites would gather from around the Judean countryside and ascend the hills to Jerusalem three times a year for one of the three annual festivals: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. As they ascended these hills toward Jerusalem they would often recite or sing one of the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120 through 134. One of these Psalms of Ascent the psalm appointed for today, Psalm 126.

Psalm 126 is a psalm of restoration, a psalm of hope, as the opening verses attest:

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy. Then they said among the nations, “The Lord has done things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed (Psalm 126:1-4, *The Book of Common Prayer* 782).

During this unprecedented year in which COVID-19 has made things overwhelmingly hard for some people, even deadly for many thousands of people, there has been an increasing desire for things to “get back to normal.” This has certainly been the case here at Christ Church.

I can't tell you how many comments I have heard along these lines...“I really miss my church family...I really miss singing in the choir and EYC and Sunday school and church picnics and 20's/30's dinners and college ministry dinners and Friday morning Bible Study and coffee hour...”—on and on it goes. Steph and I have been grieving about not having the annual Christmas Open House at the rectory this year, always one of our favorite nights of the year because we really love you.

On the positive side, I have also heard many expressions of hope...“It is will be so awesome when we can all worship together again without social distancing, when we can actually shake hands and give hugs as we pass the peace and have jump castles for the kids at the church picnics and amazing barbecue from the Men in Blue and a church picnic to end all church picnics...and yes, because we are Episcopalians after all, to raise many a glass of libation and celebrate being back together again.

I cannot tell you when this will happen but I trust it will eventually, and that when it does we will echo today's psalm: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy... The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.”

In Psalm 126 these words of restoration and hope are followed by a brief prayer: “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses of the Negev” (Psalm 126:5, *BCP* 782). We all know what it is to pray this prayer, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord”, but what are the “watercourses of the Negev”? In the desert wilderness of the Middle East there are many wadis—channels, valleys, or ravines—that most of the year are bone dry, but after a rain, even a relatively small rain, these wadis suddenly flow with running water, bringing immediate relief and refreshment when it is needed most.

You see, Psalm 126 is very good news for those are weary and worn down from wandering in a dry desert, very good news for those who have things in their life they thought were stable and safe and secure suddenly be turned upside down, very good news for those whose lives have been severely impacted by COVID-19, very good news for those who need God to do what only God can do—restore their fortunes.

The last two verses of Psalm 126 are words of reassurance that God will indeed answer that prayer for restoration, that God will indeed restore your fortunes: “Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves” (Psalm 126: 6-7, *BCP* 782). Yes, the Lord knows you are weary and worn down from wandering in a dry desert. Yes, the Lord knows that the things in your life you thought were stable and safe and secure have suddenly been turned upside down. Yes, the Lord knows your life has been severely impacted by COVID-19. And, yes, the Lord cares about all that and cares about you more than you could ever imagine so that, yes, in his time the Lord will indeed restore your fortunes—and your tears of sadness will be replaced by tears of gladness.

Psalm 126 also points to Jesus Christ. As a boy Jesus would have recited or sung this psalm as he and his family ascended the hills to Jerusalem. Luke tells us that when Jesus was twelve years old he and his family ascended the hills to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual festival of Passover. And near the end of his earthly ministry, and the end of his earthly life, Jesus ascended these same hills to Jerusalem with his disciples one last time, again to celebrate the annual festival of Passover.

Jesus and his disciples would have recited or sung Psalm 126 yet again, “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and out tongues with shouts of joy...” This last time Jesus ascended to Jerusalem culminated with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey crowds of people greeted him in welcome and praise, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” (Luke 19:38).

But in spite of these shouts of welcome and praise Jesus knew exactly what was in store for him as he would suffer and die in order to restore the fortunes of Zion, suffer and die in order restore the fortunes in your life—which is why as scripture tells us, “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it” (Luke 19:41). And as you know, later that same week Jesus—having been betrayed and arrested and kept up all night and mocked and beaten and flogged and spit upon and falsely accused of blasphemy—stood next to Pilate. And the crowds of people chanted something very different that day, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

And Jesus carried his cross through the same streets he had run through as a boy during the annual festivals, and Jesus ascended yet one more hill, Calvary, where he was nailed to a cross. And make no mistake about it, as Jesus suffered, as we read in Psalm 126 he “sowed with tears” and went out “weeping, carry the seed”, the seed of his very blood, sown so that the world, so that *you*, could be fully restored and fully forgiven.

And on the cross during the festival of Passover, Jesus the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29) gave his life for you, which is why we proclaim as we celebrate Holy Eucharist, “Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” (*BCP* 364).

In Psalm 126 we pray, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses of the Negev” and God answers that prayer in Jesus Christ, through whom rivers of divine mercy, rivers of divine grace, rivers of divine hope, rivers of divine love flow through the desert wilderness in your life to bring immediate relief and refreshment when you need it most.

The Lord will indeed replace your tears of sadness with tears of gladness—and this means one day you will indeed echo the psalmist, “The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.”

Amen.