

## RETURNING HOME AFTER THE EXILE

Psalm 126

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30 May 2021

Human beings have a remarkable capacity to adapt to change, even change that is unwanted. The Jewish people had been living in Israel for hundreds of years, on land they believed was promised to them by God, a promise given to their ancestor Abraham. According to our Old Testament narratives, this is the land Moses led the people towards, during their forty year journey.

(The fact that the land was already occupied by someone else needs to be mentioned, and of course all of this is connected to the current situation in Israel and Palestine, but those are stories for another day.)

After hundreds of years, they thought of the land as theirs. They assumed that they would always live there. But in the 6th century B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and his army captured Jerusalem and forcibly deported many citizens. That deportation, that captivity, that exile, lasted for decades. Some people lived their entire lives in exile. People died, people married, children were born; life was lived in exile.

Some of the Jewish people faithfully maintained the traditions of the faith during exile. They established synagogues, they kept the sabbath; they taught the prayers to the next generation.

Some maintained hope that they would return to their homeland. The prophet Ezekiel believed that God would restore Jerusalem as the center of Jewish life, that God would give the people a new spirit and a new heart.

Other people, though, assimilated completely in Babylon. For many, it was the only home they'd ever known. They adjusted to life in exile. They established new routines.

They planted gardens, raised their children. When the exile was over, when Cyrus the Great gave the Jews permission to return to Palestine, some people didn't know whether to stay or go.

Psalm 126 is the song of the people who were thrilled to leave Babylon. It is the song taught to all of the subsequent generations. It becomes a song that everyone knows, part of their community's lore and history. Remember the time when the exile was finally over? Remember how happy we were to be back home? These become collective memories, deep in the psyche of the community. This psalm expresses the **joy of homecoming**, the relief that we feel when a long night of suffering is finally over.

"When from our exile, God brings us home again, we'll think we're dreaming."

It's obvious why I chose this psalm for today's worship service. The last time we were together in this sanctuary was March 8, 2020. We worshiped in exile for 63 Sundays. We were in exile for two Easters, one Christmas Eve. Many of you have expressed to me how grateful you have been for the gift of technology over these past 15 months. One parishioner said to me, "I can't imagine living through a pandemic without Zoom and FaceTime. We've stayed in touch with our grandchildren." I know grandparents who set up game nights via video chat; others who tutored over zoom. You have told me how much you have appreciated the ability to **worship** on Facebook Live, on Avon Lake cable TV and on vimeo. I want to thank our tech crew, especially Tim Schulz and Dinah Hunt. I want to pay tribute to my predecessor and the generations that have come before us in this church who had the foresight to help us become one of the first churches to install TV cameras and connect us to local cable. Thanks to those of you who are able to support the church financially, ensuring that we have been able to keep up with our needs for equipment and software and licensing and all that is involved in producing and

broadcasting our services. And thanks to all of our A/V volunteers over the years. Because of the financial support of this church, we were able to make Tim Schulz a full-time employee starting in January of 2020. We would not have been able to do what we did during the pandemic without him in that role. Indeed we have much for which to be thankful.

And this **is** a psalm of thanksgiving - it's often read, in fact, on Thanksgiving Sunday or for Thanksgiving Day worship celebrations. One of the themes of the psalm is the harvest. Those who sowed in tears now reap in shouts of joy. We come home, carrying our sheaves. The psalmist believes that **something was produced in exile, something worth harvesting, worth keeping, worth remembering.**

What was that for you? What have you learned during the pandemic, that you want to ponder before you forget? Before life returns completely back to normal?

One of our very active member families is not here today, even though this particular family has been telling us for months that they're ready for in-person worship. The mother emailed me and Beau a few days ago and said, "You know how much I have been looking forward to in-person worship, but as it turns out, our daughter has a soccer game exactly at 10 AM on Sunday." I wrote her back, told her we would miss seeing them, and said, "Your email makes me realize that life is really coming back to normal." We haven't been back a week and already calendars contain conflicts.

I can't count the number of people who have said to me, sometimes very quietly, as if they were expressing something secretive, "I don't want life to go back to normal. There are things I've really liked about this time." Just like those people who became accustomed to life in Babylon, returning from the exile brings mixed emotions for some of

us. Now is the time to reflect on what elements from these past 15 months we want to keep.

I was together with some friends on Friday night, and yesterday morning I reflected on how wonderful it felt to laugh and to hug. I'm rejoicing that our time of being physically isolated is over. At the same time, I know that I don't want to go back to the way my life used to be in every aspect. A schedule so jam-packed with activities that I had no ability to even appreciate what I was doing. I want a calendar that is more balanced, where I build in time for thinking, reflecting, and just being. Church leaders are being **intentional** about how many activities we build back into our program life. Which meetings make sense to have in person? Can we use the time when we are in person to really connect with each other on a deeper level, and then when we just need to conduct business, does it make sense to do that in a quick online meeting? We're trying to discern and be purposeful.

### **What do we want to harvest from our time of exile?**

As much as I'm enjoying walking into stores without masks, planning some trips, and certainly this return to in-person worship, there is so much about the way life was before the pandemic that I don't want to return to normal. I'm not just talking about my personal schedule which had become too hectic.

It's more than that. And it's connected to a discontent I feel when I read Psalm 126. Many phrases of this psalm are joyous and uplifting, but there are also these two verses. I can't ignore them. Here they are in the Message version, as Scott read them:

We were the talk of the nations—

“GOD was wonderful to them!”

GOD *was* wonderful to us;

we are one happy people.

Here they are in the NRSV, the Bible we have in our pews: “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.”

In these two verses, the world is described as us vs. them. Even worse, God does great things for **some**, but not for **all**. That is a worldview to which I do not want to return. These few verses reflect the time in which they were written, a time when people believed that their religion was in competition with others. The first commandment states that there is one God, but in that culture, people claimed their God was better than other gods. It's so easy for that worldview to take hold, a whole worldview of competition and scarcity, where God champions certain people and causes others to die in battle. Where there's not enough abundance for everyone. Psalm 126 was written thousands of years ago, but I contend that these two verses describe some damaging ways of thinking that are still with us now. We can celebrate the rest of Psalm 126 while challenging the dangerous direction these two verses are veering.

We believe that there is one God, maker of heaven and earth. There is one God, who loves all people equally, who wants all of creation to thrive and all people to flourish. So our rejoicing today is not in any way bragging. Rather, our rejoicing is tempered by the fact that in other parts of God's beloved world, the virus is raging, people are dying; there is no homecoming out of exile yet. We celebrate today, and our celebration isn't selfish. We celebrate wholeheartedly and then we pray and work towards the day when **all** people will be able to celebrate. There is a joy, which we turn to compassion, which then becomes a passionate desire for **all** people to experience blessing and abundance.

We will not completely rejoice until all people are well. The homecoming we really yearn for is a whole world restored to well-being, a whole world at peace and allowed to

flourish. Psalm 126 calls us to be people who dream, people who never stop imagining a better way of being human, a home where all God's people will thrive, surrounded by a creation that is itself restored and healthy and whole.

When from our exile, God takes us home again, we'll think we're dreaming. Dreaming of a day when Democrats and Republicans can sit down together and write policies that protect those who are most vulnerable. Dreaming of a day when all people have access to safe housing, health care, clean water, education, the basic necessities of life. Dreaming of a day when every child grows up to fulfill their God-given potential, regardless of their skin color, gender, sexual identity or orientation, ability or disability.

This is the place where we dream those dreams, where together we grow people to serve God and others. It's so good to be back home!

Let us pray. Holy God, for the joy of this day, we give you thanks and praise. May our joy show itself in compassion for all of your children, for all of your creation. Energize us to work together to build your beloved community, in Jesus' name. Amen.