

From Joy to Rejoicing

Psalm 126

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One time, a traveling itinerant preacher trained his horse to go when he said, "Praise the Lord," and to stop when he said, "Amen." The preacher mounted his horse ready to begin another circuit and said, "Praise the Lord," and off the horse went.

When he wanted to stop for lunch, he said, "Amen." The horse stopped and he hopped off. After eating his lunch, he mounted the horse and took off again, saying "Praise the Lord," but the horse got spooked by a snake and took off in a hard gallop, heading straight toward a cliff.

The preacher got excited and said, "Whoa!" But the horse didn't stop. The cliff looming closer, he again said, "Whoa!" as he pulled back on the reigns. But still the horse wouldn't stop. He was certain the horse was about to kill them both, when he suddenly remembered and said, "Amen! Amen!" The horse screeched to a halt right at the precipice of the cliff.

The preacher was so relieved and grateful that he looked up to heaven and said, "Praise the Lord!"

Do you know what I miss? I miss John-Mark's big, belly-laugh after I would tell a joke. Sometimes I think he laughed just for my sake and not because the joke was all that funny, but it always made my day to see him cock his head back and let out that laugh from deep in his belly.

What could be more lovely than a good belly laugh?

Humor is God's great gift to a species prone to failure, depression, misery, remorse, sickness, poverty, pain, exploitation, the common cold, heart burn, and gout.

Foy Valentine suggests that "laughter may well derive from our having been made in the likeness of God."

He says that it's important to remember that after God worked those first six days, God took the seventh day off — probably propping his feet up, surveying his handiwork, and with a broad smile, allowing that it was good.

Valentine goes on: "Who knows but God may have laughed out loud at the ludicrous hippopotamus, at the antics of the monkey, and at the *adamah*, the adam, hairless, teetering around on two legs, and naked as a jaybird?" (*Whatsoever Things Are Lovely*, 27).

Laughter is one of the great delights of being alive, but it is only a symptom of something else we feel deep within us. In the Bible, that something else is often *joy*.

Why did Sarah and Abraham name their son, “Laughter?” Because of the *joy* they found in finally having been delivered from barrenness by God’s good hand. “God has brought laughter for me,” said Sarah, “[and] everyone who hears will laugh with me” (Gen. 21:6).

When was the last time you had such a sense of elation – of joy – that you couldn’t help but belly laugh?

Was it from a good joke – like the one I told with perfect comedic timing earlier?

Was it caused by a funny situation or perhaps a meaningful life event – like the birth of your first child or the surprise birthday party you didn’t see coming?

Was it from having a dream come true? From having your deepest longings realized?

“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... (Ps. 126:1-2).

Psalm 126 comes from a collection of psalms called the Songs of Ascent. There are fifteen of them in all, beginning with Psalm 120 and going through Psalm 134. We can’t be certain, but our best guess is that this collection called the Songs of Ascent were the hymns that faithful Jews sang as they made pilgrimages into Jerusalem for the major festivals each year.

Jerusalem sat up on a mountain – not even the highest in Israel – but still up a mountain, and so as travelers made their way up to Zion, to the holy city, they sang Songs of Ascent.

Psalm 126 is widely regarded as one of the most joyful prayers in all of scripture, because it begins by looking back to a time when God had delivered the Israelites from exile.

We talked about that story last week. In 587 BCE Babylon invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, left the city walls in ruins, and conscripted many of its best and brightest citizens to serve Nebuchadnezzar.

They were forced to live in exile, forced to work for a king that wasn’t theirs and for gods that weren’t theirs, forced to live in a land that wasn’t theirs. But in 543 BCE all of that changed.

Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, conquered Babylon and gave the Jewish people the choice to return home, if they so desired. After decades of slavery, it was like a dream had come true. The Israelites understood their liberation to be the work of God’s hand.

“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” (Ps. 126:1-5).

The image is of a people whose joy at being freed from bondage is so euphoric that it seems like it’s all a dream — almost too good to be true. But it was true. They were going home, their dream realized.

What must joy like that do to the human spirit?

Langston Hughes once wrote a little poem that has been taught in Sunday schools for generations now. It goes:

“Hold fast to dreams, for life without a dream
is like a bird with a broken wing that cannot fly.”

Life can beat us up, can’t it? It can leave us with broken wings.

When he was pastor of First Baptist Austin, Texas, the late Browning Ware wrote about the sorrows that teach us to long for joy:

“When I was younger, I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time, I knew all of the answers. I knew about parenting, until I had children. I knew about divorce, until I got one. I knew about suicide, until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year. I knew about the death of a child, until my child died.

I’m not as impressed with answers as I once was. Answers seem so pallid, sucked dry of blood and void of life. Knowing answers leads us to make pronouncements. I still have a few friends or acquaintances who are 100 percent sure on almost everything, and are ready to make pronouncements on marriage problems, teen pregnancies, AIDS, or whatever is coming down the pike.

But when we get shoved into the valley of the shadow, a pronouncement is the last thing we need. We try to make everything fit our easy answers, but more important and satisfying than getting all the answers is knowing the One who is the answer.”

Ware's testimony to the One who is the answer is also the testimony of the One who restored the fortunes of Zion; of the One who has done great things for us; of the One who is sometimes the only One who can mend our broken wing.

But even when we rest our faith in the One who is the answer, it does not mean our lives will be filled with joy constantly.

The movement of the psalm is first a looking back to the great things God has done, so that we can then put our trust in the same God even when our lifeblood seems to have run dry. The psalmist writes:

“Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses of the Negeb” (Ps. 126:4).

The Negeb was a desert to the south of Judah that was known for being arid and barren, except on the rare occasion when it rained. In the arid seasons, the stream beds would dry up completely, leaving empty gulches and hard, dry, cracked ground. But when the rain came, the stream beds or wadis would fill up with water and run their courses, often irrigating the land and bringing forth vegetation and fruit.

Some seasons were dry and arid, void of water and vegetation, and in others the watercourses were filled and teeming with life.

I don't know about you, but that sounds more accurate to my experience of joy. The stream bed is not always full. The fields are not always fertile. Joy is not always teeming at the banks. Sometimes the watercourses run dry.

But simply because our lives are not constantly flooded with joy does not mean that joy is not present. Sometimes what's absent isn't joy, but our *awareness* of it.

So how do we practice an awareness of joy? Better yet, how do we practice an awareness of joy that works *in spite of* all the ways in which the world has tried to dry us up?

In the 1500s, Saint Ignatius Loyola wrote a book of spiritual disciplines called *Spiritual Exercises*. He wrote it because he was concerned that the missionaries under his watch needed know how to detect the movement of God in their lives. He believed that discernment came out of an *awareness* of how God moved uniquely in each soul (Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 59).

Foundational to Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* is the practice of the *examen*, or the examination of consciousness. The purpose of the examen is to reflect on where we are most and least present to God in our day — and then to let that awareness guide us to a deeper sense of joy. It's a simple practice — one that is built around reflecting on two questions each day:

The first: What was the most life-giving part of my day? And the second: What was the most life-depleting or life-thwarting part of my day?

You ask both questions because suffering and joy are two strands of the same fiber. It seems contradictory, but joy can thrive even in the midst of suffering, because God's kind of joy is not rooted in circumstance, but in the knowledge that God is present in every moment of our lives — working to do great things for us, whether we are paying attention or not.

When I was still just a young boy, I looked forward to Vacation Bible School each summer. And my favorite part of VBS was the part when, at the end of the morning, all of the children would gather back together in the sanctuary so that we could sing a few songs before being dismissed.

One of my favorite songs — one of those songs that I will never forget — was the one that went:

“Praise ye the Lord!” as one half of the room would stand up.

And then as they sat down, the other half of the room would stand and sing, “Hallelujah!”

“Praise ye the Lord!” — “Hallelujah!”

“Praise ye the Lord!” — “Hallelujah!”

Then, standing all together, “Praise ye the Lord!”

And then we would do it faster. And faster. And faster — until we didn't know whether we were standing or sitting or could even get the words out, and we would all collapse into the pews laughing until our cheeks ached and our stomachs hurt. It was pure joy.

“In the 1950s, a group of students at Princeton University went to sing Christmas carols outside the home of the great genius and physicist, Albert Einstein. They had sung only a song or two when the front door opened and the professor himself stepped outside and began leading them on his violin. One of the greatest and most respected minds of our time uniting with and playing for a little group of carolers” (Brett Younger, “The Gift of Peace,” *The Broadway Pulpit*, December 9, 2007).

I can't help but think of that image — of the genius, Einstein, stepping out on the porch and leading that little group of students — as I reflect on those wonderful memories of singing “Praise ye the Lord! Hallelujah” at VBS as a child. I think it's because if we sing the song of joy, we'll discover that we aren't singing alone. God is playing the music.

“The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoice” (Ps. 126:3). Amen.