

“THE DESTINY OF OUR TEARS”

Psalm 126

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

Turning to our third Psalm of this Advent season, from the first Sunday of Hope, and the second Sunday of Peace, Psalm 126 teaches us how to wait for joy. Psalm 126 has 2 stanzas. The first stanza sounds as if we’re walking alongside the Ghost of Christmas Past. The Psalmist describes a celebratory homecoming, composed of laughter and shouts of joy, after Israel’s fortunes have been restored. It is a powerful memory of a time when God redeemed Israel with authority. The second stanza, though, describes a future hope—as if we might be walking alongside the Ghost of Christmas Future. The Psalmist depicts a successful growing season as reason for joy, as her people carry home a harvest that had apparently been sown during a drought. She knows God *can* restore the fortunes of Zion because God *has* done just this sort of thing before. It remains to be seen, though, when this future will be fulfilled.

For now, the Psalmist stands between these two stanzas, somewhere alongside the Ghost of Christmas Present. For the second stanza of the Psalm articulates a request of God—a dream of joy to come. In this present, we can imagine the Psalmist weeping in the middle of a dry and parched field, her family’s work wasting away as the season passes with no rain in sight, imagining the tears she sheds are so numerous that God might use them to water the ground. O Lord, you have restored us before, she says. Now restore us again!

This last stanza of the Psalm expresses this joyful dream with a threefold pattern:

May those who sow...*reap*,
May those in tears...*shout for joy*,
May those who go out...*come home*.

The Psalmist’s expectation of joy is one of total transformation— absence to presence, from grief to joy, death to life. But she knows only God and God alone can accomplish such a change.

Here again, as always, the Psalmist gives us words to pray before we know we need them. Even when we can’t find the words, she provides. I believe there could hardly be any of us who don’t remember a time in our lives that was filled with a joy that now seems impossible to recapture. I remember hearing a writer interviewed on the radio several years ago. When asked what he thought it took to be a Southern writer, he said, “You have to be nostalgic by age 7.”

So many of us, especially during Christmas, secretly furnish our “joyful nostalgia templates”, and begin to measure the present against the past. I have my own template, which requires Grandma’s house, and friends and family sitting around the fireplace after a delicious meal, and falling off the couch laughing at each other’s stories. But I can’t recapture those days. Some of the people around the room are gone now. Even the house isn’t ours anymore.

Then again, there are many here who remember Christmases past not merely in a nostalgic or sentimental way, but in sighs too deep for words. The Baptist preacher, Chuck Poole, says,

“There really is something different about Christmas. But the something different is not that we feel new feelings at Christmas. Rather, it is that we feel familiar old feelings more deeply and fully at Christmastime than at other times. It is in that sense that Christmas feels like every other day, *only more so*.”¹

I believe this *more so* is what the Psalmist describes as “sowing in tears.” Especially for those of us who are missing something—a home, a job, a marriage...or missing *someone*—a friend, a parent, a child, Christmas often comes into view for us through a thick lens of tears. As brothers and sisters in the Lord, let us not dance through the whimsical delights of the season without recognizing that many of those we sing beside in worship do so with cracked voices and lumps in their throats. Let us not pass over the significance of our tears, for they serve as empirical evidence of joy that is just as much a part of our bodies as our flesh and bones. Our tears are real. They rise up within us as confirmations of past joys. They well up as physical manifestations of the prayers of unforeseen joy we whisper to ourselves under the din of Christmas festivity.

Our tears are as real as the memories they express. Our tears have physical qualities that reveal their sources. All tears contain salt, which has nourishing, preservative, and antibacterial qualities. We couldn't live without salt. Which is one reason Jesus calls us to imitate salt for the world's sake: “You are the salt of the earth.” But tears of emotion even have a different physical composition than the kinds of tears that naturally occur to lubricate our eyes, or the reflex tears we get from irritation (like slicing onions). Tears of sorrow and joy have more hormones in them, because they're activated by different parts of our nervous system. So even from a scientific perspective, tears are sourced from the very depths of our being. Therefore, they should be welcomed and honored for their significance, especially when we gather with each other in Jesus' name. We shouldn't think of church as a place where it is dangerous to weep, but a place where we expect to weep. A church that welcomes tears welcomes the whole person.

According to the Psalmist, the church that welcomes tears also stores up seeds of joy. “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy,” she says. In an agricultural society, it would be hard to describe the priceless value of seeds. Seeds are more valuable than currency. We can't plant currency and expect anything to grow. Which is why nations around the world help fund the Svalbard Seed Vault in northern Norway, just 800 miles south of the North Pole. In case of a global crisis, nations will have access to the seeds we need for survival. The facility has the capacity to keep billions of seeds safely preserved deep underneath arctic soil.

Now imagine the church as just such a treasury, but for tears. A place where tears are so highly valued that we not only honor them, but protect and preserve them for posterity. It isn't so fantastic a thing to say. God keeps our tears. Another Psalmist says to God, “You've kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?” (Ps. 56:8). God collects our tears like a mother who keeps a scrapbook of her children's accomplishments. They are neatly arranged and categorized. Some pages are more packed than others. Some chapters are longer than others.

¹ This quote can be found in this recent reflection by Poole, drawn from his earlier Advent sermons: <http://www.nextsunday.com/how-does-christmas-feel/>, posted 13 Dec 2017.

Then again, the Psalmist describes these tears as tears that are sown. Imagine with me, then, the parable of the sower from this perspective. Jesus tells of a sower who goes out to sow. But this sower goes out in grief. And her tears fall, some on the path, some on rocky ground, while still other tears fall among thorns. While no tear is lost to God, some tears lie scattered across good soil, and bring forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let everyone with ears listen! (see Mt. 13:3-9).

Jesus also says, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Have you ever planted a seed in a cup full of soil? You plant the single seed, water it, set it in the window, tend to it, and then there is a little sprout. But now imagine holding this same cup under your cheek, dropping one of your tears into it. The Psalmist says, “Trust God, and this tear you’ve sown in sorrow will sprout into joy.”

The Psalmist expects her tears to bear fruit. Even more, the way the language flows, it appears that the Psalmist believes tears of sorrow can be sources of joy. How can this be?

The great 20th century theologian, William Stringfellow, expressed this so beautifully. Processing his pain after the loss of his partner Anthony, he says there’s a difference between grieving and mourning. “Grieving,” he says, “is about weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth; mourning is about rejoicing—rejoicing in the Lord.” Of course, grieving and mourning are all mixed up in real life. But he understands mourning as “the liturgies of recollection... affection... anticipation for the life of the one who is dead.” So, from that standpoint, Stringfellow says, “I confess I have found mourning Anthony an exquisite, bittersweet experience. *I enjoy mourning him.*”²

The Psalmist remembers joy, and looks toward joy, and is therefore caught up in joy, even though she longs for it in her immediate situation. Isn’t it true for us, too, that to wait for joy is somehow to participate in joy? We don’t say that our love for someone fades when we’re apart from them. If anything, our love grows for them in their absence. It is the same with joy. For joy in this Psalm is not a feeling but a way of living. To live joyfully is to live from joy towards joy, so that when joy does come, we have the capacity to recognize it.

So, my dear brothers and sisters, you blessed who weep, who sow in tears now, remember we do not grieve as those who have no hope. “For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him” (1 Thess. 4:13).

Yes, Christmas will follow our Advent waiting. Just as surely as Christmas came to Bethlehem, it will come to us. So, we know joy is not a feeling of happiness, as much as joy is our story. Our tears tell the story, which begins in joy and ends there, too. Our tears well up from joy, and they will give rise to joy again. It’s true. The **destiny** of our tears is *Joy*.



² William Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith: My Experience in Mourning* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1982) 22.