



Roanoke, Virginia
January 16, 2022

“The Joyful Harvest of a Tearful Sowing”

Psalm 126, Philippians 3:1-14
George C. Anderson

Sermon note:

Due to an anticipated snowstorm, this sermon that begins on the next page was recorded on Saturday, January 15, 2022. Read as a responsive *Call to Worship* at the beginning of the service was Psalm 126:

***Call to Worship:**

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 they said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

The Lord has done great things for us, we are glad.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy!

He that goes forth weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy.



The passage I am about to read from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is not my primary text. As was the case with my sermon last week, my primary text is the passage we have already read together as our responsive *Call to Worship*, Psalm 126. Paul's reflections serve as backdrop. Listen for how he accepts suffering not as a trial to be endured but as a necessary part of his straining to reach the goal of finding, and then walking with, Jesus. And listen for the Word of God.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Many of you have been worshipping from afar during the pandemic and on this snowed-in-Sunday... (I'm assuming we are snowed in. We are taping on Saturday, so I might be sounding pretty foolish right now. Nevertheless, I'm going with it)...on this snowed-in-Sunday, our entire worshipping community which gathered so regularly in this sanctuary is today scattered all over Roanoke... scattered as far away as California if the Daniel family has joined us again today. We are for today a *Second Presbyterian Diaspora*.

My friend, Bruce Stockburger, already gave a Minute for Education, but I'm going to offer another one by teaching you, or reminding you, what was the *Jewish Diaspora*.

Today's *Second Presbyterian Diaspora* is nothing compared to that multi-generation Diaspora. The Jewish Diaspora was the scattering of Jews beyond Israel after the northern half of the kingdom fell to Assyria and then more significantly for the purposes of this sermon, after the southern half of kingdom fell to Babylon. The Jews lost their king, their homes, their national identity, and the focus of their faith: the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a horrible and devastating experience that changed things for everyone. They didn't just endure a national defeat. To eliminate any future threat and to crush their national spirit, the Jews were exiled to refugee communities all over the vast empire of Babylon. With all the props of Jewish faith and identity



kicked out from underneath the people, it seemed a real possibility that Jewish history would end, and Jewish identity and faith would fade away.

So, how to explain Psalm 126? How to explain a psalm of praise and thanksgiving that was written for people in exile?

This past year, my four-year-old granddaughter, Emory, was taught the “Long-Trip-Rule” taught to my daughters when they were her age and we have to drive 9 hours to get to my parents’ home or the 11 hours to get to Millie’s parents home. Our girls were on time meeting all the benchmarks of childhood development like learning to walk, being potty trained, and verbalizing “Mama,” “Daddy” and, on long roadtrips, “[Are we there yet?](#)”.

It was misery answering that question all the way from Mississippi to NC and so we reached an agreement. If they would not ask the question, we promised to tell them when we were getting close. About 10 miles out, we would announce, “[We are almost there.](#)”

And when that announcement was made, *time slowed down*. You might think that after hours of being trapped in the van we called, “The Black Barg,” that would be a bad thing. But it wasn’t. The last leg of the trip that we called, “[We’re almost there,](#)” became a time of excitement and anticipation of the reward of finishing the journey and arriving at a place we loved. We would look for and shout out familiar sights proving that we are close. Approaching Montreat we would say

[We are on the windy road going over that big mountain.](#)

[We are getting off the interstate.](#)

[We’re in Black Mountain and there’s the General Store.](#)

[We’re going through the gate.](#)

[We’re turning on Suwannee.](#)

[We’re there!!!](#)

Psalm 126 is one of a series of psalms sung or recited from memory right at the end of a long journey Jerusalem. Called *The Assent Psalms*, these poems were for the special final leg of what is often a once-in-a-lifetime-pilgrimage to see Jerusalem, the rebuilt city of David; and to see the rebuilt Temple of God. As the pilgrims reach the last leg of a journey that is measured by weeks and not hours, and as they first see the sights of which they had always heard-

the cemetery outside Jerusalem,

the walls of the city,

the dome of the temple,

they recite these Assent Psalms to channel their excitement and emotions of praise and thanks.

You might jump to the conclusion that these psalms of praise and thanks are because the exiles think of their lives in Babylon as awful and that they are so glad to be back in God’s country. (That’s what my family calls Montreat, by the way, “God’s country”). The exile is

a Terrible Temporary,

an Unwanted Detour,

an Imposed Pause on the life of Israel-



And seeing the city sitting on the mount, and the Temple placed at the highest point, their hearts well up with the hope that maybe soon it all will be over.

But, no, that is not the way it is. If you've been coming to church for years, we preachers can sometimes make it seem that the experience of the Exile was just one long experience of destruction, degradation, and disgrace. And it was all that at first. The deportation was as awful as what Syrian, Afghan and Congolese refugees have gone through. The experienced tragedy of exile by the Jews shouldn't be minimalized any more than the experience of war refugees today.

But the pilgrims are generations removed from the deportation. It is not that the pilgrims are ignorant of how awful the Exile was. While joy runs deep in Psalm 126, it is not the cheerfulness of celebrating a journey's end. It is not the fun but shallow cheerfulness of

Oh, what a beautiful morning,
Oh, what a beautiful day.
I've got a wonderful feeling,
everything's going my way.

The pilgrims know very well that when their ancestors were deported out of Israel and into Babylon, it was "a trail of tears."

But here is what they say about those tears.

*Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.
They go along weeping and sow their seed;
they come home with shouts of joy and bring their sheaves with them.*

Theirs is the joy of a people who have known suffering and pain; who know something of regret, loss, crisis and tragedy. They know what went terribly wrong. But though "House of God," the Temple, was destroyed, they did not lose God. Their ancestors were determined to do more than survive but learn and grow from the experience of tears. Their suffering was a productive time because they faced what they had to face, learned what they had to learn, and were driven to a more radical trust in their God. In exile, they gained deeper connections, to worship, to each other and to a more profound faith than their ancestors had ever known. *Seed was sown in the weeping.*

Now they celebrate the tearful sowing of a joyful harvest. They celebrate the gift of the journey of the exile itself, how they have been led from a night of darkness to a brighter day of a deeper faith in God.

The psalm frames a question for us when we face difficult times: "To sow or not to sow?" Though I'm playing off Hamlet's question, I do not mean to be frivolous in asking it. When facing challenges

like getting through a pandemic,
or facing difficult issues like the legacy of racism in America,
or a terrible tragedy like the death of a child,



the major question is about stewardship. Is one going to be a steward of challenge, loss and pain? Sometimes there are lessons to be learned from what is lost (the prophets made that clear to the exiles), and sometimes terrible things happen because that's the risk of life (the book of Job made that clear to the exiles). But always there is... for lack of a better word... a choice to be made. Am I to find reasons to live forward with hope and faith...

or not?

The glory of the Assent Psalms is that they look forward and up. The psalms do not forget the past. In fact, they own the past. But they look up at the city and temple on the hill and they declare a faith for the future that comes of having known God even in the valley. When one does not give up on the God who does not give up on us, the now familiar saying is true: “[The journey is the destination.](#)” If what we always long for is to have a home to which to return, what a joy it is to finally know that no matter where we are in life, we always have a home with God.

