

A Disciple's Devotion: Our Faith, Our Witness, Our Hope
Psalm 126

Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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During the season of Lent, we are exploring the psalms as models of devotion. Through the psalms we have studied thus far, we have learned in the 91st psalm what it is to rest in the security of God's protection; we have learned in the 27th psalm what it means to make communion with God the "one thing we seek"; we have been challenged through the 63rd psalm to make our Lord the one in whom we can quench the thirst for meaning and purpose that lies deep in our hearts; and through the 32nd psalm we have learned that confession is good for the soul, for it turns our hearts back toward God and makes us ready to receive God's forgiveness.

Today we come to the 126th psalm. For the first time in our Lenten reflections, we come to a psalm that is not the psalm of an individual. Rather, it is a psalm sung by the whole community of faith. During this season of Lent when you and I are approaching the psalms to determine how each of us can draw closer to God in our own personal devotion and faith, it is appropriate that we be reminded that faith and devotion is not something that is exercised all by ourselves, as if in a vacuum. Your devotion and my devotion are not simply the product of how you relate to God on your own, or how I relate to God on my own.

If we are truly to cultivate a deeper devotion to God, we must do so as part of a larger community of faith. That's why when we baptize in the Presbyterian Church, we don't do so privately. We baptize in the context of a congregation, because our life of faith and devotion is not lived out in private, but as part of the body of Christ. It is as you and I relate to one another in the context of the church that your faith and my faith become OUR faith.

And so as we come to the 126th psalm, we come to a psalm that speaks forth the faith and witness and hope of a community of people who seek to follow God. It therefore becomes for us a model of how we can express our faith, our witness, our hope.

In a chapter he writes about this psalm, Eugene Peterson points out that the very center of this psalm is the line in the third verse, "we are filled with joy." And just prior to that we find the reason for the joy of the people: "The Lord has done great things for us."

The Lord has done great things for us... Our faith is based on the mighty acts of God. The Lord has done great things for us... Our faith arises from an awareness that God acts on our behalf, that God comes to us and redeems us and delivers us. The psalm begins as a psalm of praise for some deliverance that God has made on behalf of God's people. There is not unanimous agreement as to what event in the life of Israel the psalm is referring. Perhaps it was the exodus from Egypt. More likely it was the return from exile in Babylon, for the first verse refers to captives returning to Zion. In any case, the people recognized that God had done a mighty work on their behalf, restoring them to a once-lost glory.

The Lord has done great things for us... The psalm begins by looking to the past, by remembering how God has acted for God's people. Ours is a faith that comes from remembering the mighty acts of God. One of the most profound yet simple dynamics of how our faith grows is the act of remembering. There is a power in remembering. In remembering we can often see things more clearly than we can while they're happening. And so

in remembering, we can look back at times in our lives and see God's hand at work. We don't do that simply for the sake of reminiscing and wishing for a return to the good old days. We remember so that our faith in God can be strengthened as we come to today and as we face tomorrow. The theological act of remembering the past is meant to help us have confidence in the present and hope for the future. The God who was, is also the God who is, and the God who always will be.

The Lord has done great things for us... Ours is a faith that remembers the mighty acts of God. As the community of faith we affirm that the God who has been with us and for us in the past, is with us and for us in the present, and there is no reason to expect that God will not be with us and for us in the future.

The other night during our Lenten vesper service I was reflecting on the psalm, and something struck a chord with me. In the second verse it says, "Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'" And it struck me—what a powerful witness it is when the people of God express their praise and thanksgiving with such enthusiasm that those on the outside will remark, "The Lord has really blessed them."

It makes me think how important is the way we come together as a church. For generations Presbyterians have been known as "the frozen chosen"—dour and humorless. I'm reminded of the story a woman told about her father, a Presbyterian elder. According to the woman her father was "full of rectitude and rigid with duty: He was entirely unselfish, and in his long life he never committed a pleasure."¹

One time I was preaching a vesper service at a nursing home, and I used a little humor in my sermon. After the service a man came up to me and said, Young man, you should never make us laugh in church...

Personally, I think the moniker of "frozen chosen" is no longer appropriate for Presbyterians, if it ever was. Maybe we don't clap during worship, or shout out loud amens, but that doesn't make us dour and lacking in joy.

The point I'm trying to make is this: the way we are when we're together sends a message to those outside the walls. The psalm describes a time when the people of Jerusalem were so joyful and thankful that the surrounding nations took note. And that's the way it should be for us, whenever we gather as the people of God—our expression of faith should be one that lets others know that the Lord has done great things for us. Our expression of faith should be a witness to the love and the grace of the God who has redeemed us and delivered us. When others look at us in our collective life of faith, they should say of us among themselves, "The Lord has done great things for them."

The other day some of the members of the Administration ministry and I were in a meeting with an insurance representative. The representative was telling of a church that discovered that one of its longstanding employees had siphoned over \$300,000 from the church's coffers over the years. This employee was also a lifelong church member, and their family had a long history of faithful service in the church. The employee's family rallied around the employee and made good on the stolen money. The church asked that the charges against the employee be dropped. Instead of pushing for jail or a fine, the church has urged forgiveness and reconciliation. The defense attorney was so moved by the church's mercy and the family's love that he remarked, "I haven't been to church in over 20 years, but now I think I might just start going again."

¹ Eugene Peterson uses this illustration in his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 91.

Indeed, when the people of God demonstrate God's love and grace and mercy, it is a powerful witness. As a church, our expression of faith should be such that those on the outside will declare with longing in their hearts, "The Lord has done great things for them." Such should always be our witness.

It should be our witness regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, even when things aren't going well. You may note that there is a change in tense and a change in mood after the third verse in the psalm. The language moves from joy and laughter to that of tears and weeping. Clearly the glory and the good fortune the people had celebrated upon their return from captivity was in the past. Praise and thanksgiving have been transformed into lament. We don't know what it was, but something had taken away the laughter and the shouts of joy. Something has parched their spirit like the dried-up riverbeds of the desert.

Yet they don't wallow in their misery, do they? Theirs is not a perpetual cry of "Woe is me," for they refuse to let the present circumstances dictate their outlook. They don't deny their current troubles, but neither do they remain fixated on them. Instead of dwelling on the present difficulties, they draw upon their remembrances of the mighty acts of God in the past, affirming that better times are ahead. They acknowledge the current tears, the weeping, the hardships; but then they affirm their hope that the tears and their weeping will be transformed into songs of joy.

And the Lord will do this for them.

You see, because of our faith in the Lord who has done great things for us, we have the opportunity to live with a hope that looks beyond the present circumstances. We don't deny that the economy is tough on us. We don't deny it when sickness strikes us down. We don't deny the fear that makes us lock our doors. We don't deny the difficulties in our lives, but neither do we let the difficulties paralyze us or define our perspective. Our perspective is informed by our hope in God, a hope based on God's character, which is defined first and foremost by steadfast love, faithfulness, compassion, patience, grace. The tears are real, the struggles are real, but they are not the last word to us. Ours is a hope that declares that our tears and our weeping will be transformed into songs of joy. Because our hope is in God, then we are confident that our best days are ahead of us, regardless of what it's like in the present.

Indeed, the Lord has done great things for us. That is the proclamation that gives us strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow. The Lord has done great things for us. May it always be so for us, that we proclaim with confidence, We are filled with joy. Amen.