

How Can This Make Sense?

Psalm 126 (NRSV)

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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.

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

It is likely unsurprising, given my day to day profession, that when I have the opportunity to preach one of the 22 passages with the Hebrew word for tears in it that I allow myself the opportunity to do just that. I am a welcomer of tears and in our time and place I find they often need to be welcomed.

I have a few favorite sentiments involving tears that I've gathered to this point in my life and I hope you don't mind if I share them. The first is from the comedian Mary Mack, a fellow midwesterner with the Fargo-est of Minnesota accents, who reminds us that, salad is not a comfort food, it cannot even help to wipe our tears, it's too wet, but tatertots, these are perfect for the job, little sponges that soak up emotions. Tatertots care about you. Not salad. Salad is cold and unconcerned with your problems.

The second is from an unnamed two year old who when asked if he'd like a tissue to wipe his tears declined because he still wanted to feel the sad on his face. I find this sentiment to contain an emotional wisdom that far exceeds my own. I often don't remember to feel the sad that I am indeed ready to feel.

The third is something that I believe to be true, though I do not have a source or might be the source, I can't always find the references for the things in my brain, and that is that I believe tears of grief are in some very real way prayers of gratitude.

This is how Psalm 126 feels to me. It feels to me like this balance between grief and gratitude. They're two sides of a very heavy and intricate coin. Commentators and translators notice this

about the psalm, as well, there are some translations that will try to smooth out the differences of the beginning of the Psalm where there is a clear reflection on a past event:

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**.

And the Psalm as it turns toward some current need and difficulty hoping to be satisfied by the power of God:

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. **May** those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

And as it finishes in a statement of faith that declares the expected outcome:

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, **shall** come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

The whole Psalm is either a mess of tenses or a masterpiece of the wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff that also has us as Christian people proclaiming an already that is also not yet.

Let's also take a moment to dig into some context both historical and geographical. There is a clear memory described in the first verse, "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion..." Many historical commentators believe this to be a direct reference to the return of the people of Judah, who were exiled in Babylon, to Jerusalem and their rebuilding of the Temple. For God's people at the time this was a longing so deep and a yearning so strong that returning felt akin to dreaming, good dreaming, like the kind of feeling that has us asking ourselves is this really happening to me? As if we've won the lottery, or scoring a game winning point/goal/run, or what I imagine the sensation to be just after the birth of a child, or as we experience our own wedding day. That kind of earth shaking, paradigm shifting joy that stirs up our insides like a muddy puddle and needs to take time to settle in and become a new reality. It leaves us giddy and in full throated exclamation! This is the kind of memory that the Psalmist evokes right off the bat.

In that second section of the psalm there is a mention of the watercourses in the Negeb. I didn't really know what the Psalmist was referencing here so I decided to look it up. Sure enough the Internet delivered. The video I watched was of a completely dry, like bone dry, riverbed and people standing about talking and waiting. Some shushing others and a dog running around and barking. It goes on like this for about a minute or so and then just as one might begin to lose interest in comes the rushing water. Seemingly out of nowhere a river springs to life. I honestly began to worry for the dog because it was so much water so quickly I thought I was going to be swept away.

The phenomena I witnessed in this video is a rather foreign concept to those of us who've grown up near lake Michigan or the Mississippi River. The idea of a waterway running dry seems almost absurd. But in the watercourses in the Negeb, a desert region in the southern portion of modern Israel/Palestine, it is a not infrequent occurrence for a river to dry up and spring again to life on a seasonal basis. It isn't always so, 'the tap is off and now I've unleashed the river' for these seasonal rivers but it's easy to gravitate toward this kind of imagery where God's favor has us in the dreamy spaces of life and then the tap goes out again. In those dry spells all we can think about is water.

So now we have some deeper context, or have been reminded of the context for the emotions that the Psalmist is looking to evoke in us. We're meant to remember a dreamscape, but recognize that in this present moment, the river runs dry and that all we can do is wait for water.

But it is the next bit of this Psalm that has always left me a little beguiled.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

I just fail to see in the here and now how this can make sense. How can this make sense? My every day is work in and around grief. Just yesterday, I attend to five different families experiencing loss. For these who I sent home with a pamphlet of postmortem procedure, how can I begin to explain that they who go out weeping shall return with shouts of joy? How can this make sense?

The only answer I've come to within myself is that this is a gospel Psalm. This kind of prayer only makes sense with a God who shows up. This kind of prayer is only answered in the context of the resurrection. For when the river of life runs dry how then might it ever be refilled?

This Psalm can only be itself and be true in the context of a resurrection hope. A hope that I desperately need, that we desperately need. Many pastors and chaplains entertain lives full of doubt. I entertain doubts with every bad day I encounter. I sometimes fail to see how, in the world of tears, how these might be harvested with joy, no matter how many tatertots exist to mop them up. But there, deep down in core of my very being, this Psalm resonates. And in the context of a resurrection hope, where Jesus has conquered death and will come to reign over the living and those once dead, where the people of the risen king will rise with God, where all injustice and wrong that seemed oft so strong shall fall away and yield to shouts of joy and the healing of the nations I can once again find reason, in hope, to believe. And it is my sincere desire that on that dark day to come or that's already at your door, that you can too.

So, pray this psalm, sing this psalm and let it fill you with hope.

All this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit Amen.