

The First Reading: Psalm 126:1-6

¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

² 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.”

³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

The Second Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

¹⁸ Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

²⁰ The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people,

²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

I invite you to recall a happy past. A time when laughter and joy filled your days. A time when you remember that life was full and rich with meaning. A time when you rejoiced and gave thanks for the great things God had done. Do you have a memory? Can you connect with

the laughter, the joy, the fullness? I remember October 30, 2016, when I worshipped for the first time with all of you. What a joy-filled day it was it was for us. You came anticipating the new pastor the pastor nominating committee was recommending. I came anticipating the congregation that the pastor nominating committee had shared stories about. I remember that day of worship and rejoice, as it was a time of laughter and joy and together we confirmed the beginning of our journey together. I remember the joy of my childhood vacations when my dad would pack up the three youngest of five children, I am number four, and take us camping for a month. We camped in a large tent and enjoyed the beauty of God's natural creation. And then at the very end of the month we always enjoyed a day or two in a hotel, so we could enjoy a swimming pool before we headed home. I remember the joy of bringing home two bundles of joy from the hospital one September and then the absolute fun of camping with our own sons as they were growing up. What memories do you have of the past that fill your mouth with laughter and your tongue with shouts of joy?

But, then there is a break in the psalm. In many versions of this printed text, there is a blank line between verse 3 and 4. There is space signaling a time of silence, a time of reverence for a time that was anything but happy. The first word of verse four is "restore." Something has been lost. Something is in need of repair. The psalmist remembers the time of captivity, when the people of God were carted off to a foreign land, not by choice, but by force. The psalmist remembers living estranged from the most fundamental experiences that gave their life meaning.

The context of our passage from Isaiah also recounts the reality of exile. The people of God had lost everything: their land, their homes, their livelihood, their families, and to some extent, they felt they had lost God as well, for the temple was destroyed. Memories like these don't fill our mouths with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. Memories like these can cause bitterness to take root or apathy to consume us. What memories do you have when life as you knew it was lost? When a crisis appeared and rearranged all that was right with your life? I remember August 4, 2004, the day my dad called and said he was taking my mom to the Emergency Room. Something was wrong terribly with her and he didn't know what it was. We didn't know what it was. It took 12 days, multiple trips to the doctor, in and out of a care facility and the hospital to diagnosis West Nile Encephalitis. My mom's health crisis rearranged life, as I knew it. Most of us remember the day when ordinary passenger jet liners were used as bombs, for they brought down the twin towers in New York City. People were stranded around the world as flights to the United States were crowded for almost a week. When have you felt disoriented, when life as you knew it was lost?

"Restore our fortunes, O Lord." Restore what was. Restore our happy past when we were filled with laughter and shouts of joy. Restore us, may our tears reap shouts of joy, may our tears sow laughter. Restore us.

Churches like us often remember a happy past. When children were plentiful and choirs were huge. When sanctuaries were full and activities were bursting. I remember my own youth group, we were 90 strong on Wednesday nights! I remember my summer vacation bible schools with over 100 children. Does this church have memories of days like these? Days when people flocked to churches and everyone in town was in worship on Sunday mornings?

This is why we need to hear Isaiah's words, "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old." When we recall the past, we often romanticize it. We remember

what was good and make it even better. We remember and imagine that all we need to do is recreate what was here and now.

Hope lies through memory, but not because we should recreate the past. Hope lies through memory, because it helps us remember that God's provision was enough no matter the circumstances.

October 30, 2016, was an amazing day for me, yet just two days earlier I had learned that I had stage one breast cancer. How could it be that I went from such devastating news to joy in 48 hours. My simple answer is God's provision. God made a pathway from despair to joy, from tears to laughter, from anger to rejoicing. Now November was a month that was more than difficult to navigate given that I was ending one pastoral call, undergoing surgery and preparing for a new pastoral call, yet God was with me. God made a way when at times there appeared no way. I learned, often reluctantly, that the only way for me to move into the future and the new thing that God was doing through me was to name what I had to leave behind. My future would not look like my past. My future would be a complete new thing.

Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann has done significant work with the psalms and he believes that they speak to life's rhythms. There are times in our lives when everything makes sense. When life is happy, rich and full of meaning. Brueggemann calls this orientation. Then there are times when a crisis disorients us, when we feel dislocated from everything as it once was. Brueggemann describes this as entering a pit, a place of despair, a place where nothing makes sense. Then there are times when we move out of a pit, when God lifts us out and carries us through a crisis to a new place full of gratitude and awareness about ourselves and the God whom we worship. If we reflect on our lives, we will see these movements from orientation, to disorientation, to reorientation; from normal, to chaos, to a new normal. And Psalm 126 is a psalm that speaks to the hope of the rhythm.

This rhythm happens in our personal lives, as well as in our communal lives. The church in the 21st century is experiencing disorientation or chaos, because what once was is no longer. What worked in the past for churches doesn't seem to work anymore. People in our culture don't often just wander into churches, for what was known as the attractional model – build it and they will come – is history. Churches of all sizes are struggling to connect with the world outside their doors, because everything continues to change so rapidly.

So, listen again to the words of Isaiah, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." Memories are wonderful, yet our future is not going to look like memories of our past. Isaiah continues saying, "I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" You see God is at work among us doing a new thing and it doesn't look anything like the past.

Isaiah said, "Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path through the mighty waters." The people of God escaped from Pharaoh and his armies because God made away through water. What stood before the people of God was the sea of reeds. There was no escape route. They thought that their death was imminent. They had nowhere to go. The people cried out, "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." They romanticized their past. Their past was better than their present. Their past was certainly better than their imagined future – their death in the wilderness. Then Moses said to them, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish today."

God delivered, for the dry path that brought freedom to the people of God, became the grave yard for the Egyptian army. Pulled out of the pit, the people of God were filled with laughter and shouts of joy. And their future, well it wouldn't be like their past, for God was doing a new thing.

Listen again to God's word through the prophet Isaiah, "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." There is not water before them. There is wilderness before them. Their way forward is not through water on dry land, but through dry land with water. A body of water before them doesn't signal death, water through dry lands signals life. God's way in their past, doesn't look like God's way in their future. "I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it, First Presbyterian Church in Redlands?"

What will it mean for us to follow a God who specializes in making a pathway through whatever barriers stand in the way of our future? Is this building a barrier or a blessing to be developed? Is our size a barrier or a blessing that makes us more flexible and responsive? Is our diversity a barrier or a blessing that demonstrates our ability to welcome all peoples into the household of God?

Friends, our future will not look like our past. Yet, will we trust in a God who makes a way through the wildernesses of our lives, individually and communally? A pathway is before us, for God is doing a new thing, do we not perceive it?