

Nov 23 Thanksgiving Sunday

Changed Circumstances

Psalm 126

Today I am going to begin with a story instead of ending with one. The life of a good friend of our son's embodies this Psalm. Some years ago we were at his wedding. Our son was his best man as he had been at Sam's. He is from a large family that does everything together. Thanksgiving dinner guests at the grandparents routinely numbered 40 or more. In fact when the grandparents had built their garage they had designed it so that it was a cozy retreat for family gatherings, with insulation, heating, and an extra bathroom. He was so excited on his wedding day and was looking forward to having a family. Two years later, as I was talking with his dad I learned that things were not going well. It seems that this young man's wife did not want children and only went to family events when she was forced and then sat around pouting so that it was better to not have her there at all. Finally they made the decision to divorce.

At that moment he was at his lowest. All of his hopes and dreams were shattered. But, he had a strong faith and he recalled all of the good things that had happened in the past and trusted that someday something good would come his way. But he was in a funk. He was not dating. He just went to work and hung out at his parents playing with his nephews and nieces. His sister decided to take matters into her own hands. She had a friend who she knew would be perfect for her brother. She set up the blind date and almost forced him to go. She threatened to drive him to the restaurant if he wouldn't go on his own. They met and ended up talking for three hours that night. It led to another meal. And soon they were talking about marriage. She was an only child and always longed to be part of a large family. When she came to the first clan gathering she fit right in and was soon in the kitchen with the other women swapping stories. Two years ago they were married and are expecting their first child in December. He is so happy. He said to his dad recently, "I never realized life could be this great."

His story reminds us of a sobering fact. Difficult times happen in life. The Psalmist was going through such a time. He talks about tears and weeping. This Thanksgiving Psalm reminds us of what to do in such circumstances.

First of all he looked back in time. He remembered when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. He recalled the laughter and joy. He recalled how others had said about them, "The Lord has done great things for them" and how they had rejoiced. All of this is not thinking kindly of the good ol' days for we know that those days were not always so good! It is instead filling your mind with the knowledge that you have been through difficult times in the past and God was with you. Those dark times did not last. God was with us.

Our friend, after the divorce, was doing just that. He recalled good times in the past. His parents and grandparents reassured him that he would not always feel this bad. Did it take away the pain? No. Did it keep him from feeling discouraged and depressed? No. What it did do was give him the courage to keep going, knowing that somehow, someday things would ultimately sort themselves out.

This is a challenge for all of us. We need to remember those times when goodness has happened unexpectedly in our lives. We have all had those moments of surprise when blessings came to us and we rejoiced. These blessings often come in unexpected ways and often from unexpected sources. One of the things I think we all need to do, as part of our Thanksgiving ritual, is to spend time reflecting. Think about all of those times when blessings came after dark moments. Almost always they were not expected. These moments of reflection help us to see the big picture in life. It reminds us that whatever we are going through, this moment does not define all of existence. It reminds us that good things happen, that God is at work in our lives blessing us even when we are not feeling very blessed and these reflections should fill us with thanksgiving and hope.

Moments of surprise are many in my life. I always say, "My God has a great sense of humor." Let me share just one instance. I had had a very busy time. The church was finishing a major remodeling project. I had put in many long hours and was

feeling burned out. I looked to the future and saw no relief in sight. Just then one of my church members called to ask if I would do her wedding. Jenny and I had enjoyed watching the romance bloom after her first husband had died. I said yes. She said, "There is a catch. We want to get married in St. Croix in the Virgin Islands. Will you and Jenny come as our guests for a week?" My "woe is me, I am too busy" quickly turned to shouts of joy as we celebrated the New Year in the Caribbean. All of this reminds us to not carry the current times' pain too heavily. It won't always be this way.

The Psalmist also tells us to bring our concerns to God, but we are to do them with hope. He says, "Restore our fortunes O Lord." It is a plea for change in the present but he goes on to the positive. They are some of the most powerful words in the Psalms. "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 hear this being a reminder that God is always at work at transformation. The negatives will be replaced by positives. The hard work of sowing will reap a rich harvest. This is our hope.

So, when you are struggling, know that this moment does not define your existence. There have been good and wonderful times in the past. God has blessed you many, many times. That possibility is with you even to this day. Share with God your concerns and your worries. This too is part of the healing process. When we can unburden our souls, not in despair but in hope, life looks better. We then need to be open to how God is going to bring in the rich new harvest.

That is the hardest part because we often reject or can't believe that God is at work in this particular way. Our young friend almost refused to go on the date that transformed his life. He wanted to be mad at his sister for butting into his life. After all, he was an adult. He didn't need someone to fix him up with a date. God would provide some possibility sometime. He was so frustrated that he drove out to visit his grandpa. After sharing his frustration with his sister he finally let grandpa speak. Grandpa asked if he had been out for a date recently. He had to admit that he hadn't. Grandpa said, "What will it hurt?" At the worse you will have a dreadful night but at least it will be at a good restaurant. At best you will have a meal with a girl. No one was thinking that this

was more than a toe into the dating waters. No one was thinking that he would find his soul mate. All they were wanting was for him to plant some seeds for a future. It would only happen as he got out of his funk, started dating and being open to possibilities. As you heard, God had an even bigger surprise. Instead of just a beginning to the healing process he found joy beyond imagining.

I found this often to be the case. When we are open to what God is doing in our lives instead of wanting God to jump through hoops of our own making we often find our tears turn to joy. I know this is true in my life. New opportunities that came from the ashes of disappointments; doors opening to possibilities that I was reluctant to go through but glad I did, and new beginnings when I wasn't even willing to acknowledge that the current whatever wasn't working have all been a part of my life.

So weeping may come in the night, as one Psalm says but Joy comes in the morning. This is our hope and this is the basis of our Thanksgiving now and always.