

## **Nov 22 Thanksgiving Sunday**

### Changed Circumstances

#### Psalm 126

I recall a Thanksgiving story about a young woman who had enjoyed spending time in her grandfather's garden. She moved to the city for work and was lamenting that she would not enjoy getting her hands dirty growing things. She was attending her new church when she heard about a vegetable plot, almost an acre in size, which the congregation worked on together with the bulk of the produce going to the community food bank. The church was looking for volunteers, with the payoff being fresh vegetables. She immediately signed up and called her grandfather with the joyous news. His words to her set her back a bit. He said, "Gardening is hard work and takes time. When you helped me you just did the fun stuff. You have said yes, now I expect you to give this your all." His words came true as the reality of growing an acre of vegetables became apparent. Every week she needed to spend several hours on a Saturday plus a couple of nights a week after work at the patch. She thought about giving it up but just as she was most discouraged the first harvest occurred. She went with some of the other volunteers to deliver the veggies to the food bank and saw the joy it brought to those who received the produce. As she prepared some greens from the garden with that fresh picked flavor she again rejoiced. The joy of the harvest kept her in the field. And she, who had been lamenting how the garden had destroyed her social life because it left no time to hang out with her new friends, found companionship, love and ultimately a husband in the vegetable patch.

I share this story because this is the story of Psalm 126. The first verses recall the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon. For years they had been thinking about, wishing they could go home. Finally this had happened. Their circumstances had been changed for the better. It was a heady time when everything seems to be going as predicted. Joy and laughter abounds. They are saying; "The Lord has done great things for us and we are overjoyed!"

We can identify with those feelings, right? We have longed for something, prayed about it, and then it happens. We experience great joy and want to tell everyone how

God answered our prayers. We are like the woman calling her grandfather with the joyous news that she volunteered to work in a vegetable garden and will be eating fresh vegetables she had helped grow even while living in the city. A prayer certainly answered.

For the people of Israel reality soon sets in. When they see Jerusalem they see a place in disrepair. The walls are breached in many places, the gates are gone, the temple is in ruins and there are angry neighbors all around who want them gone. This is why they also pray, "Lord change our circumstances for the better." Psalm 126 reminds us that we live in the hope of God's help, always remembering what God has done in the past and always anticipating what God will do in the future.

The people of Israel celebrated what God had done but also realized that they needed even more. They use images to help get at that idea. There are many dry waddies around Jerusalem. When the rains come in the mountains these waddies run full with life-giving water. In the dry times they stand as a reminder that water will again flow in the desert.

Where are those symbols that remind you of how you have been blessed and give you assurance in your dry times that blessings will again occur? I recall a woman telling about her blessing book. Whenever something good had happened in her life she would note it in her book. The notations were often about seemingly insignificant things, a call from a friend, a lunch out, or celebration of a task completed. Yet, when life became challenging she would go back and read from her blessing book. It would remind her of all those times she had celebrated the blessings of life. It would help her see the blessings that were still happening even when life was hard. And, it caused her to have an anticipation of even more and better blessings in the future. It is nice when blessings show up. We celebrate and give thanks.

The other image used reminds us that often for God to answer our prayers of "change our circumstances for the better" we have to go to work. The image of the cycle of planting and harvest gets at this idea. You plant with tears but reap the harvest with joyful shouts. You go out crying carrying your seed, but come home with joyful shouts.

The young woman in my story lived out this psalm. She found it to be hard work to bring in the harvest but in the perseverance she found joy. The people of Israel persevered. They rebuilt the walls, they hung new gates, and they ultimately restored their kingdom. It took much hard work but ultimately the blessings they had first felt in seeing Jerusalem after a long absence in exile were realized. God had done great things and the Lord changed their circumstances for the better, but they had to work for it!

Too often we pray for things and sit back waiting for the blessings to come. It is like being beside a dry river bed in the desert. Eventually blessings will flow to us because life is good and God is good. But the reality is that most of the time it is going to take some effort on our part to get to our goal. When we realize this, it is easy to want to give up. We blame God for not making it happen. God instead offers to partner with us saying we can do this together. In our work and God's help the blessings are realized.

For you gardeners out there remember the tingle of anticipation as you buy those seeds. You image all the good food that will come from that little packet. But you also know that to make it happen is going to require planting, and weeding and thinning and watering and... but the harvest makes it worthwhile. We know that the seeds mean nothing unless we partner the potential with our effort.

Israel wanted the Lord to change their circumstances for the better but they had to be reminded that they were involved. They had to work to bring in the harvest. The blessings were there like a dry wadi filling with water but they had to become involved for the joys of potential to become reality.

This is a good word to end with when it comes to thanksgiving. Often we think of thanksgiving as being mostly about celebrating the blessings that just come to us. We are like the Israelites returning from captivity. We are filled with joy and we give thanks. But many blessings come to us only in the hard work of planting and harvesting. We invest of our time and our resources and then we rejoice in the results. But we should also see that the hard work is also part of the blessing and give thanks.

The woman in the story I started with came to realize that part of the joy of the harvest was the investment she put into it. The joy came in seeing how others benefited from her hard work. The joy came in being with others who had a similar goal. She had thought the blessing was getting fresh veggies. Her grandfather knew that if that was her only focus she would quit before the harvest. That was why he challenged her to accept the work, to embrace the totality of the project. As she did the other blessings came to her as well.

Where do we need to embrace the work that brings the blessings this day? Many of you have had to go through rehab. Some do it mildly complaining all along about the process. Others embrace the rehab as their part in getting better. It makes a difference when you embrace the journey. I see people who mildly complain about how their friendship is being taken advantage of. Others see the helping out of a friend as part of what goes into a friendship knowing that what goes around comes around. It makes a difference when you embrace the totality of what makes friendships real instead of only the results.

This thanksgiving give thanks to God for the blessings you have received. Some of them are fulfillment of longings held for some time, others are little events that brighten your day. Build on them to look forward to the future with anticipation. But even more, give thanks for the journey into the future that will make some of our longings a reality.