

## Role Reversal

Psalm 126

Third Sunday of Advent, Our Savior Lutheran, Westminster, MA

In Psalm 126 we are invited to celebrate the restoration of Jerusalem after the disaster of exile:

- 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 they said among the nations,  
          “The Lord has done great things for them.”
- 3      The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.

The original context of the Psalm references the restoration of the temple and rebuilding of Jerusalem after the devastating event of the Babylonian invasion in 596 BC. This was the second massive and crippling invasion in Israel’s history. The first was in 722 BC when Assyrian hordes breeched from the north, and not merely conquered the northern ten tribes of Israel, but obliterated them from the face of the earth: the northern 10 tribes were lost forever. The Assyrians then bred out the few Jews in that region, with the resulting people being the Samaritans. *That’s* the kind of devastation to have in mind when we get the to the massive invasion led by Nebuchadnezzar into the two remaining southern tribes.

This region, called Judah, was all that was left of the once-great 12 tribes of Israel. In Judah the capital city of Jerusalem sat — the place of Mount Moriah, the seat of the Temple where God dwelt in the Most Holy Place, enthroned between the Cherubim. It was there that God met with humanity, where atonement was made, where kings were anointed. The Temple was the Jewish end-all, be-all epicenter to social-political-religious-economic life: the equivalent of the White House, Capital Building, Treasury, Library of Congress, and Pentagon in one, awe-inspiring edifice.

But just like the Northern ten tribes of Israel, the Southern tribes of Judah were given to idolatry, injustice, ungodliness. Prophet after prophet came, calling them to repentance until, at last, Babylon, the superpower of its day smashed the walls, burned the city with fire, and laid waste the Temple complex, carting into oblivion all the sacred fixtures including the Ark of Covenant, never to be seen again.

But the Israelites of the southern two tribes—called Jews, short for Judeans—were *not* lost to history. They preserved their religion, as best they could; their language, as best they could; their culture as best they could. And in just two generations, three waves of exiles were released to restore Jerusalem by the decree of Cyrus.

We have something like this in mind when Dresden was laid waste through Allied bombing. Imagine being the residents of this once magnificent city (known as Europe's Jewelry Box), seeing it reduced to ashes and enslaved to Communism for the next 50 years, and then seeing it liberated and restored: all within your lifetime. Imagine, further, being driven from Dresden (fleeing Nazism and Stalinism) with your last glimpses of flaming rubble; only, seventy years later, to find yourself in the Marketplatz beholding the awe-inspiring Dresdener Frauenkirche. You would burst out in laughter; wonder if it were a dream. The Psalmist experienced that and more.

Such an epic redemption is depicted in vv. 1-2 with implied incredulity:

- 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;

Today we would say, No way! This can't be happening! An entire nation swept from its land. Its capital city left in a state of Hiroshima. Its sacred epicenter a scorched memory. And now, ascending a half-mile above sea-level, you see it for the first

time, the Temple glistening in the sun, the walls and houses of Jerusalem restored; people bustling with activity. It seems too, too good to be true.

Who ever heard of a nation being restored, getting its capital city again? It *must* be a dream! No—we are awake and really experiencing the Lord’s faithfulness. That’s Ps 126. YHWH has made good on His promises to redeem, restore His people. It’s no wonder that all the Bible’s great theological words begin with the prefix “re”: redeem, restore, resurrect, renew, re-create, regenerate. Our God takes the world’s worst conditions and spectacularly reverses all; *that’s* celebrated here. Miraculous redemption; extraordinary providences. It’s like a dream — a dream come true.

That’s not all: A fresh revelation of glory will only be known through the sorrow and shame of God’s people and God’s King — His “anointed.” In Psalm 126, it is the one who weeps, bearing seed for sowing, who will come with joy and victory as he brings home his sheaves. This is the image of Jesus. He is promise of Advent.

Luther interpreted this Psalm obedient to the principles taught by Jesus himself. And so Luther and holy, catholic church understand verses 4-6 as being the *words of Christ, words about Christ*. Luther writes:

[Verse 4] explains Christ’s first advent into the church, so it is explained concerning His spiritual advent into the soul, to which is given saving joy when its captivity is brought back through grace and it becomes like one comforted and full of joy and praising.

It is Christ who restores the fortunes of our lost souls, who takes us from being under judgment and sets us upon a rock; who is himself *a stream of living water* into whom we are through Baptism immersed, and of whom we drink from the medicinal chalice. Jesus requires that the content of the Psalm be transported into the New

Covenant. St Paul shows us the way in his writings. There we find that ‘seedtime and harvest’ is one of the central ways in which we stand at the intersection between the corruptible physicality of the old world, sown in sorrow and fear, and the incorruptible physicality of the new world, reaped in triumph and joy. That’s the image Paul uses in 1 Cor 15 to explain the difference between the present body, made of corruptible flesh, and the future body, a solid physical body, that is nevertheless incorruptible, because resurrected bodies will be animated by God’s Spirit.

It’s an appropriate image. Seedtime and harvest, like day and night, are built into creation as signposts, indications that the God who made the world has purposes yet to be unveiled. Jesus himself used the image to speak of his own forthcoming death and resurrection.<sup>(John 12.24)</sup> In all of this, we sense the larger world within which the uses of the Psalms in the New Testament make the sense they do. *Jesus, the bodily Son of Holy Mary, has become the place where and the means by which the glory of the Lord has been revealed for all flesh to see it, even right here, right here.* And as we see the glory revealed in his face <sup>(2 Cor 4.6)</sup>, we realize that when the Spirit is at work, we see it, too, in one another, as we are changed from one degree of glory to another. The now-and-not-yet of God’s inaugurated ‘new time’ is expressed in terms of the to-and-fro between temple-space and cosmic-space, with you and me, God’s people, straddling the gap. This altar is temple-space, intersecting with cosmic-space — heaven overlapping with earth, with you with one foot in heaven and the other in this church, straddling both worlds as you receive the Eucharist. Because all of this is creational theology, it is expressed in terms of *matter*: the matter of creation and the renewed glory-saturated matter of new creation. Yes, there has been a stunning restoration of your spirit in Holy Baptism; but there also will be a miraculous transformation of your body through resurrection; even the Earth itself will be renewed on the Last Day! The miraculous events of that new

world order we now experience only in part. Holy Mary typifies this, as heaven himself indwelt her: pregnant in matter, the eternal entering time, grace invading nature. Jesus is the reality of it for us, for He is *the* Sacrament of Advent. What keeps you straddling heaven and earth, what keeps you abiding in the intersection and assures your bodily transformation is *ingesting* the One who is the Resurrection. Holy Communion is the red-pill, red with His blood, transporting you from the matrix of fake news, virtuosity, and Artificial Intelligence to the facts of resurrection life.

Vv 5-6 pray for restoration. Implying that, even though the transformation of Israel's fortunes has happened, there's still more that needs doing. The picture of the sower going out to sow looks back to the ancient prophecies evoked by Jesus. It was a regular picture of *hope*: as the farmer would scatter seed to produce a new crop, so Israel's God would once again "sow" His people (now Jew and Gentile) in their land (the entire world). God's Messiah would reclaim the entire world beginning with our souls but also our bodies and the physical earth. Can you see, can you see how the Eucharist the both the pledge and reality of that? He takes bread and wine and hallows them, makes them vehicles of divine self-giving, vehicles by which the Son of God is incarnate here, for us, and all this by the power of His Word.

But reclaiming the world, including physicality is a contested, difficult process. In the Gospels, the work of "sowing" the kingdom cost Jesus his life. But it yielded resurrection life. So, too, with you owning, believing, and living in accordance with the reality of God's kingdom come, His will being done on *earth* as it is in heaven is hotly contested. The older a child gets when it comes to First Holy Communion catechesis, the more jaded, the most skeptical they become to spiritual realities. Their imagination, sanctified in baptism, is corrupted by scientism, materialism, and an American culture that has purged the fact of Christ from public discourse and most certainly from public education. This is why a 14 year old doesn't play

anymore — they've lost imaginative capacity. Give me a 14 year old to catechize for Holy Communion and I have to do eight years of detoxification. Even now the forces of the world pull against you children. You will in fact be pulled, lured, tempted, even instructed to abandon this holy faith and the vulnerable fact of Jesus with us to view such things as non-essential, on the periphery of Christianity, something only to be thought about, at best, once a month, like many of our weak-willed churches. But I exhort you, the Christian life largely consists of this: A fervent and unbroken devotion to the Christ of the Eucharist, a religious commitment to Holy Communion. Expect it from every Lutheran Parish. Demand it from every Lutheran Priest. It is no show-and-tell device to be rolled out the second and fourth Sundays of the month, and the spread before us with all the dignity of a McDonald's counter. This is *the* encounter. You say you love Jesus, that you desire Jesus, then own this fact: Here he is given for you, give to you. Vigilantly, therefore, safeguard your sanctified imagination and don't allow it to degenerate into functional unbelief and seeing here only bread.

Advent and the Rite of First Holy Communion gives us weeks of texts like this to see afresh that, with the virgin birth of the Son of God, with the birth of Christ in the souls of the baptized, with the birth of Christ in the Eucharist, we are ever in the presence of the extraordinary One—who is ever wrapped in the mundane: a womb, water, bread, wine, words. The ordinary bearing the extraordinary. Matter as the vehicle of Spirit. Nature yielding grace. This requires sanctified imagination, not make pretend.

There is then the striking contrast of verses 1-3, with the exhilarating theme of a grandiose restoration, a miraculous redemption set in contradistinction to the day-to-day plodding of verses 4-6: Sowing seeds, waiting, slow growth, a creeping pace. Verses 1-3 are the stuff we long for — the earth-shaking hand of God dramatically reversing the circumstances of His people; a high-handed salvation played out in the face of our enemies! Meanwhile, reality is that most of our lives are quite ordinary.

And it is in the ordinary that we lose perspective, get bored. But I'm here to tell you that Advent and the Altar are the edge of tomorrow, of heaven on earth.

It seems like, compared to this Psalmist, the only supernatural events we see are baptismal regeneration and the Eucharistic incarnation. And, well, they aren't exactly like parting the Red Sea or God descending on Sinai. Our challenge is appreciating and embracing the mundanely miraculous as the normative acts of divine self-giving. And the reason it's this way is twofold: First, there's the example of Jesus, who lived in mundane obscurity for thirty years of his earthly life: he was just the carpenter's son; a rabbi from Nazareth. A full 90% of his years were, well, a lot like yours or mine: Unremarkable, so unremarkable in fact that there are only a couple verses that cover his years from toddlerhood to just before his baptism by John.

The second reason is for us to get a grip: The extraordinary will be ordinary in the life to come, when heaven is fully manifest on earth. All of that will be normative — being in the presence of Christ, seeing him face-to-face. It'll be everyday stuff. So, too, with transforming our minds to understand the normative reality of God with us. Get used to it: Here He is: water; Here He is: bread, wine; behold the King: Priest proclaims His Word. Ordinary, normal stuff. But get used to it. You are being trained to live as restored human beings before the face of the King; life in Church trains us toward that forever end. Jesus right here, right here, for you, changing you.

We have to recapture the sense of the God of the ordinary, of contentment, so that our ordinary lives recapture the sense of *mattering*; and especially to appreciate the reliable means of grace: the gospel and the sacraments. Appreciate the way God actually works in our lives and the ordinary comes much richer and fuller. I cannot help but think that's why the most stunning event in Earth's history consisted of a pregnancy and birth. Ordinary. Yet, so utterly extraordinary. Mary's egg yields the

flesh of God. Ordinary, yet, utterly extraordinary. Take this moment to understand that you stand on the edge of heaven. The window of God opens on the Altar and Christ rides into our presence on ordinary fare. If it weren't for the hyper-stimulation of Star Wars and The Avengers that have dulled the truly miraculous, we would appreciate this moment of enchantment — Christ entering your body forging a mystical union with him and one another. Unleash your imagination. Allow it to be sanctified and see, gaze with your ears upon the fact of Christ Jesus here and now.

God prefers to work in ordinary ways, which is why the theology of the Cross doesn't fill parking lots quite like the church-of-what's-happening-now. We think that the extraordinary—the blinding moments of bliss—is better than the real. Yes, there are those moments in redemption history. But our hearts are directed to the ordinary because that's what our lives mostly are ... albeit defined by the Extraordinary One.

What this says is that we are saved by the Extraordinary One who went through a whole lot of the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary so that we who live in the ordinary may know the extraordinary and live in it ordinarily. And it is communicated to you and me through an ordinary man with an open Bible; wine that wouldn't make it on a drinking list; and bread that's hardly fit for hors d'oeuvres. The world's most ordinary but set apart for a holy purpose. They are consecrated: Consecration is all about making the common holy, not transforming it into something substantially different than what it was. It says, these things are vehicles now for God's use. And so are you — you ordinary kids of Massachusetts. The work of the gospel and living Christianly is ordinary stuff, empowered by the extraordinary. God in this moment says: You are mine (like St Mary; like that bread and wine) and I'm confiscating you to accomplish my ends. Therefore devote yourself to this: Advent in the womb, Advent on the Altar. Amen.