

*Sermon for 3 Advent, Year B
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Our Psalm today remembers the return from exile. God's people had been waiting for generations for him to restore them to the land God had given them. Many had wandered off into pagan ways and blended into the Babylonian society around them, enjoying the wealth and ease of life in the mainstream. But some had kept themselves distinct, preferring to remember who they were, even though it might make life more difficult.

These faithful were eventually returned to the Holy Land in several waves. And God acted miraculously to restore them as a nation. The psalmist looks back over that period of return and restoration and remembers the emotional impact on the people of knowing that God had acted on their behalf. "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy."

Even the other nations all around had to recognize that the people who returned to the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah were blessed by some extraordinary power. "Then they said among the nations, "the Lord has done great things for them." The joy of blessing is even expanded into the joy of being a blessing. The fact that God had blessed them became a witness to the nations. The blessing had purpose and direction, and their cup simply ran over.

Remembering all this, the psalmist feels the need to agree with the judgment of the pagans. He repeats the previous line that was attributed to the surrounding nations: "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed." It is almost as if he has to make himself say it, knowing it to be true but not feeling those feelings of joy any more.

And here it becomes clear that the reason we are rehearsing and remembering that emotional state and the blessing that caused it is because we are no longer there. The blessed ones have sunk back into the normal state of human existence in this world. The emotional ecstasy is fleeting, even when it is from God. And the circumstances of this world are never static. Death, pain, and grief are endemic in the world. Once again, we need God to bless us. "Restore our fortunes, O Lord"

In the fog of pain that most of us are usually in, we must remember three things. First, we must remember what God has already done. This is what we are doing in the first half of our Psalm. St. Paul commends the same thing to us: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” This is not a command to manufacture an emotional state. If you are sad, be sad. But still don’t forget to give thanks for what God has done. Grief will pass, but ingratitude will twist your heart. And God has been proving his love for us since before there was anyone to report it. Jesus’ Incarnation and then death on the cross is the greatest evidence of love the world has ever seen. But that was simply the climax of God’s long history of love toward his people.

Secondly, we must remember God’s promises. The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed. But he is not finished. He will not stop until he has made all things new. The Lord tells us through his prophet Isaiah, “Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not [even] be remembered or come into mind.” This new world that God is bringing us into will be perfected. All will be as it should be. The pain that our sin has brought about will be wiped out. Everyone will enjoy the fruit of their labor. Families will be complete and without fear. Our paltry and broken prayers will be replaced by instantaneous communication with God. And the serpent who got us into this mess all those long years ago will no longer bite our heels, but eat dust.

This is the promise of God: that everything will be OK. He will eventually make it more OK than you or I can possibly imagine. And so the psalmist can remind himself, “Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.” St. Paul tells the Thessalonians, “He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”

Finally, we must remember one more thing. And that is that we ourselves are part of this world that needs to be changed and made new. There is no way we are going to do any of this on our own. We need God. That is why St. Paul focuses on the faithfulness of the one who calls us. That is why he prays, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly”. That is why the psalmist cries out, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord”. And it is why our collect today starts, “Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us”.

In Advent, we look toward the remembrance of our Lord's first coming in his Incarnation, and we look forward to his second coming in glory to usher in the new creation. And in the midst of that, we cry, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses of the Negev." The Negev is the uninhabitable desert in the south of Judah, down past the Dead Sea. Our lives are like that desert, "sorely hindered by our sins". But God is the source of all life. And he can pour down living water even on the uninhabitable waste. He can make the desert bloom by his grace and mercy. He is faithful, and he will do it.