

Bootprints
Rev. Cindy Maddox
November 21, 2022

Psalm 126

This is a difficult week for preachers in general,
and for progressive preachers in particular.
Typically we try to reach people where they are,
and this week many of you are focused on Thanksgiving.
Maybe the kids are coming home,
the family is getting together,
and you're thinking about all the preparations that need to be done.
Or maybe it will be just the two of you, or just the one of you,
and you're preparing for a quiet day, or a lonely one.
Or maybe, whether you're with others or not,
your focus will be on that one empty chair,
and you don't know how you will get through the day.
That's a boatload of joy and sorrow wrapped up in this holiday.

But there are other sorrows associated with Thanksgiving.
I'm speaking, of course, of the myth of the original thanksgiving,
and how a holiday has been used to dehumanize and further marginalize
indigenous people,
while concealing our nation's horrific treatment of Native Americans.
This is not a holiday we can blithely celebrate without acknowledging
the sins of the past and the ongoing pain of the present.

And then there's the news this week.
Yet again, in two very public cases, white young men have been found not guilty
or have been given no prison time
for actions that would have landed black young men in prison
for the rest of their lives.
And in another case, a White lawyer says that Black pastors showing up for court
to support a Black family is equivalent to a public lynching
of his White clients.
The inequalities and flat-out racism in our legal system
are both a reflection and an indictment of our society at large.

So how should the preacher approach today's message,
 when some want a happy prelude to family time,
 some need comfort for what will be a difficult week,
 and some are searching for a faithful and passionate response to injustice?
 Or does the poor pastor throw up her hands and say,
 "Forget it! I'm just preaching the text!"

So . . . let's look at the text and see where it leads us.

Psalms 126 is an eloquent psalm, bursting with imagery,
 rich in metaphor and meaning.

The psalm divides very neatly into two sections, each three verses long.

In the first section the psalmist is looking back
 at an experience of God's deliverance.

Most scholars agree that it was most likely referring to
 the time when God brought the people out of bondage--
 not the first time, out of Egypt, where they had been slaves,
 but the second time, out of Babylon, where they had been exiles.

Remember that when Babylon defeated Israel and destroyed Jerusalem,
 everybody who was anybody was shipped off to Babylon.

The people lost their land, their home, and their religious and communal identity.

After at least 70 years in exile, the Israelites were eventually set free
 and were told they could return home.

This first half of the psalm is most likely reminiscing about that time.

Listen again to verses 1-3 with this context in mind:

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
 then it was said among the nations, 'God has done great things for them.'
 God has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.*

I love this passage because I have been there.

I have felt like my soul was in exile,
 my body separated from all that was real and mine and home.
 I'm guessing you have, too.

The lost job, marriage, or security.

The exile of your hopes and dreams.
 The grief for what used to be and never would be again.
 I have been there, and I have been restored.
 And I'm guessing you have been, too.
 Whether it was God who did great things for us,
 or fate or karma or hard work or simply the passing of time,
 our fortunes have changed.
 We rejoice and we give thanks.

This is a comforting and comfortable passage for Thanksgiving week,
 when we try to focus on those things for which we are grateful.
 But I also love the second half of this psalm because I've been there, too.
 In the second half, something bad has happened—
 perhaps because their return to Jerusalem
 wasn't as wonderful as they thought it would be.
 But whatever the reason, something bad happened between verse 3 and verse 4.
 The people have experienced God's deliverance in the past,
 but they need it again.

*Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negev.
 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.*

"Restore our fortunes" doesn't mean money or land.
 It means a radical change from the way things are.
 The people are saying, "Please, God, do it for us again.
 Bring us a radical change from the way things are.
 Bring us back into relationship.
 Let us hear you again."

But notice the way they ask, the metaphor they use.
 "Restore our fortunes, O God, like the watercourses in the Negev."
 There is still a region of Israel known as the Negev,
 though scholars say that the portion referred to in the Bible
 was only the northern area of current Negev.
 This region is extremely dry.

The usual rainfall total from June through October is zero.
But the region is also known for its dry riverbeds.
When the region does receive rain, especially hard rain,
the land is so dry that it cannot absorb the water,
so those dry riverbeds become powerful streams.
Yes, the flooding sometimes brings destruction,
but it also brings life-giving water to the arid landscape.
These watercourses would bring what the people needed for life;
and then it would dry again.

The watercourses were crucial to the people's survival
so they must have watched them closely,
waiting to see when the waters would start and stop.
Today the once-dry bed is rushing with life.
Today the rushing river has slowed to a gentle stream.
Now the stream is a trickle.
Now the water has stopped coming, but the ground is still muddy.
Now the ground is dry and cracked.
Now the crops are withering and the livestock are failing.
Now my lips are cracked, and my nostrils are caked with dust.
Oh God, will it ever rain again?

If it were me, when the water was high,
I would mark the edge of the river so I could see it later,
to remind myself of where it had been.
If it were me, when the water stopped I would put on my boots
and stomp around the riverbed while it was still muddy,
making deep footprints that would remain as the ground dried and cracked.
That way, I could come back and see the proof with my eyes
when I couldn't see it with my heart ...
that the ground had once been wet,
that it had rained before.
It would help me believe that it would rain again.

Sometimes our spirit flows with the water of life,
and sometimes we're in drought.
We go to the river, and we think . . .

Today I feel like disconnected, but I know God is near.
 Today I feel alone, but I think God is somewhere.
 Now I feel lost, and I don't know where or what or if God is,
 and sometimes that's okay but not today.
 Today my soul is cracked, and my hopes have turned to dust.
 Now . . . oh God, will I ever be whole again?

And that's when we look for the bootprints.
 We look back for those signs of God's faithfulness in the past,
 or we look back at those difficult times we survived in the past.
 We remember when we were brought back home from exile.
 We remember the times when we were like those who dream,
 when we were strengthened and renewed.
 And we know . . . that our life has flowed with living water before,
 and it will again.

There's one more metaphor I want to point out,
 and that's the sowing and reaping.
 One scholar puts it this way:
 "The sowing and reaping imagery of Psalm 126 is a powerful reminder
 of the importance of 'place,' because without 'place,'
 somewhere to dwell and call home,
 the concepts of sowing and reaping,
 in whatever form they might manifest themselves, are simply not possible.
 Without 'place,' how can people grow and reap a good 'crop'?
 Without 'place,' how can people dream and laugh
 and give a ringing cry of rejoicing?
 Without 'place,' how can parents provide for their children?
 The words of Psalm 126 remind us that God's good provisions
 extend to and are available to all."¹
 And with that, the text finally brings us to the other issues of today—
 the importance of place to indigenous people,
 a place and home that our ancestors stole
 and the right of everyone to dream and laugh and live in safety.
 We need a radical change from the way things are.

¹ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-psalm-126-12>

For those of you celebrating this holiday week:

know that you are like those who dream, and God has done great things.

For those of you struggling and grieving this week:

know that you are not alone in this arid land,
and the rivers of life will flow again.

And for all of us acknowledging the sins of our society,

let us be like those who dream
of a world where justice and mercy abound.

And may we give thanks that we can help to bring it to be.

Amen.