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Psalm 126: A Song of Ascents.

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Psalm 126
A Song of Ascents.
(RCL) (NRSV)

Introduction to Psalm 126

Psalm 126 is part of a cluster of Psalms (120-134) which are called Songs of Ascents. These Psalms are widely regarded as Psalms that were originally sung by pilgrims as they made their way up Mount Zion at festival times. Zion was the hill on which the Temple was built, and often was used as a name for the entire city of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah.

This Psalm divides itself quite naturally into two segments. Verses 1-3 recall a time in the past when the LORD had delivered Zion from a grave misfortune. Verses 4-6 call upon the LORD once more in the present to come to the aid of His People.

Vv. 1-3

- ¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream** (we thought we were dreaming).
**² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”**
**³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced** (we were overjoyed).

While it is impossible to determine exactly to what event the Psalmist makes reference, it is widely thought to be the return to the Promised Land from Exile in Babylon. That makes sense to me. The Israelites in exile did not suffer physically; they were not enslaved as they had been in Egypt. Yet they were removed from their homeland, the land which the LORD had promised them in perpetuity. Hence exile was not only banishment from home, but it also distanced them from the LORD their God. Year after dreary year passed, and the hope of return grew increasingly remote. And though that hope was never completely given up, it ceased to function in any lively way. I rather imagine it to have been something like the Christian hope of the Second Coming of Jesus. We confess it, but it does not strongly influence our daily life.

But the day did come! The Babylonians were defeated in battle by Cyrus the Mede, emperor of the Medo-Persian Empire, whose policy of allowing captive nations to return home affected also the Jews. Isaiah 40 is another literary testimony to the joy that the exiles felt upon receiving the utterly unexpected good news that they were now free to go home. Here they confess that they thought they were dreaming!

Note also that throughout the Psalm the reference is always to the LORD, the compassionate God of the Exodus from the slavery in Egypt and now (in the ever-lengthening name of the LORD) also the God of the Return from Exile. The LORD (Yahweh) is also the proper name for the God of Israel, as distinguished from the proper name of the god(s) of the other nations. Hence Israel's return from exile was also recognized by surrounding nations as “a great thing”

that the God of Israel had done for his people. In the language of Isaiah 40, “The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken it.”

Vv. 4-6

- ⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses** (the dry river-beds) **in the Negeb** (the desert
regions south of Judah).
- ⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.**
- ⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.**

That was then, in the past, back in Babylon; this is now (in their present, in the immediate wake of their return to Israel). The LORD’s “great thing” in the past is needed again in the present. Again it is impossible to determine exactly what the occasion for this plea might have been originally. We know that the returnees faced daunting tasks in the rebuilding of Zion, not only in the sheer magnitude of rebuilding a city that had been sacked and left in ruins during their 70 year absence, but also in the face of active opposition to the task from those who had inhabited the land in Israel’s absence.

Perhaps it was on some such occasion, when they experienced severe temptations to despair, that this Psalm was composed. They had experience of a dramatic change in the course of events. One rainstorm could cause flash flooding in the dry waterbeds of the desert regions (referred to in verse 4). Just so suddenly could the LORD change their fortunes.

Verses 5-6 receive some illumination from the religious and cultural background of the area. There were old religious myths from Ugarit (an ancient Syrian city) and Egypt in which seedtime (the planting season) was associated with the death of the god of fertility, and harvest was associated with his revival. The rituals associated with the death of the fertility god included weeping and the rituals of the revival of the god of fertility at harvest included rejoicing. Thus tears-and-sowing and laughter-and-harvest became conventional aphorisms for misfortune turning to good fortune. The Psalmist uses these conventions in praying that the LORD would turn their sorrow into rejoicing by coming to their aid.

This has become a precious image for Christians who sorrow in the face of death, but sorrow in such a way that they confidently anticipate the joy of heaven tomorrow. You might think here of the first Chorus from Johannes Brahms’ “A German Requiem,” where the prayer of Psalm 126 is turned into a divine promise: “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. They that go forth and weep bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing their sheaves with them.” Or think also of the hymn, “Let us ever walk with Jesus,” from stanza 2 in TLH #409 (superior in my judgment to the LBW and LW revisions): Let us suffer here with Jesus, To his image e’er conform; ... Tho’ we sow in tears of sorrow, We shall reap in heav’nly joy.”

This Psalm is appointed for our use for the Third Sunday in Advent. If our Advent tears are those caused by the call of the Baptist to repentance in the expectation of the Coming Mightier One they shall surely be turned to the rejoicing of the blessed.

Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 126:

Lord Jesus, our Life and our Resurrection, the tears you sowed in the sorrow of your Passion brought the earth to flower on Easter morning. Renew the wonders of your power in the Church, so that, after the sorrows of our exile, we may come home to you in gladness and praise you now and forever. Amen.

This prayer is a lovely Christian adaptation of the theme of the Psalm.

Nuggets

“The virginal conception of Jesus is the doctrine on guard at the door of the mystery of Christmas.”
Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian of earlier in the 20th century:

The Incarnation is like a dagger thrust into the weft of human history.
Edwyn Hoskins, a famous Cambridge (England) Biblical scholar before WW II

Do you not suppose that love has anger? There is no such anger as that which a mother's love furnishes. Do you suppose that when she sees the child that is both herself and him (her) whom she loves better than herself, the child in whom her hope is bound up, the child that is God's glass through which she sees immortality, the child that is more to her than her own life, doing a detestable meanness, that she is not angry and indignant, and that the child does not feel the smart of physical advice? Do you not suppose that the child know what anger is? I tell you there is no such indignation possible as the indignation that means rescue, help, hope, and betterment. You might as well say that a summer shower has no thunder as to say that love has no anger. It is full of it, or may be. Has love no specialty or discrimination in removing error, nor any continuing, intense regard for specific and exact truth? God has it, and we are like him. We are his children and know it by that. Love is simply that which overhangs all these powers, which gives them quality and direction, and gives to us a larger power through these lower instruments.

Henry Ward Beecher, famous 19th century abolitionist preacher

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