

A Harvest of Joy

22nd Weekend after Pentecost – November 4/5, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Psalm 126 (NRSV)

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

²Then 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.”

³The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

*Life can throw a lot at us. Joys and concerns.
Ups and downs. Dreams and disappointments.
The church, including our St. Andrew, is the
place where we can go to ground ourselves in
the joy and hope of being God's beloved.*

Ups and downs

Many people don't know that in the same year Rick Warren's *A Purpose-Driven Life* exploded onto the bestseller lists, his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. In an interview, Rev. Warren said that he had always seen life like the outline of a mountain range, a line of ups and downs. Up followed by down followed by up and so on. But he said he had come to see life differently, that the ups and downs were more like parallel railroad tracks than the outline of the mountain range. In what was surely the most tumultuous year of their lives, he and his wife lived through the simultaneous “up” of a bestseller and the “down” of cancer at the same time – they were living on parallel tracks.

Today's psalm is about life's ups and downs – from the “up” past of the Jews' return from exile, to the present “down” of their disappointment with the post-exilic life, to the “up” future of God's promised restoration.¹ But look closely at the psalm. How much is actually said about the present “down.” Granted, there are tears and weeping (verses 5 and 6). But where is the petition for help? The anger over what seems to be God's unkept promises? It is like there is an entire middle stanza missing from the psalm. Indeed, if we didn't know the truth about the Jews' return to Judea, we might have little clue there was any “down” at all – but there certainly was.²

Perhaps the psalmist wants us to understand that though the people are experiencing a present “down,” their eyes and their hearts are focused upon their past blessings and their future hopes. They know life is

Seeking Joy

I don't know that there is a better word to describe the life I seek than a life filled with *joy* – the joy of a loving relationship with God, with my wife, with my children and family, with my friends, with all of you at St. Andrew. The joy of a job well done; the happiness of purpose and fulfillment. The celebration of all that is good and wonderful about life. This is what I seek, but such joy can be so hard to find!

A few years ago, an article in the *New York Times* caught my eye: “The Futile Pursuit of Happiness.” The author traced the work of several researchers on our search for happiness. What they found is no real surprise. We humans are dreadful when it comes to imagining how we'll feel about something in the future. As the author put it, “we overestimate the intensity and duration of our emotional reactions.” More simply stated, that new BMW isn't going to make you as happy as you thought it would and any boost it does give to your happiness won't last as long as you thought it would!

The same is true on the downside; emotional devastation was less intense and shorter-lived than people expected. Mistakes we make in understanding what to expect from a raise or a new car or a new house lead directly to poor choices. We think we know what will make us happy or content or joyful – but we don't. The truth is that it is easy for us all to spend most of our lives looking for joy in all the wrong places. So, where do we turn?

¹In 587/86 BC, the Babylonians burned Jerusalem and sent tens of thousands back to Babylon to live in exile. After about fifty years, King Cyrus of Persia overran Babylonia and allowed the Jews to begin returning to the burned out ruins of Jerusalem. The phrase “restored the fortunes of Zion” refers to this return from exile. Yet, the exiles' dreams were not realized. In this psalm, as in the book of Joel, the psalmist confronts the disappointing circumstances in Judea. The Jews may have come back from Babylon, but they were neither free nor prosperous.

²There are many parallels between Psalm 126 and the book Joel. But there is also a key difference: Joel opens with a lament over the ruining of the country, whereas in the psalm, the lament is only inferred.

like Rick Warren's railroad tracks, ups and downs swirling around them, but they choose to dwell on the "up" track. They choose to see the blessings in their own lives and to see the good in others. It is not that they are being "unrealistic." The people of God certainly do not see the world through those famed rose-colored glasses. But we do see the world in the light of God. And that changes everything.

Harvesting joy – how or where?

We may know that there is an "up" track in our lives and that we ought to see our lives in the light of God, but, frankly, sometimes it is just pretty hard. Job, marriage, family, money, health . . . problems in any of these can overwhelm us, make us feel lost and alone, so that we lose sight of the "up" track entirely. Then what do we do or, more to the point, where do we go?

We Americans are practical people, focused very much on the "how." Whether it is six steps to happiness or eight weeks to a fulfilling marriage, we want to know *how* to find the joy we seek or *how* to see the "up" track when we are being feeling overwhelmed by the "down." And, I could come up with a "how" list for you. You might even be able to write it yourself. Prayer, service, caring, Bible, worship, giving, learning . . . all good candidates for our "how." But instead of the "how," perhaps it is better to begin with the "where."

What is church? Why are there churches at all? Is there a church because we need organizations that can bring people together to worship, to minister to one another, to study, to serve, and to do mission? Is the church defined by what we do as we seek to accomplish God's purposes? In other words, is the church the means to an end . . . or is the church the end in itself?

Simon Chan, a professor at Trinity Theological Seminary in Singapore, helps us to see that the church, the larger body of Christ of which St. Andrew is one small part, is not merely an organizing tool. He says, "The church does not exist in order to fix a broken creation; rather, creation exists to realize the church. To be sure, the church's coming into being does require the overcoming of sin, but that is quite different from saying that the problem of sin is the reason for the church's being. God made the world in order to make the church, not vice versa."³

The place of hope and joy

"God made the world in order to make the church." Think about that for a minute. To put it another way, God made the world so that God could form a people to love and who would love God, even at the cost of his own Son. It staggers my heart to contemplate such a thing and it humbles me.

The church does not consist of buildings, not even the beautiful sanctuaries such as our own. Rather, the church consists of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed and affirm our belief in "one holy catholic church," we mean the universal church, the body of Christ - to which all Christians, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, belong. God had once dwelt in the temple of Jerusalem, but, beginning at Pentecost, God dwells in and among his people. It is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ, a new creation and new humanity, growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God has returned. What a remarkable claim we make, that God's very presence dwells in us, the church ~ the people of God.

For twenty years, there has been a congregation called St. Andrew in the holy, catholic church. For twenty years, we have been on a journey, understanding that God created us to be his. We are a large community and we have all the blessings and challenges that come with size, but we must never lose sight of the fact that we are not merely an organization. Rather, we, as the body of Christ, are the very presence of Christ.

We are a growing and dynamic community of faith, marked by a welcoming warmth that we cherish and nurture. This has been made possible by a committed and generous congregation that has always understood there is joy in giving. Our current stewardship will again demonstrate these giving hearts.

Thus, before we ever get to the "how," this place is our "where." The church, not a mountaintop, is the place of joy and hope. It is here, in the fellowship we share with God and one another that we can ground our lives on the "up" track. In the words of the psalmist, when we come here, to the people called St. Andrew, we are coming home to shouts of joy as we carry the fruit of God's harvest.

³from Mark Galli's article, "Stopping the Cultural Drift," in the November 2006 issue of *Christianity Today*.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

November 5 - 11

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Ezekiel 35-38; Psalm 130-131 Ezekiel's famous vision of the dry bones in chapter 37 is a vision about the restoration of Israel after its coming death.</p>	<p>Monday Ezekiel 39-42; Psalm 132 God wins the final battle and builds a new and improved temple, just as Israel will be all-new and improved.</p>
<p>Tuesday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Wednesday Ezekiel 43-45; Psalm 133-134 More on God's new temple</p>
<p>Thursday Ezekiel 46-48; Psalm 135 Ezekiel's last vision concludes with the boundaries of Israel, to be seen as the perimeters of paradise</p>	<p>Friday John 1-3; Psalm 136 The prologue; Jesus turns water into wine; Jesus confronts the temple, turning over the tables; Jesus meets with Nicodemus</p>
<p>Saturday John 4-6; Psalm 137 Jesus in Samaria; he heals an official's son; Jesus is the bread of life</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this fall. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewccl.org.

Books that would make good Christmas gifts

I've been making book recommendations for almost three years. Here are a few that I think would make good Christmas gifts to friends and family. *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore, still has copies of these.

The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible, Ed. Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, et al

Talking the Walk, by Marva Dawn

Prayer, by Philip Yancey

Finding God in the Questions, by Dr. Timothy Johnson

The Jesus I Never Knew, by Philip Yancey

Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision, by Paul Wesley Chilcote

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

First, what do we mean by joy? Is it the same thing as happiness? If not, how do they differ in your mind? How would you describe joy to someone? What illustrative story could you tell?

How do we usually seek joy or happiness? What stories do you have about times when you've thought something would make you happy - but instead proved disappointing or fleeting? I once bought an expensive piano because I somehow had decided that it would improve a very unhappy marriage. (Crazy but true!) As parents, most of us try to teach our own kids that a new dress or a video game won't bring them lasting happiness, but I wonder how much we take to heart our own teachings. What have you learned about finding joy in life?

If St. Andrew is to be truly the place where we experience a "harvest of joy," then we need to commit to helping build a loving and joy-filled community, remembering back to last week that we do so out of God's strength and not our own. The many completed puzzle pieces illustrate what a special place God and we have formed here. You might reflect upon the ways in which you have been blessed by God and by St. Andrew. Specifically, where at St. Andrew have you found joy? What people here make you joyful? What is it about them? You might share some stories about the most meaningful and memorable experiences you've had at St. Andrew or with other members of the St. Andrew family.