

Psalm 126 The Streams in the Negev
December 17, 2023

Whenever I read something in the Bible that is unfamiliar to me, it tickles my curiosity, and I am inclined to do a little research. In the psalm of the day it was the line about the streams in the Negev that sparked my interest.

The Negev is the region in southern Israel that stretches down to Aqaba and is mostly a desert nowadays. Most of the year there is a rocky barrenness, and dry river beds. Each year in the rainy season, the waters drain down from many sources in the hills to create broad rivers that temporarily bring the region to life with vegetation and flowers and all the accompanying wildlife. It is an unmistakable visual aid representing death turning into life right before the eyes.

As an illustration it has a measure of importance. Nothing specific that happens in life can be said to have absolute significance. No one thing has ultimate meaning. On the other hand, such phenomena and other examples *can* point us in the direction of that which *does* have eternal meaning.

As we know, for the Israelites, *their history* became the context for interpretation, a way of apprehending the meaning of things. They, or at least the one's who, guided by the Holy Spirit, were led to write about the spiritual and theological discoveries they made, told their national story.

The psalms and the prophets mostly represent the tail end of the story, in which they had to contend with events that were troubling, and hard to explain, sometimes even to acknowledge.

Their story, along with the theological discoveries they made . . . has become our story, in the sense that it gives meaning to people's lives in our time, as much as it did to them in theirs.

The 126th psalm, that mentions the streams in the Negev, tells what part of the story that inspired it, right in its first verse, "When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion. . . " which takes us back some 2,500 years or so to the end of the Babylonian Captivity, when many of the people that had been a part of the Judean Kingdom, which had been conquered and carried into exile, were allowed to return.

Words can not express the depth of the suffering or of the defeat that they experienced, not because it was more terrible for the Israelites than for others who have suffered in similar ways - Israel is *like* other people, not different; that is what makes their story universal - but simply because being defeated and exiled is suffering at its worst, and they suffered it. No words are sufficient.

So also we can imagine the joy of the return begging the words they used to convey it, which is to say that human language is not able to carry the freight of meaning, of either of these experiences of life; the

pain of failure and defeat, and the inexpressible joy of deliverance and success.

Living in the third century of the American experiment, it is difficult to relate. *We do not consider ourselves to have been defeated* in such a way, although that consideration is not universal.

Yet, each of us *has* experienced enough of life's persistent hardships and joys to relate by way of analogy. There has been some occurrence that has given shape to our lives; a loss, a shattered dream, a broken promise; something.

Conversely, there has been some joy; a victory, a resolution of conflict, a friendship, a source of laughter, a cleansing, such that life's defeats are themselves defeated.

In a way each is given a choice . . . which aspect of our experience shall we allow to interpret our lives? The hardships and the defeats? Or the victories and the beautiful dreams, the experiences of joy?

To be clear, the message of the Bible is unswerving in its answer to this great question; and the answer is that the good far outweighs the bad; the victory of life, and light, and joy is proclaimed over death, and darkness, and despair.

Like the prophets of old who found hope in the worst of the tragedies, the psalmist is *overwhelmed* by the joy of the return from exile, the restoration of all that is

good and right and just, even if it was temporary, and partial, came with headaches, because of the eternal truth to which it points.

It is a high and holy proclamation, expressed very well in the Isaiah reading. The prophet also had to contend with the same hard times as did the psalmist - and instead of being swallowed up by the catastrophe, was able to proclaim:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach *good news* to the poor,” and then there is a litany; “to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance for our God;

to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion, and bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of God's splendor.”

It is a vision that points to the future, and yet is sometimes manifest in the present, like when the exiles were able to return; like when the war is over, any war, and the peace is restored; and the sound of children playing can be heard once again; when old friends meet after long absence. When the desert comes to life.

What we celebrate on this third Sunday of Advent is the good news that the power of the best news is greater than the power of the worst, and points to the great victory of eternal life and of righteousness and of peace and of unselfish love. That is the meaning of the joy represented by the pink candle, that this new birth is near, close enough to reach out and touch.

Thus we pray,

“Restore our fortunes, O Lord, *like the streams in the Negev*. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. The one who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, (bringing in the sheaves).”

Let this be our Christmas prayer, let this be our prayer, and not only for ourselves but for those who presently do not know peace and joy. And let it be not only the source of our hope, but of our striving to live towards that hope, by living lives of generosity and truthfulness, of courage and resolve, of integrity, and dignity, of peace and good will, of compassion, most of all of love, not the selfish kind that spends up what it encounters, but the divine kind of love that builds up and restores and reconciles.

To the praise of God’s glorious grace, and with all joy.

Benediction

1 Thessalonians 5

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. Amen.

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