



October 24, 2021
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Psalm 126
"Acts 2: Praising God"



A few weeks ago, while wearing a mask on the subway and seeing all those around me wearing them as well, it all suddenly felt like a surreal dream; as if we were on a movie set. Though I hadn't forgotten about the state of things for a moment, I was dissociated from the world we live in, feeling as if this new normal was a momentary dream.

In Psalm 126, Israel had a similar experience, except in reverse. They had been in exile for so long, away from their homes and their lands, that when the Lord returned them to the Promised Land, it all felt like a dream, the text tells us. The response to their surreal experience was spontaneous laughter. The feeling of release and freedom was such a distant, seemingly impossible dream, that no other response was possible except for incredulous joy!

But in a few verses, the joy shifts to deep pleas for help. Psalm 126 presents a confusing set of verb tenses to underscore the fundamental state of life on this side of paradise.

Notice the first section of the Psalm is in the past tense. "When the Lord restored our fortunes." That phrase speaks to a work that God has accomplished and the people have experienced, thus the laughter and the joy!

But in the second section there is an abrupt shift as the psalmist pleads to God for present action, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord!"

In our time, we have offered exclamatory shouts of joy and laughter. I remember getting my first vaccine shot and feeling such a thrill. It was the first time I went running on the reservoir without a mask. I relished the idea of a ritual mask burning, a bonfire of symbolic freedom! It was thrilling just to think about it!

Let us take a moment to give thanks and to celebrate, shouts of joy even. The pace with which the vaccine was produced was an absolute blessing from God. The miracle, despite the narrative that some want to teach, was an incredible, monumental partnership of modern science, pharmaceutical business, and government.

The scientists went to work. Feverishly. And soon several vaccines were ready to go.

"This is a remarkable and very reassuring situation that we find ourselves in," says Trudie Lang, who directs the Global Health Network at the University of Oxford... "[It] is an incredible milestone for science." *

The pharmaceutical companies, with their considerable resources, were the ones ready to deploy the scientists, and partnerships

were created across competitors. Their resources enabled them to ramp up production of hundreds of millions of doses – something that would have been utterly impossible in any other moment in history. Government, for their part, enabled an accelerated the approval process, provided funding, and supported cross-national cooperation.

Despite the deep divisions in our world, the vaccine is a miracle of cooperation for which we rightly owe thanks and joy. Without it, we not only would not be singing in church, we likely would not be in our sanctuary at all.

As people of God, we might be forgiven for feeling schizophrenic – not knowing if we should be filled with joy or with sorrow! The answer is yes! Not one or the other, but both, to their fullest!

But today I want to focus on the joy. We have had too much of the other for so long. As Karl Barth wrote so often, “God’s ‘Yes!’ is louder than God’s ‘No’.” In speaking of the divine truth found in Mozart’s music, he summed up his thoughts on faith, “It is a glorious upsetting of the balance, a turning in which the light rises and the shadows fall, in which the ‘yes’ rings louder than the ever-present ‘no’.”

But it is God’s word itself that shows us the “yes” most clearly. The gospel writers summed up the entirety of Jesus’ message with the word, *euangelion*, which as you know means, good news!

The triumph of God in Jesus Christ is glorious, good news that we can find hope, life, light, and even laughter in all times.

Living in this time of tension between the “already” and the “not yet” sometimes leads us to be dour or even cynical Christians, which in the end is no Christian faith at all. For our faith and hope lies in God, not in our broken selves. And indeed this tension was just as true, perhaps even more, during Israel’s era of exile and return, and yet verse two tells us their mouths were filled with laughter. Not simple happiness, but incredulous joy at the redemption of God contrary to all expectation and reason.

One priest, Father Martin, has written a book about this calling to laugh, “Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life”. One person in their encounter with Father Martin learned, “He was dismayed that so many of the Christians he met assumed faith was strictly a solemn matter. Laughter is actually a tenet of faith, Father Martin told me. ‘The endpoint of the Christian life is joy,’ he said. ‘Yet we don’t privilege joy as much as we do suffering.’”

Indeed laughter perhaps is also the right emotion for the gift of this vaccine. For as we spoke earlier, in our times of historic failure of cooperation this vaccine has come from precisely because people were able to work together. How delightfully ironic!

And because of it grandparents are able to see their grandchildren, singers can open their voices, actors can perform on stage, families can celebrate birthdays, youth can more safely go to school, and teachers can feel safer amongst the youngest of children. Yes, there is a lot to continue to mourn, but there are so many victories!

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The power of laughter truly is a sublime, healing gift from God. My favorite author, the late Isaac Asimov, was a consummate New Yorker, PhD scientist at Columbia, and literary polyglot who wrote on endless subjects. He had a fascinating view on laughter, disclosed by a delightful short story. Being an atheist, he could not quite make sense of how this uniquely human trait evolved. Unable to find a satisfactory reason for its existence, in this short story he posits that laughter is the invention of aliens doing experiments on us! Indeed laughter is from above, but not aliens, rather the gift from a God who wants us to do more than simply exist! This God wants us to laugh, and we even have a few members of our congregation who have dedicated their lives to this craft.

A “Guidepost” devotional tells of one lawyer-turned-preacher, Susan Sparks, who believes laughter is not only from God, but of God. Sparks is a former trial lawyer turned minister and standup comedian. “We are the only creatures that really laugh,” she says. And since we’re made in the image of the divine, that must mean God laughs too... Being able to laugh in a place of pain was the most powerful thing I could do to take my life back.” **

Laughter, it seems to me, is to be surprised by joy, to be taken off guard when something wondrous leaps into your life. I cannot count how many times I have heard the surprising sound of joy in the most unlikely of places – funeral planning. Wives, children, brothers and friends come to my office to plan a service to the glory of God and celebration of a life. I try to have Kleenex on hand, for tears

often flow heavy, but also often in the midst of the planning, they get to telling stories.

And suddenly, there might be not only polite chortles or meek chuckles, but gut-wrenching laughter. And it is at the moment, in the profound intimacy of shared lives, that I see how God has reigned blessing upon blessing throughout their lives.

Indeed, there will be much opportunity to mourn and to weep, as our Psalm suggests. But note how the Psalm concludes with a parallelism better seen in the Hebrew. “He goes out weeping bearing seeds for sowing; he comes home rejoicing bearing the harvest.” May God put laughter in your lives, knowing that someday we will all return home, rejoicing at the harvest of our Lord. Amen.

*(<https://www.science.org/content/article/covid-19-vaccine-trial-complete-pfizer-and-biontech-update-their-promising-result>).

**<https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/miracles/gods-grace/divine-humor-how-laughter-benefits-us-spiritually>