

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – December 17, 2017

Psalm 126

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on Psalm 126:

1. This Psalm speaks of both Israel’s historical experience and its present reality, and thus locates assurance of hope in present difficulties in past experiences of restoration and rejoicing. How can this pattern inform our own faith and experiences? What are our sources of joy, even in the midst of trying circumstances?
2. This reading is assigned for the 3rd Sunday of Advent – that Sunday typically focused around joy (thus sometimes referred to as “Gaudete Sunday”). How does the joy spoken of in the Psalm resonate with your own experience of or longing for joy during this Advent season?
3. Psalm 126 makes no effort to deny or cover up the weeping of its people and the trying times they have experienced or are experiencing. Such honesty is often rare during the Christmas season, when what has sometimes been described as “an oppressive happiness” is the dominant cultural mood of the season. How is the joy of which the Psalmist speaks similar to or different from this “Christmas mood?” Does the Psalm deliver any “good news, of great joy” even to those of us who struggle especially during this season?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on Psalm 126 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Restore Us, O God: Joy" – December 11, 2011)

Psalm 126 is one of the more enigmatically comforting compositions in the psalter. It is by no means clear whether it is recalling history or foretelling eschatology, but its message of ultimate trust in God's power to save has reassured generations of Jews and Christians alike.

Like the majority of the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134), Psalm 126 is brief -- only six verses -- and its message is presented succinctly: Those who undertake their efforts in the Lord are ultimately rewarded. The psalm is a communal hymn of praise.

The traditional translation of the opening hemistich -- "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion" -- can also be translated more prosaically as "When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion," as the NRSV notes. The alternatives depend on the translation of various forms of the Hebrew roots *shuv*, a very common verb meaning "turn back" or "return," and *shavah*, a much less common verb meaning "take captive." The two roots and their various derivatives appear to have been confused in the biblical text (see F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906], 986).

Charles Briggs, in his turn-of-the-century commentary on the psalms, identified the "fortunes of Zion" (*shibat tziyon*) broadly, referring to general agricultural prosperity and explicitly rejecting the widespread (and obvious) view of many commentators that the restoration referred to was the release of the Israelite people from Babylonian captivity in 539 B.C. (a rejection shared by Mitchell Dahood; see C. A. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909], vol. II, 455; and M. J. Dahood, S.J., *Psalms II, 51-100* [The Anchor Bible, vol. 17; New York: Doubleday, 1968], 217). The life setting for the psalm is not clear. It may have been sung or chanted annually at the start of the planting season, or it may have been a special composition reserved for occasions of unexpected celebration. The agricultural language of the closing verses need not, however, be taken literally; it is quite possible that the traditional interpretation of the psalm as a celebration of Israel's deliverance from captivity -- a celebration repeated annually -- is correct. It is also possible that the psalm looked not so much to a specific event in Israel's past as the cause of celebration as much as the psalm looked forward to the day when Israel's fortunes would be permanently restored in "the new thing" envisioned by such prophets as Isaiah (43:19).

The interpretation of the psalm is most problematic when it comes to the tenses of the verbs (see Dahood's discussion of the problem, 218). The majority of scholars read the verbs as denoting completed action (i.e., the perfect tense), although Briggs prefers the historical present (or, in his terminology, the "pf. [sc. perfect] of state, not referring to the past," 457). The safer option is the perfect (simple past) tense.

The consonantal text of the Hebrew translated "we were like those who dream" (v. 1b) can also be translated "we became like the sands of the sea" (Dahood, 217), which makes a certain sense in the context, but like many of Dahood's proposals, this one depends on the use of the enclitic *mem* construction, a stylistic feature identified in Hebrew poetry more often by Dahood than by virtually any other commentator. Dahood's rendering may be correct, but it remains a minority view.

On the other hand, "like those who dream" is an expression found nowhere else in the OT (this being the only occurrence of the plural participle of the verb "dream"). It is an unusual use of dream language, which normally occurs in prophetic contexts (e.g., Genesis 20:3, 6; 28:12; 37:5, 6; 40:5; Numbers 12:6; Deuteronomy 13:1; Judges 7:13; etc.). To have one's "dream come true" about Zion in this commonly accepted, slightly Disneyesque fashion is edifying but difficult.

The parallel reactions to the restoration of Zion's fortunes -- "mouth was filled with laughter . . . tongue with shouts of joy" (v. 2) -- are typical poetic reactions to great events (cf. Job 8:21).

The reaction of Israel's neighbors to Israel's fortunes or misfortunes (v. 2b) was a recurring matter of concern to the theologian composers of the OT (see, for example, Leviticus 26:45; Numbers 14:15-16;

Deuteronomy 29:24; Psalm 44:14; Nehemiah 5:9). At stake was Israelite religion itself. Yahwism eventually triumphed as the faith of biblical Israel because Yahweh could be trusted as Israel's divine patron. (Marduk became the divine patron of Babylon and Baal the divine patron of Canaan for the same reason.) That trust rested on tangible and visible results -- prosperity, security, deliverance from adversity, etc. -- all of which were witnessed by (and to) Israel's neighbors (see 1 Chronicles 16:31; Psalm 96:10; Isaiah 48:20). Not to do great things for the chosen people would have meant that Yahweh was either (a) unable or (b) unwilling, and Israel's theologians chose to interpret the nation's adversities as the latter, resulting from Israel's unfaithfulness, and the nation's prosperity -- or here, the restoration of fortunes -- as a sign of divine favor.

The mood of the psalm shifts from declaration to supplication in the second half (vv. 4-6). The petition to restore fortunes (v. 4a) suggests a current crisis, perhaps agricultural, given the imagery of verse 4b. The Negeb was the desert and semidesert region of southern Israel (covering over half the current land area of the country) where annual rainfall ranges from roughly 12 inches (in the northern area closest to the Mediterranean) to as little as 2 inches of rain (in the Arabah Valley). The relatively few wadis ("watercourses" of v. 4b) found in the region flood during the winter rains, providing much needed water for agriculture and transforming the areas immediately around the wadis into areas of sudden verdant growth.

The reason for the tears of the sowers (vv. 5a, 6a) is not specified, but it cannot have been a rare occurrence for farmers during extensive periods of drought, crop failure or pestilence to be forced to sow the last of their reserve seed, knowing that another failed harvest would result in famine. In preindustrial subsistent agricultural societies such as ancient Israel, famine was an omnipresent threat and frequent occurrence (see, for example, Genesis 12:10; 26:1; 41:27; Ruth 1:1; 2 Samuel 21:1; 1 Kings 18:2; and many others), so the imagery of the psalm is drawn from quotidian existence.

But the point of the image is not the suffering but the relief, attributed implicitly to the Lord (vv. 5-6). A bountiful harvest, now as then, was a cause of great rejoicing (Isaiah 9:3, 16:9), multiplied exponentially when the prospects at the time of planting were grim. The unspoken message of the psalm is that the only thing better than joy is being surprised by it.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Psalm we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.