“Weeping for Joy!”

Psalm 126

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When was the last time you wept for joy? Hopefully it wasn’t all that long ago.

Maybe it was at the birth of a child or hearing the news of great joy of the arrival of a new grandchild. Might have been watching someone you love marry the one they love. Most recently, for many of us as this pandemic drags on, it has been seeing a family member or a friend we haven’t seen in a very long time.

Then, there are those moments when something we’ve long waited to happen and began to wonder if it ever would, suddenly does. We say to ourselves, “Somebody pinch me. I must be dreaming! It seemed so impossible. That couldn’t have happened.” Yet it did happen, bringing us such joy tears stream down our faces.

As the people of God, we’ve all had those glorious experiences where God has done something in our lives so marvelous that we feel the need to pinch ourselves to be sure we weren’t dreaming. That is how the people of Israel felt as when they returned to Jerusalem following their long exile in Babylon.

Seventy years is a long time to be away from home. A whole generation of people settled down,

built homes, and went to work in their new land not of their own. Some of those returning had been born in exile. It was all they knew. And then, suddenly, this new king, King Cyrus, appears. He issues a proclamation allowing all the Jews to go home. Seventy years in captivity, then in what seemed like a flash God restored them to who, how, and where they were meant to be. Even though they knew by heart God’s promises of deliverance, recited them daily, still, when the moment came, God’s people were overwhelmed with joy — it felt like a dream.

With power and beauty, the Psalmist describes their grateful astonishment at the power and goodness of God. God’s grace poured out upon them like streams in the Negev. The Negev was a dry and dusty desert. Every year after the long summer drought, the rainy season brought waters rushing through the desert. In the blink of an eye, an array of beautiful and bountiful grass and flowers sprung forth. What a wonderful image of the sudden outpouring of God’s blessing that was not just for God’s people, but also for the world around them. They, too, felt like they were living in a dream: “Then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.” It was a moment forever etched in their national memory. From that moment on, every year as Jews made their way back to Jerusalem for all the major religious feast days, they were acutely aware that they were walking in the same footsteps those exiles had taken. And, each year, God’s people would again marvel at God’s graciousness and trust that, because of their past, they were able to imagine an even more glorious future.

But, they also remembered that when those captives arrived back in Jerusalem, there was still much work to be done. They needed to rebuild the temple and rebuild the walls. They faced discouragement from within and opposition from without. God’s people might have longed

for that rebuilding to also happen overnight, but it didn’t. They learned what we have learned, too — that more often, God’s way of working within and from within us is much slower. The image of God’s sudden streams in the desert now turns to the image of God’s slow but certain work in our lives of sowing seeds, nurturing those seeds, and patiently waiting until the harvest is ready and we reap an abundance of new life. That experience of the power and goodness of God at work in our lives is no less astonishing. The joy we receive when we remember and marvel at the past leads to the joy of anticipating what more God will do in the future.

This is a Psalm we need in times of crisis because, as Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann said, it was written on the “other side of things.” It reminds us that the past anchors us solidly enough to know what to expect of God in the future. Hope isn’t wishing for a better tomorrow and it isn’t a nostalgic longing for the return of the good old days, if we understand God’s ways. If we know God’s heart as revealed to us in years gone by, then we will know what to look for, what to ask for, and what realistically will come to be. So, marvel we must — not just think about or reflect upon God’s history with us, but to take time to marvel; to be astonished at who God has been and what God has done for us. For when we do, then hope really does spring eternal.

For my day off this week, I took a quick overnight trip to New Jersey to see the ocean one last time before winter arrives. On my way home, I listened to my go-to playlist of songs and hymns of praise and thanksgiving chosen for my own moments of “being on the other side” of a crisis or difficult time. Each song transported me back to that exact time and place when I experienced God’s power and goodness; those moments during which I, too, thought, “Pinch me, I must be dreaming.” Listening to my praise playlist gave me another chance to marvel at God’s faithfulness, bringing me that gift of joy remembered and joy anticipated. I like to think of the Psalms as Israel’s playlist of God’s faithfulness. They sang, they remembered, they marveled, they lived in hope of a better tomorrow.

In a moment of silence, I invite you this morning to think back to a moment in your own life when you wept for joy for a mighty work God did in your life. To remember, to marvel, and then lift up your own prayer of praise and thanksgiving.