

Sermon 11-21-21
Paul Purdue preaching

A Trajectory Toward Thanksgiving

Ten hours earlier, I tied a Sunday bow tie, slipped on a jacket and headed to church. Driving home, I pulled the knot free and stepped back into our house with an unexpected joy. Gentle laughter rippled around my soul as I shared the details of our All Saints vespers service at the Blakeford Independent Living Center with Connie. A retired Baptist pastor wiped back some tears kindly saying afterwards, "That sermon was exactly what I needed to hear today." The words came as a gift to me. Ten Belmont members live at The Blakeford. I got to see BJ, Judy, Ruth, Sally, Sandra, Nancy, and Elmer. Their faces lit up as they welcomed their pastor into their home. Oozing with extrovert energy, I felt the same joy I feel at the opening hymn of the Annual Conference when hundreds of Methodist sing together, "And are we yet alive, and see each other's face? Glory and thanks to Jesus give, for God's almighty grace! Preserved by power divine to feel salvation here, again in Holy praise we join, and in Christ sight appear. What troubles have we seen, what mighty struggles past, fightings without, and fears within, since we assembled last! Yet out of all the Lord hath brought us out by Christ's redeeming love; and still God's help doth afford, and hides our life above. Let us take up the cross till we the crown obtain, and gladly reckon all things loss so we may Jesus gain."

Frankly, I was surprised that on Monday I was still feeling a bit of a post-worship buzz. Heather and I compared notes about the joy of taking Communion to people again after 20 fallow months. As I opened a thank you email, I felt a rush of that same unexpected thankfulness. I wondered why that moment was so good? Walking down the hall, it struck me: the service at The Blakeford was the first time I had preached to a congregation not wearing masks. I could see faces- smiling, weeping, beautiful faces. One of our members who dressed up for vespers laughed, "*Oh, don't get me wrong, I am thankful for the livestream, but it is so wonderful to sing in a room with people.*" As a guest in their Blakeford home, the receptionist had taken my temperature, asked me Covid screening questions, and directed me to wear a mask except when preaching. These protective measures allowed me to see seven of your beloved Belmont faces. It felt like a dream. We are a pilgrim people moving through a hard season. Someday, on the other side of this pandemic, I may burn some masks in my firepit or maybe I'll instead string them together into a kind of prayer flag. I have not decided which way to best remember the mask. We may see masks, vaccines, and social distancing signs as reminders of the pandemic, but they also are signs of shared hope, scientific progress, and our caring connections to one another.

Psalm 126 comes in the midst of a series of pilgrimage songs, having the word pilgrim in their titles or being mentioned in the Psalm text. In Hebrews, the phrase "pilgrim song" means "songs for the going up." These were the songs families and villages sang as they traveled as pilgrims from as far away as Babaloyne or Egypt. They traveled up the mountainside to the Jerusalem temple, singing year after year. They sang these same pilgrim songs in the best and the worst of years.

Psalm 126 remembers a wild reversal of national fortunes. Fifty years earlier, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had burned Jerusalem to the ground, using logs to super heat the palace and temple limestone foundations so that even the foundations collapsed. The invaders dragged the young diplomats, doctors, artists, and engineers off to slavery in Ninevah, leaving only the poorest and weakest to tend to the desolate, burned over, post-apocalyptic, national mall. Solomon's crown, thrones, hundreds of scrolls, golden temple vessels, and the high priest's jeweled robes hung in the Babylonian Museum of vanquished nations. Wild mountain goats ate the straggly brush that pushed up in the ground littered by leveled foundations. Then suddenly, overnight Babylon fell to the Persian Empire without a war, and King Cyrus of Persia came to power. The Persian King Cyrus did not

practice Nebuchadnezzar scorched Earth politics. Perhaps Cyrus thought happy subjects paid more tribute. Nevertheless, overnight persons exiled for 50 years could go home to Jerusalem if they so desired. Cyrus even invested in infrastructure and paid to rebuild the holy temple Nebuchadnezzar destroyed. Who could imagine that? So as the pilgrims sang of God making their circumstances better, they did not think God made things better by unseen magic, but through people like Cyrus doing the right things. Still, they were shocked that a foreigner, a Persian prince, an unbeliever, was the agent God used to restore their crumpled fortunes, *“It was like we had been dreaming. Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; our tongues were filled with joyful shouts.”* Who is your Thanksgiving Cyrus? Who is God using to rebuild and change things for the better? Who is living out Jesus’ prayer on Earth as in heaven? Who is shaping your Thanksgiving trajectory?

When the Lord changed Zion’s circumstances for the better,
it was like we had been dreaming.
Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter;
our tongues were filled with joyful shouts.
It was even said, at that time, among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them!”
Yes, the Lord has done great things for us,
and we are overjoyed.

The story behind the thankful pilgrims' song unfolded over 50 years. Psalm 126 is not about the immediate happiness of finding a lost phone, winning a board game, or enjoying a delicious slice of homemade pie. Thanksgiving is not found in consumption, but through awareness. Thankful people notice where we have been, where we are, and press forward to make things better. Psalm 126 holds the deeper thankfulness of people who knew they had come together through a deep, long, and rocky valley. They had lost people, houses, churches, and even their nation, and yet they pressed on singing a pilgrims’ song. Such deeper gratitude requires time, reflection, and endurance. It calls us to look back over the ground we have covered, the trials we have survived, and the obstacles we have overcome. In this Thanksgiving week, will you stop, step back, slow down, and look around for the places where the Lord has changed our circumstances? (Rev. Dwight Hughes) Will you look around long enough to see who and how God is changing our circumstances for the better? Will you give thanks that you can share facetime with beloved folks hundreds of miles away? Will you weave your old masks into a prayer flag to remember that we have come this far?

When the Lord changed Zion’s circumstances for the better,
it was like we had been dreaming.
Yes, the Lord has done great things for us, and we are overjoyed.
But the song of ascent continues: Lord, change our circumstances for the better,
like dry streams in the desert waste!

The pilgrims remember that “the Lord changed our circumstances for the better”, while simultaneously praying, “Lord, change our circumstances for the better.” There was much hard work to do to rebuild the nation. Ezra 3 tells us, *“When the builders laid the foundation of the Lord’s temple, the priests clothed in their vests and carrying their trumpets, and the Levites with cymbals, arose to praise the Lord giving thanks to the Lord, singing responsively, ‘God is good, God’s graciousness lasts forever.’ All of the people shouted with praise to the Lord because the foundation of the Lord’s house had been laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and heads of families, who had seen the first house, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this (smaller) temple...No one could distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, because the people rejoiced very loudly.”* True thankfulness is always an honest assessment, it can weep and rejoice, being happy to see the new house going up, while grieving for what was lost. We can pray, “Thank

you, Lord, for our changed circumstances, even as we plead, 'Lord, change our circumstances for the better.'"

And finally, the pilgrims' song invites us to give thanks for the work ahead. The pilgrim song leans into the work, thankful for the opportunity to change things for the better. Rebuilding is holy work.

Lord, change our circumstances for the better.

Lord, let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts.

Let those who go out, crying and carrying their seed,
come home with joyful shouts, carrying bales of grain!

Farming with oxen and hand tools is very hard work. The Harvest takes months of plowing, sowing, weeding, watering, harvesting, drying... We who get our bread from Kroger cannot appreciate all that we have to be thankful for. There is a deep almost Easter-like joy in placing smooth dull seeds in the ground watching stems, (then plants, vines or trees) buds, flowers and finally apples, carrots, grapes, gourds, pumpkins and potatoes. There is a refinisher's joy at finding a castoff kitchen table with flaky pale green paint and revealing and restoring the unexpected Poplar heartwood below. There is a pride in rebuilding a collapsed temple that those who only walk through it can never know. To partner with God in changing circumstances for the better seems an essential part of authentic thanksgiving. Let us stop only holding out our hand asking God to fill them, but instead learning to give thanks for the opportunity to engage in the harder work of faith. A consumer church can never be truly thankful, for it seeks a payoff from God for doing good, failing to grasp that goodness is the payoff. It is the harder work of faith (things like forgiveness, sacrifice, generosity) that bring about faith's bounty (things like faith, hope, love, unity, community, justice, peace). The deepest payoff of a Christian life is becoming Christ-like. To learn to give thanks for our chance to rebuild, restore, heal, uplift may be the deepest work of thanksgiving.

This week, as we consider the practice of thanksgiving, let us not find meaning in the candlesticks or the pumpkin pie. Let us do 3 thankful things. First, let's look around and be mindful of places where and the people who God is using to change things for the better. If we do not, we may give up! Second, let us keep praying and partnering with God to change things for the better. Let us resolve to be those people who change things for the better. That is the deeper thanksgiving work. And third, let us give thanks for our opportunity to make things better. May our faith become rooted in becoming Godly people more than getting something from God, for this is perhaps the deepest work of thanksgiving. Amen.