

Our Mouth Filled With Laughter, Psalm 126 & Mark 10:46-52, 10/28/18, NM

Beginning

The Psalm we heard today is about a hope fulfilled. A hope that had seemed completely out of reach. The realization of hope is not something that happens every day in this world of ours. More often - far more often - we must stand by while the hopes of many are broken on the wheel of greed and misfortune. And yet...we humans are a stubborn lot. We keep hoping. We keep trying. We keep coming back for more.

I think scripture is often all about the fulfillment of hopes and dreams. But they're not always the personal hopes that drive so many lives. They're the great big giant hopes that propel the whole Universe forward into the future.

The NT reading is also about a huge, world-changing hope that is kind of hiding behind a smaller personal fulfillment.

In it, we find a blind man taunting Jesus as he passed by on the road out of Jericho. The man's name was Bartimaeus and he was blind. What he shouted was, *Jesus Son of David Have mercy on me!* Jesus heard the man calling and stopped, and he called Bartimaeus over and he said, *What do you want from me? What can I do for you?* And Bartimaeus - as you might expect - said he wanted his sight! Now Jesus never went in for flashy magic tricks and this time was no exception. He listened and he spoke.

The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

The restoration of his sight was a fulfillment for Bartimaeus, but it is a different embedded desire that applies here. For when he said Jesus son of David he was in fact affirming Jesus' status as Messiah, and the arrival of The Messiah was truly something long hoped for by many.

Middle

The Psalm we read is about the return of the captives from Babylon. It is an event we've spoken of many times because it is referred to many times in the OT, particularly in the Psalms and the Prophets. And it's referred to many times because it was so central to the worldview of Ancient Israel.

To quickly recap - the Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judah were both conquered by the Babylonians who according to scripture took most of the nations leaders hostage. They were taken to Babylon where they lived in exile until the wheel of history turned and Babylon was itself conquered by the Persians. The Persian emperor Cyrus the Great allowed the exiles to go back to Palestine. Psalm 126 is about that return from exile.

To say it was unexpected would be to understate the case. It was beyond all hope and expectation. For seventy years the people had lived in Babylon and they had accepted it as inevitable and forever. They were a diaspora. Then came Cyrus. Who could have imagined that he would even notice them much less set them free?

To measure their joy at being released we should first understand the depth of their despair when they had been captured.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and wept when we remembered Zion.

Can you feel it? Have you ever felt that kind of sorrow? I invite us all to imagine ourselves to be one of The Captives. You are a person of distinction. Your whole family is with you now and as much as you worry about the journey ahead you're grateful to have them.

God's People suffered a terrible defeat. Thousands lie unburied on battlefields. If you're a soldier you're ashamed that you are alive while others are dead. This

was not like any defeat that had come before it. There had been losses. No army can win every battle. But this was a defeat not only of the army - this was the whole nation that had been defeated. And it looked like the victors intended that Israel would never rise again. Only if God had abandoned them was that possible, and God would only abandon them so completely if they had done something - or somethings - to deserve God's wrath. The feeling is beyond words.

The remorse, shame and guilt never really go away. The younger exiles - especially those born in Babylon - did not suffer as acutely as those who remembered the Holy Land. But they were certainly affected. They heard the stories all the time. And they knew the history of their people. The legacy of Israel. It was the Exile community that wrote and transcribed most of what we know as the OT - The Torah. It's likely that the Jews of Babylon were as educated as any who had lived in Palestine. Everything they did was steeped in the history and faith of the homeland. Thus their daily fare was bitterness.

So imagine - being that person we just described - what you would feel and say upon word reaching you that the exile had been lifted! I don't say the hope had been lost. There was always hope. But it was not a hope that looked to be fulfilled. It was a hope for a future as yet un-imagined. Yet here it was. Far sooner than anyone had expected. Can we see how that might have felt? That's the feeling I want us to channel.

End

Now - multiply that feeling by a thousand - then you have a glimmer of an idea of what it would mean to know that The Messiah had come. Remember I'm talking about The Messiah. Not a Messiah. Not a Holy Man, not a prophet. The Messiah. The One and Only Messiah - Son of God born human - Savior. Because if The Messiah were to arrive it would mean that we are going live.

First, it would mean that Planet Earth will live because God had intervened. God cared and in time All would be well. Second, it would mean that Heaven is real

and the life of the spirit truly is forever. Not forever as in some kind of void - but a joy and a fulfillment that makes forever a good thing!

Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

The astonishing thing about this text is the fact that Mark has a blind beggar declaring Jesus' Messiah-hood in such a definitive way. But whatever we make of that, there can be no questioning the faith and hope that are embedded in this text. Messiah had arrived.

I am increasingly worried about my own capacity for hope. Everywhere I look I see the wrong people winning the day. How do I know they're the wrong people? It's nothing to do with who they are or what they look like and everything to do with what they stand for. You can easily recognize them - they're the ones who teach the opposite of what Christ stands for.

Christ teaches tolerance - they teach intolerance. Christ practices inclusion - they seek to exclude those who are perceived to be different. Or afflicted. Or in need of sanctuary.

The worst part of this is that we have become divided into us and them. There is only one humanity. One Human Race. Any divisions that exist are self-imposed - self-inflicted wounds.

My grandmother used to talk about this stuff at rallies in the thirties. She was an anthropologist as well as an activist. She believed that science should be in service to the greater good and that her science - the science of culture - had a special part to play in the unfolding drama of history. Having understood that cultures and peoples did not exist as a hierarchy with Europe at the tip of a pyramid representing the pinnacle of Human development and achievement - my Grandmother and her peers set out to educate others. She would say, *There's no such thing as Irish Blood or Italian Blood - there're four kinds of Blood A, B, AB and*

O. Everyone has the same blood regardless of ethnic origin - because in fact there is only one human race!

My grandmother paid a price for saying things like that. There were powerful people in the country who didn't like it and made that known. She wrote a pamphlet for the Army during WWII that debunked the Nazi position on race. And what do you think? Congressmen from the South protested that the pamphlet was too extreme - it pointed out that educated African Americans often exceeded White Americans in their IQ test scores. Explosive stuff. In time she was blacklisted and was forced to live in obscurity. She overcame it in the end, but it was a terrible price to pay for speaking the truth.

It seemed to me that for a time the truth she spoke had taken root in America. That despite a history of exclusion and slavery most people knew that all human beings are created equal in the eyes of God. But now we see that the other view never really went away.

I tell you these things to set the stakes. And to explain the feelings of despair and frustration that sometimes threaten my own faith. But knowing what we face allows us to measure the joy we will someday know when our hope has been fulfilled. The Jews of Roman occupied Palestine lived in a world of shattered hopes. They believed that God had abandoned them completely, and that was why they had been defeated and occupied. They continued to fight and resist until finally Rome - in its infinite wisdom and power crushed them completely, destroyed Jerusalem and The Temple, and dispersed God's People to the ends of the Earth. Where they have been oppressed and persecuted right up to today. And still - they worship God, they study Torah, they share hope in the future.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.

It is my belief and my conviction that someday humanity will feel that way again. Until then we have to see the present moment clearly. What is at stake is

everything. We await The Messiah's return and do all we can to recognize the truth and speak it loudly to anyone who will listen.