

Returned

Advent Midweek #3 – 12/20/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Psalm 126:1-6 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 3, “Yahweh has done great things for us; we are glad.”

v. 6, “He who goes out weeping...shall come home with shouts of joy...”.

Introduction

✘ The people of Israel have been through a lot thus far in the *Resounding Psalms of Advent* that have had our attention in these Midweek services. For 70 years they have been kept in captivity away from their beloved homeland in Judea; apart from God’s promised presence on Mt. Zion; separated from His Temple that had been torn to the ground.

→ But now Yahweh has returned His people to Zion, the city of peace. The Temple is restored, and God’s people are singing in joy. In tonight’s Psalm, we hear the people looking back and reminiscing; likely thinking, or praying something like this: “O Lord Yahweh, my God and my King, you have done great things for us. No longer are we, your people forced to live in Babylon, a land of slavery and false gods. You have brought us back home to be with You in Jerusalem; home in the blessed city of David. You have returned us to the mercy seat of God once again, O Lord.”

I. The Nightmare of Exile was Over.

✘ It’s like a dream come true for these people. As they say in verse one, “When Yahweh restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.” The nightmare of their life in exile is over, and the sudden rush of joy is like a barren desert turning into a flood.

→ Imagine, if you can, the flow of life-giving water or the flow of wine into the cups of these joy-filled guests at the very best of banquet celebrations; filling the hearts of people with happiness as they celebrate their return to freedom.

✘ Whenever captives have been set free, for a time all they can do is rejoice and be glad. Every breath of free air is a celebration!

→ So it is that the return of God’s people from Babylon to Judah was exactly that. Now these former captives are free to build their own homes wherever they want. They can work their own ground and farms without being forced to hand any of their crops to the Babylonian taskmasters.

→ They were free to worship Yahweh, their God without fear; no longer forced to bow down and honor the false gods Ishtar or Marduk or any other idol ever again! Now they could openly worship the One who created them, redeemed them, and called them by name. Isaiah 43:1 says, “But now thus says Yahweh, He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.’”

✘ These returning captives were like those who had just been roused from a nightmare and jumped into a rushing river of gladness.

II. From what nightmare do need to awaken?

✘ What about those of us whom God has gathered here in His presence tonight? What’s the nightmare from which you need to wake up? Yes, you know it; we all have them. I know that society says that everyone is supposed to be happy this time of year, but maybe you aren’t. Maybe all of this “forced festivity” right now is just too much.

→ You hang out all of the lights, decorate the tree, wear jingle bells and play nonstop holiday music, but the reality is that none of that stops daily life from still existing. The nightmare of debt, addiction, or abuse – often accentuated this time of year, has led to the destruction of hope for so many people to the point that they...perhaps you feel just like a captive. Exiled in the Babylon of your own sins and forced to bow down to so many rather worthless idols: power, money, sex – you name the poison – we’ve all been there in some way or another. It drags a person down so that you wake up in the morning, not rested but still bound with the chains of regret and sorrow and shame; feeling hurt and hopeless.

✘ Whatever it is – your own sins or the impact of someone else’s sin against you, it doesn’t only feel like it shackles you like a slave. It is as Jesus says in John 8:34, “Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” Sin, Satan, and death truly have us lock, stock, and barrel; chained up and ready to march us off into that eternal Babylon the Bible calls hell.

III. Can the voice from God wake you?

✘ But just when you think all is lost, a voice is heard. A voice calls you out of the valley of the shadow of death; calling to you like a voice in the wilderness with words of promise and deliverance. It is the voice of Jesus, quoting Isaiah’s (61:1-2) prophecy about Him in Luke 4:18-19, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus has not only fulfilled God’s Word, He is the Word of God, born in human flesh and forever active in and through God’s Spirit to set us free from the nightmares that haunt our lives every day.

→ I know what some or likely most of you are probably thinking, “But Pastor, there are so many nightmares in this world that simply don’t go away. There is so much sin and temptation; so much war and disease; so much anger and abuse. Just think of COVID and cancer; of all the bullies and crooks, not to mention my own countless weaknesses and habitual sins. How can these promises of freedom from it all possibly be true?”

→ Jesus may have promised freedom, liberty, sight, good news for the poor, and the year of the Lord’s favor for everyone, but that was a long time ago. Could it really be true? Could it be that those promises are for me?

IV. Yes, a new reality is mine!

✘ Dear Christian, I have great news! All of this is absolutely for you. The Word of God that called out in Isaiah is now alive in the risen and ascended flesh of Jesus Christ; calling out to you here and now.

→ And even as He sits at the right hand of the Father, He still has so much to say; so much to give to you and to me and to the entire world. Your idols; the temptations that seek to hound you have been broken. Your sins are forgiven. Your death has been undone, because the baby born in the manger has grown up, died, and risen again in victory over it all. No longer are you forced to live in a prison of your own making. Jesus has brought you back home. He has returned you into the grace-filled arms of your loving God; filled you with repentance and faith in His saving work for you!

✘ Here in His Church you are home; back to the font where He washed and saved you as His child in Baptism; back to the altar where He feeds, nourishes and strengthens you for life in this sin-drenched world. He brought you back to the very Word of God made flesh. He has given you life – redeemed and renewed. So, yes, you can start all over again in Jesus.

→ The nightmare is over. You are not dreaming! This life with Jesus is far better than any dream we could ever have; a new reality in Christ our Lord; a blood-bought and baptismal-water-covered reality.

→ In Jesus you've been brought back to your Creator; returned to the Father who loves you more than we could ever ask or imagine. Your exile is broken; the separation you deserve in death is defeated and eternal freedom is now yours! The baby in the manger – now the victorious Savior, gives it all to you for free. This is your new reality in Jesus.

Conclusion

✘ As verse three says, “Yahweh has done great things for us; we are glad.” So place yourselves for a moment in the image that tonight’s psalm paints in verses five and six and see the contrast there; the before and after; the tears and weeping of exile and captivity versus the joy and bounty of one whom Jesus has returned into His love and grace.

→ “Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him” (vv.5-6). Being returned by Jesus changes everything folks.

✘ As Jesus told the man in our Gospel Reading after he had been freed from the bondage of demon-possession, so He tells and desires of you and me tonight – for we too were possessed by Satan at our birth. But now He has set us free for evermore and He says, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Just as it was for people of old in Judea, may our tongues also be filled “with shouts of joy” (v.2). In Jesus’ name. Amen.