

12-13-2020- JOY

Last week I had mentioned that in Ps 131 David was teaching us that we MUST be humble- willing to let God have control of things happening in our lives and around us SO THAT we can find rest in God- And whereby I was speaking of our ability to find TRUE peace in the midst of the storm, today I'm sharing that the same holds TRUE for our ability to find joy in ANY situation.

If you've ever experienced TERRIBLE challenges- you know the enduring burden often felt. But there are times, too, when God surprises you with unexpected blessings even during a disheartening period. The year 2020 hasn't been one that we might WANT to remember- in fact, for A LOT of people it's been an OUTRIGHT nightmare.

The pandemic, illness, financial worry, along with political turmoil, and social unrest, ALL bringing anxiety, heartbreak, righteous anger, and stress for many. So talking about being joyful kind of sounds absurd, doesn't it? But I say that THIS is the PERFECT time to LET joy be felt and expressed. B/C joy is a POWERFUL companion during ALL that life tries to CRUSH us with.

It's evident that Ps. 126 was written during a challenging time and it was sung by pilgrims ascending the mountains to worship at God's Temple in Jerusalem also during challenging times since Israel has had MANY! So it's fitting that WE- who are pilgrims on a journey-should be lifting it up as well.

Although Psalm 126 begins with thanking God for past miracles you soon realize that it's more of a hopeful lament when the psalmist then calls upon God to meet desperate needs for the people of Israel again. In vs. 1-3 we find out immediately why they're desperate-

*"When the LORD brought back his exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream! <sup>2</sup> We were filled with laughter, and we sang for joy. And the other nations said, "What amazing things the LORD has done for them." <sup>3</sup> Yes, the LORD has done amazing things for us! What joy!*

The psalmist is remembering the circumstances that enabled the Israelites to return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon in or around 537 BC. Why were they IN exile, B/C they HADN'T listened to the prophets God sent and kept sinning-so the people living in Judah are deported to Babylon.

But the Babylonians didn't just take the Jews- no around 587BC they also killed many and completely destroyed Jerusalem-including the Temple of God. B/C of this, there was great pain and hardship. The Jews had experienced 70 long years in captivity, and then in a moment, God turns things around when Cyrus King of Persia defeats the Babylonians-releases the exiled Jews & even gives them money to rebuild their Temple.

They COULDN'T believe it. It was TOO GOOD to be true. Somebody pinch me, I must be dreaming B/C this couldn't be happening, and yet it did! They were now going back to Jerusalem, back to the holy city-where God dwells with his people, and it all felt to amazing to believe.

Have you ever had something amazing happen- where you laughed, shouted and maybe did a little victory dance? I believe that's what it was like for these returnees to Jerusalem. While the nations around them aren't too happy to LOSE the territory they had grabbed when the Jews were exiled- they could see that God is with them saying-*"The LORD has done great things for them."*

God's miracles were widely acknowledged in Israel AND BY their neighbors, but then the psalmist speaks about the present as we hear in vs. 4 Restore our fortunes, LORD, as streams renew the desert. The captives were back in Jerusalem, but 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 all sides and the people are in a desperate need= they feel like dry streams- So they CRY out to God saying *'ok God-you've done this before= can you DO IT again!?'*

Out in the American southwest –they call this kind of dry stream, an *arroyo*. This gully would be bone dry nearly all year except when the rains come, and then without warning - a flash flood can turn the dry stream bed into a rush of water.

The psalmist is asking God to come in like a flash flood -to REVERSE their situation with God's presence & blessings! It's a powerful prayer that signals a CHANGE in perspective. While verse 1-4 focus on God's mighty intervention to bring a miraculous restoration from pain to joy, verses 5-6 focus on trusting God. Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy. They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest.

We too experience GREAT tears during challenges & obstacles. We run out of food before the next pay check comes in. We face illness, a pandemic, death of loved ones, friends, neighbors, and many others we don't know, but WHO seem to affect us. We go through the lows and divisions within our relationships and in our beloved nation in many ways.

But B/C of faith we keep on doing what we MUST do, all the while TRUSTING God. We may be LIKE the farmer weeping as the seeds are planted, but WE TOO can be assured that in DUE TIME the harvest-JOY will come, IF we don't give up.

And we WILL GIVE UP if we ONLY rely on the joy that we think the world provides, but this joy is fleeting -and to be clear, the Joy we're talking about ISN'T the same as happiness either. Happiness tends to be the pleasurable feeling we get from feeling satisfied with our circumstances- thinking that life is going well.

The joy we're talking about is the JOY we have B/C of GOD-For it can be felt alongside of sorrow, worry, despair, and esp. in the midst of suffering -which means that THIS joy ISN'T dependent on good situations-in fact, *this joy* has staying power B/C it comes from faith.

When we have faith, we can feel this JOY DEEP within- REALIZING its caused B/C of our connection to God. This connection enables us to see what is genuinely good, beautiful, and meaningful around us -even in the mix of pain and worry. This was what Jesus had been talking to the disciples about in our NEED to stay connected to him the vine in John 15:11- *I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!*

When we know that God has the ability to restore life beyond our understanding, we WILL have a harvest of joy by knowing that God IS able to bring good OUT OF tragedy. We know this CAN happen! In Luke 1:39-45 we're shown joy in a VERY difficult situation.

Mary's pregnant= an unmarried woman who becomes pregnant RISKED disaster. She could've been stoned to death & if not-she would probably be thrown from her family home, would remain unmarried for life & would have to live on the streets- making money in WHATEVER way she could to support her & her child.

Now add to this- the story she will TELL people- that she became pregnant by God- making her child - God's Son- she'd be risking being considered CRAZY as well-and believe me Nazareth wasn't Stigma Free. Still Mary said yes. Mary also had a sliver of hope in knowing that her cousin Eliz ALSO rec'd a God given gift.

So she decides to go to Eliz hopeful that Eliz accepts Mary's story a bit better than most will. Now this visit isn't running to the next town=this is a 3-4 day journey through mtns and valleys- with danger around EVERY corner. And we find that in getting to her destination she's NOT disappointed- in fact- she's embraced with LOVE-yes Eliz's but also God's love as the HS fills Eliz –so she CAN speak just the words Mary needed to hear. The 2 women are overjoyed- not only B/C they're pregnant BEYOND human understanding, but God's plan IS REAL and their faith and resolve are strengthened.

And we hear a profound statement from Eliz- in vs. 44-45- When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.” Do we believe that the Lord will do as HE says today?

The theme of the psalm, as well as John and Luke’s passages are simple: We CAN trust God NOT to leave us in pain, worry, fear, despair or in front of a seemingly insurmountable obstacle FOREVER. Our joy ISN’T dependent on what’s going on in our life, in our world, or the people that we’re with.

It DOESN’T depend on the gifts we give or the gifts we receive. No earthly thing can EVER give us complete joy B/C REAL joy comes from God. God’s joy not only FLOODS dry or barren hearts- God’s joy has the POWER to overwhelm our hearts WITH rejoicing! And in thinking about this- 2 passages from the Apostle Paul came to mind: from Galatians 6:9 –*“So let’s not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don’t give up.”* and from 1 Corinthians 15:58-*“So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.”*

Just as the psalmist helped the people by reminding them of when God brought good things to God’s people, doesn’t this time of year help to remind us that nothing was or IS impossible- for God. And being reminded of this –we can think back to times we’ve SEEN God working in OUR lives-when someone reached out unexpectedly telling us JUST what we needed to hear or the times WE’VE helped someone & them saying- *“How did you know that’s just what I needed?”* Leading us to feelings of UNSPEAKABLE joy?

Paul challenges us to remember THIS joy- so WE will NOT grow tired of doing what is good-so we WILL keep planting seeds KNOWING that nothing we do –even if small-is useless. We’re being encouraged to keep ENTHUSIASTICALLY doing the work of the Lord WHENEVER or wherever we have the opportunity to do so.

And one way to do this IS -when joy comes to you, DON’T hold it back – don’t care that people MIGHT judge you or think you’re crazy! Sing songs of praise at the TOP of your lungs for ALL to hear. Thanking God for ALL that God has done and is doing for you. And guess what?

People in your families, friends, communities, nation and world WILL SEE your joy and say *‘what great things the Lord has done for them.’* In the midst of a year in which it ISN’T hard to stumble into depression, the GN IS -we can also jump for joy=knowing that there IS no loneliness, heartbreak or challenge that God’s joy CANNOT break through-we just need to let it bubble up from within and burst out with glad cries of joyous exclamation!