

## Sermon - "Those Who Dream"

1/28/24

### Psalm 126 - NRSV

1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.

2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
"The Lord has done great things for them."

3 The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.

4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

5 May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

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Focus: The God who brought restoration in the past gives us hope for the future.

Function: We are invited to participate in dreaming and acting to make a future of hope possible.

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Our country recently celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr. Day earlier this month, which brought to mind, for many, his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech. While I had read this speech in full before, revisiting it while preparing for this sermon was a real eye-opener for me. I’d remembered some of the more famous lines, but failed to grasp the full context of King’s dream.

He begins by speaking of a momentous victory of the past - the emancipation. He emphasizes the joy and hope that the Emancipation Proclamation brought to millions of slaves. He then pivots to his present moment - the reality that true freedom has not yet been realized for black people in America. He is frank about the struggles of African American people and the injustice they face, but he does not allow these truths to damper his hope.

It is at this point that we encounter the crux of his speech: his dream. He states, “So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.” He proceeds to lay out the many facets of this dream: equality, brotherhood, freedom, and justice. And throughout his speech, he integrates his faith. “With this faith,” he says, “we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

His dream does not stand alone, but works together with his faith and demands a call to action. Though one of the most famous dreamers, King is far from the only dreamer in our history. Progress is predicated on dreams. And we can find dreams and dreamers in our own Bible.

There are the better-known biblical dreamers like Joseph, favored son of Jacob in the book of Genesis. He dreamed in a more literal sense of the word by having visions in his sleep. He even became a dream interpreter for the Pharaoh of Egypt. But we also have dreamers like Mary, mother of Jesus. When she is told by the angel Gabriel that she is to have a child, the son of God, she sings of a world where God's dream is realized. Remembering her cousin Elizabeth, miraculously pregnant even in her old age, she sings with joy of the things God has done and will do for God's people. She sings of the promises God made her ancestor Abraham being fulfilled and she sings of the ways future generations would consider the blessing that God was bestowing on her. She dreams of a world where the powerful are brought down from their thrones while the poor and hungry are filled with good things.

When we think of biblical dreamers, we can think of Moses and his sister Miriam, who worked with God for the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt in the book of Exodus. Miriam and Moses, like Mary, have a song of praise to sing - remembering the ways God has rescued their people in times of deep distress. They sing, too, of a future with hope. Exodus 15:13, the middle of the song, says "In your unfailing love you will lead the people you

have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.”

What do all of these dreamers have in common? Their dreams hold the past, present, and future. And that rings true in our Psalm for today. This Psalm was likely written after the return of the exiles from Babylonia and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem during the latter half of the 6th century BCE.

Certainly, the people have something to celebrate - and praising God for God’s wonderful works of liberation make a lot of sense in that context. The people were in exile for at least 48 years before being able to return home. So when God delivered them from exile, there were surely shouts of joy! But all was not perfect in life after the return. Their homeland had been destroyed and their temple toppled. It was time to rebuild. And so the people are living in a time of celebration while also living in the reality that there is still work to be done.

One psalm scholar, James L. Mays, characterizes Psalm 126 as “joy remembered and joy anticipated.” Or, as commentator J. Clinton McCann, Jr. describes, “Psalm 126 can be a powerful reminder that the people of God have always lived, and will always live, by both memory and hope. We simultaneously celebrate with joy that “The LORD has done great things for us”, and we fervently pray, “Restore our fortunes, O LORD”.”

To me, this sounds familiar. It is possible to praise God for the victories of the past while also praying with hope for restoration in the future. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., we are able to look back

and marvel at the ways God has worked - the Emancipation Proclamation was a huge step in the liberation of black and brown people. And, we are able to recognize the need for God's continual guidance, hope, and deliverance. Thanks to the work of people like King, more steps have been taken in the journey towards full equality and equity of all peoples. And yet we live in a time when oppression and discrimination are forces of evil still at work in the world. So what do we do? We look back with joy at what God has done and we ask God to deliver us once more. Our faith and hope are grounded in the previous action of God on our behalf. And so we have the wherewithal to dream dreams of a future where God once again acts with us in mind.

So what does it look like to be dreamers in our context? What dreams do you have for tomorrow? For yourself? For our church? For our community? For our world?

These dreams don't have to be as big as dreaming of an end to exile or war - though I know I dream of those things. Your dreams could start much smaller. Presbyterian Pastor Matthew Stith makes this point about Psalm 126:

"It is... worth noting," he writes, "that the petition and following verses (4-6) do not seem to envision or even request the sort of world-shaking, nation-realigning intervention that brought about the joyful return of verses 1-3. Instead, the people's anticipated experience of the restorative power of God is described as being like the flow of seasonal waterways in the arid Negev after the winter rains, or like the growth and harvesting of crops after the

sowing of seed into a barren field — something that takes time, but can be confidently expected as a regular feature of life.”

Where have you seen renewal lately? What small acts of God’s faithfulness might give you hope for the dreams you have for the future?

One of my dreams for this church is to see a robust youth program. One thing that’s giving me hope right now is our Baptism Class. Yesterday, we gathered for four hours in the church basement to get to know each other and learn and explore together. It is no small miracle in this day and age to get any teen or pre-teen to spend that kind of time at church, especially on a Saturday. Today’s youth are so incredibly busy, but we had 6 sixth graders take time in the middle of their weekend to come together and talk about faith, baptism, communion, and church membership. I know at least a couple of them were missing other activities that are important to them in order to be there.

Another spark of hope came from a recent weekday coffee after school with one of our high school students. This youth was willing to share their own dreams for our youth ministry - a safe space to connect with peers and talk about the things that matter in their lives and how they intersect with faith. This youth is willing to step up and help lead the way forward as we figure out what comes next for our youth ministry.

And that’s what it takes. We’re called not just to be those who dream but to be active participants in making those dreams a reality. So as we move back into the grind of daily life after

worship, I invite you to take a few minutes to sit and think. What has God done for you in the past? What are your dreams for the future? How can you help make those dreams come true?

I want to close us with a reinterpretation of this Psalm, both poem and prayer. This is Psalm 126 Redux (77-78) by Carla Grosch-Miller:

“When the miracle happened;  
when the hoped for, dreamed of,  
prayed for, longed for,  
ached for, pleaded for  
miracle happened  
when You acted beyond  
our expectation or imagination,  
we were open-mouthed.  
We pinched ourselves.  
Can it be? Is it true?

Then delight began  
in our toes  
and rippled its way  
to the tops of our heads.  
Laughter  
and tears  
erupted.  
We clapped our hands.  
We danced with joy.

This is God’s doing, we said,

The Holy is.

Even our sceptical neighbours noticed:  
Is this God's doing?, they muttered.  
Can God save me?, they wondered.

Act again, great God,  
with unmistakeable power.

We bring our need to you -  
our poverty of spirit,  
our deep hungers,  
the work of our hands and minds,  
the mistakes we've made,  
the seeds we've sown.

Make our barren places fruitful  
and our emptiness to overflow.  
Free us from our manifold captivities  
and set us on a broad plain.  
Fill our mouths with laughter again  
and our hearts with songs of joy."

Amen.