

Proceed Accordingly

Psalm 126
James 5:13-20

Psalm 126 has a hidden reference to death and resurrection. Well, it is hidden from us. But the Hebrew priests who chanted it in the Temple would have seen it clearly. Verses five and six contain two couplets referencing tears and joy. The much older Psalm 30, which its author King David labeled a hymn of joy for recovery from a deadly illness, also contains this tears to joy motif. There, a man goes to “sleep” with weeping; but rises with joy in the morning. Here in Psalm 126 we read of a man planting with tears, but reaping with joy. This Psalm praises the Lord for having restored the Jews to freedom in the Promised Land—possibly after returning from exile in Babylon. The planting and reaping are symbols for loss and restoration, suffering and healing, dying and rising from the dead.

The proof of this pudding comes in the words “his sheaves” near the very end of the Psalm. Ancient Hebrew, the language in which it was composed, had no written vowels. Writers set down only the consonants, expecting the readers to supply the correct “points”, or vowels. “His sheaves” would have appeared in the written text as the equivalent of *lmwt*. Pointing (inserting the vowels) this root word in one way yields “his sheaves”. Pointing it another way yields “immortality”. Commentator Gerald Wilson observes, “As the ancient Hebrews delighted in rhymes and puns and double entendres, there is virtually no possibility that 'his sheaves' and 'immortality' were

paired unintentionally.” This anonymous psalmist means for his readers to thank the Lord for harvests and for life itself.

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,” Psalm 126 begins, “we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’” Last week Alan Harder spoke movingly about prayer in times of sorrow and despair. His testimony was powerful because we know his story. Today we have two biblical injunctions to pray also when we experience newness, bounty, joy. The Psalmist and James reference prayers for comfort and healing as well, but I feel called today to focus on prayers of praise. We have said before that the three-word summary of James might be, “**Do** your faith.” Again and again he writes about some important aspect of Christianity and adds an admonition to get out there and actually do it. We could paraphrase his technique in this way: “Having learned what it means to follow Christ, **proceed accordingly**.” Having learned to make prayers of thanksgiving for blessings received, make sure you make those prayers.

The Movie Chariots of Fire told the (mostly) true story of two British Olympic runners, Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams. In real life Liddell, born in China to English missionary parents, returned to China after the Olympics, where he, too, served as a missionary. He remained in China until his death in 1945, in a Japanese internment camp. A gifted sprinter, he really did throw his head back and smile while running, as the actor in the movie depicted it. And as shown in the movie, he really did tell a

reporter, "I feel the joy of the Lord when I run." In real life he added, "Running is one of the ways in which I pray." When we experience joy, do we remember to pray?

Gretchen is the real name of the woman in this next story, and I have her permission to tell it. She made it through high school and college without any real connection with God. At least on her side of the equation, as she tells it. A voice major at Northwestern, she quickly learned that her expensive education at a prestigious university qualified her for exactly one thing: singing professionally. But while Gretchen does have a gorgeous voice she lacked two of the requirements for success in the music business. She just could not seem to catch a lucky break, and she was and is overweight. She did not have "the look". After about her fortieth fruitless audition a kind woman told her, honestly, if it came down to her and others of approximate talent, she would never get the gig. Let us stipulate that this is completely wrong. It feeds unhealthy and destructive messaging to girls and women. And at the same time, it is how it is in that business.

Gretchen fell into depression. Her father, never emotionally available to her or her mother, died. It threw her into a crisis. And then she met James, on a Frisbee golf course. James was a good-looking guy. He was interesting and decent. And he liked her. They had a couple of dinner dates and then he told her something along the lines of, "I hope this goes somewhere. But I need you to know something." Her heart fell. She thought he was going to tell her she was too heavy for him. Instead, he said, "I am a spiritual person and I cannot commit to a relationship with a woman who isn't."

She honestly told him she wasn't, but maybe she could be? She started attending his church. Somebody heard her singing and told the praise band director. He asked her to sing with them at worship services.

James and Gretchen have been married for twenty years. They have three daughters. She leads a worship team at a church. And once upon a time she said to me, "My song is my prayer." [Turn to choir] Have you ever thought or felt that? My song is my prayer. **Any** activity which sensitizes us to the reality, the presence, the power and the love of God can become a kind of prayer. And should. I have found myself praising God while using a nail gun on shingles on mission trips. I have praised God in delivery rooms in hospitals—especially following the birth of our daughter by emergency Caesarian Section. How and when and why have you praised God when you have experienced newness and healing and joy? Go ahead and think about it. I will give you a few moments.

These expressions of thanksgiving are prayers of praise. It may seem this focus on them misrepresents our verses from James, which speak more of prayers of need, of prayers in times of distress. But while our theme today may represent a lesser theme of the passage it nevertheless is in there. And it highlights an idea we may not have emphasized quite enough. What is the first question people ask most often in a new conversation? How are you? And how do we answer? "Fine." Whether we are or not. In truth life can hit us hard. When it does not, when we are happy and content, we need to remember to thank God for that moment.

“Are any cheerful?” James asks, “They should sing songs of praise.” “The Lord has done great things for us,” writes the Psalmist, “and we rejoiced.” The Indiana State COVID map has kept Vigo County in orange for weeks. We are literally surrounded—even by Illinois’ Edgar County—by red. Yet here we have come today to praise God. We must deal with duplicity and corruption in our federal government—and have had to since at least Harry Truman. Yet here we have come today to praise God. We see tens of thousands of desperate human beings massed on our southern border. We see a horrid division in our social and political national life, on every issue. Yet here we have come today to praise God.

And so we should. Because whatever our challenges, whatever our problems, they pale before the existential crises that have faced most human beings throughout history, including virtually every person of God to have preceded us. The man who wrote Psalm 126 had a life expectancy for those who survived childhood estimated by anthropologists at 46, and would have spent many of those years dogged by remorseless pain in his teeth. James had to spend his adult life wary of authorities seeking to eliminate Christians. Yet both unabashedly urged their readers to rejoice. How could they? Because they knew the same joy of the Lord experienced by the British track star Eric Liddell. If only we could, as well.

And we can. I pray that nobody hearing these words will think, “Well, that’s easy for him to say.” It is actually a bit of a task for me to say. I have experienced the grief of failed expectations, of professional disappointment, of the loss of beloved ones. I

cannot pretend fully to understand how others feel but I can honestly state that I feel my own wounds. And I have spent many, many hours listening to people I love and serve speak of theirs. Someone even as dense as I can learn from these things. And here is what I have learned:

God is real

God is good

God has plans for us all

I believe those plans end really, really well

And so, rain or shine, pray. Duane Aelick, a retired pastor who worshiped at a church I served in Seymour, liked to tell people to make one-word prayers. He would give examples like “Please?”, and “Sorry!”, and “Thanks!”. Perhaps following this practice might help you to pray more often. Perhaps it feels too superficial. In that case, try a ten second prayer. It takes less than 25 seconds to recite the Lord's Prayer at the pace we use in our worship services. It contains several types of prayer: petition, intercession, confession and praise. Jesus made it more than deep enough.

As many have observed, it is the **habit** of prayer that matters maybe even more than the **content** of our prayers. Developing the habit connects us with God more deeply. It changes us. Is anybody here suffering? Let them pray. Is anybody cheerful? Let them pray. Is anybody sick? Let them pray. James tells us to pray in all circumstances. Proceed accordingly.