

“With a Laugh”

Psalm 126

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Last Saturday I think I began to feel like a local. We ate breakfast with Santa at the high school. We got library cards and had to show mail with our name and address—see right there? I do live within Geauga County. But it was getting our Christmas tree that helped me feel more that this is my place now.

All day long roads were filled with cars apparently propelled by long, green rockets strapped to their roofs. With spirits driven by tree power families zipped from home to farm or nursery to plant in living rooms harbingers of gift-wrapped littered floors and Christmas Day laughs and squeals. They came home from the tree hunt “carrying their sheaves” of tree.

There is something improbable about putting up Christmas trees. Putting up a live tree is like bringing home cut flowers, but on an enormous scale. What would a spouse think if, in July, her husband walked in the door with a spruce: “Honey, I love you. This is for you!” A Christmas tree is extravagant.

Theologically speaking I’m conflicted about setting up Christmas trees much earlier than the fourth week in Advent. Sentimentality tradition always win the day and our tree typically goes up the first weekend in December. But liturgically, it can feel too much too soon. Advent themes of waiting and wilderness and believing salvation where it hasn’t appeared doesn’t jive with thick, green trees resplendent with garland, lights and stars.

Prophet Isaiah captures Advent’s tone, foretelling “a shoot [that] will come up from the stump of Jesse”—a sprig of life will emerge, but now there’s just low-shorn wood slightly protruding from the ground. I wonder how much a tree farm would charge me for a stump. I’d go to the farm with with a shovel, not a saw, and come home with a stump in the trunk. “Don’t mind me,” I’d say. “It’s my Advent stump. Blessed Advent to you and yours.”

Yet here at week three of Advent a pine-scented living room begins to feel right. The next to the last Sunday of Advent majors in joy. Psalm 126 is a freight train loaded with rejoicing. “Joy” or “rejoice” appear at least every other line. Like a Christmas tree that calls to mind past yuletide celebrations and heightens anticipation of the coming Christmastide, Psalm 126 is memory and hope for those who want life marked by laughter at the goodness of the Lord.

In sermons these Sundays of Advent we’re journeying prayer by prayer to the manger of our Lord. This journeying makes us pilgrims. Pilgrims are people who travel in faith a sacred place. Psalm 126 is a pilgrim psalm.

Scholars agree it's likely this psalm was cargo for Jews traveling to Jerusalem for festival. After their Babylonian exile years in the mid-6th century B.C. some Jews settled in places a ways outside Jerusalem. Yet no matter where they lived Zion never stopped being home. So feasts like Passover and Pentecost were occasion for holy road trips to feast in Jerusalem. Psalm 126 is the second in a collection of fifteen psalms that were prayed on way to the Holy City.

Of course, all prayer comes from people on the way. Every word we voice to God is informed by days, says the psalmist, "when God restored [our] fortunes." I suppose we'd eventually stop praying at all if we thought God never answered with us blessing. Still, we don't pray because we know *how* God will bless us; we pray in faith that God will give blessing *somehow*, even if the *somehow* can seem awfully big.

"Restore our fortunes, Lord," the psalmist prays, like streams in the Negeb." The Negeb of southern Israel is "somehow" land—arid land filled with signs of what life once was and what it might be. Christmas trees would look odd in the Negeb. Stumps would be at home. Rocks and tumbleweeds, dried up plants, deadwood would them in. The Negeb is witness to what once was alive but has since withered up.

You don't need to have been to the Negeb to know it's geography well. People who pray find themselves there more often than they'd like. Some remember days when their bodies could leap and dance, when they would run a 5:00 mile or pull of a tight back handspring, but as it is they do well to tie their shoes and make it to the store. Others recall when a relationship was blooming and in full leaf, but as they see it now it looks as though there's a lot of dead to cut back. Churches go through the Negeb. In plenty of congregations there are stumps that point to how church life has changed, maybe in ways unfortunate. "Restore our fortunes, Lord," such people pray, "like streams in the Negeb."

One of the interesting features of the Negeb is its watercourses. The land has well-worn channels cut by erosion of soil from rain and flood. Most of the year these dry and cracked but sudden downpours send water gushing, blossoms exploding, green shoots pushing life into the barren desert space. "Bring rains to our drought-stricken lives," the psalmist pleads to God.

Sometimes prayer feels like scattering seeds in hard, parched ground—and not just prayer, but life. With the squish-squash our feet make these days in our waterlogged soil we have to use imagination, but envision: a Christmas tree farmer heading into the field where pillows of dust rise up with every footfall. The ground is so hard he uses hammer and chisel to make a hole the seems. It's like trying to grow a tree in the oven. He sprinkles the seeds with tears, tears being the only water available and fitting for planting in drought conditions. This is no Geauga Country U-cut farm where it's certain the seeds will grow to stretch their shaggy arms. Negeb is land where only

those who hope dare to plant and where anything that grows up is almost a laughable surprise.

In the hours before we got our Christmas tree I sat with people whose prayers begged God to rain down life. Emergency room lobbies can be watercourses for God-desperate prayers. Here and there cheeks blossomed red from the watering of tears. Friends and family joined hands and asked for God's restoration to come. Hearts and eyes scanned for shoots of hope pushing up from a suddenly barren patch of life.

And then there was a splash, a laugh, then a few, a shower of levity in the room. Laughs are stump-like things—choppy witnesses to moments of joy that briefly rise up and then are cut off. Amid all the trouble in the ER there shot up a laugh. I took it as a sprig of faith that even in hard things God can do something redemptive.

There are times when laughter is a witness to hope. I wish Christians—maybe Presbyterians especially!—were more well known as laughing people. A laugh is kind of a miracle. It breaks in without warning and leaves a wake of lightness as it goes. A laugh is auditory grace, a flash flood of joy.

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion we were like those who dreamed,” says the psalm. “Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.” Advent is a season that trains us in waiting and expectation. It's a pregnant season, a laboring season. It acknowledges life's travails, but in a *joy*-filled way, as though the laughter of God is just about to erupt.

At any moment, Christ may come, so live awake! we say in these weeks. But doesn't that also mean, at any moment God's blessing might sneak up and trip us like a stump at a Christmas tree farm? Out in the Negeb the next flash flood could happen any second. Without warning you could be swept off your feet by the roiling waters of life. So be on your toes! Keep your eyes peeled, Advent trains us to say.

Toward the end of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, after Frodo and Sam had finished their dark pilgrim journey and had fallen from consciousness on the side of Mount Doom, when Sam finally awakened he discovered he wasn't actually dead, but nestled in soft bedclothes, and he said to Gandalf the wizard:

“What's happened to the world?”

“A great Shadow has departed,” said Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known. But he himself burst into tears. Then, as a sweet rain will pass down a wind of

spring and the sun will shine out the clearer, his tears ceased, and his laughter welled up, and laughing he sprang from his bed.¹

The scriptures give no witness to this but I wonder: when Jesus rose to life from death, was the first thing he did to laugh? I enjoy the thought—Jesus letting loose a thundering, earth shaking laugh; a laugh rocking with everlasting life!

This is what an Advent church proclaims: the world is turning toward laughter and the joy of God's eternal realm. We say that this world and our lives, so often parched and littered with stumps, will through the cries of Christ from manger and cross wash us into a day of eternal guffaws at the abundance of life God gives.

And that's how pilgrims pray, says Psalm 126. They pray as with tears watering the soil of fears, trouble and despair. They pray convinced that God's gift and joy will spring up like a Frasier Fir from desert ground. They claim that by the mercies of God the tears of trouble give growth to shoots of life.

But for the most part, they just keep on walking—walking toward Jerusalem, walking on toward God. They keep on walking with eyes that are wet, and mouths that are ready to laugh. Amen.

This sermon was preached at Christ Presbyterian Church, Chesterland, OH.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), 931.