

Psalm 126 <A Song of Ascents.> 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 Negev. 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. (NRSV)

"Shouts of Joy"

I got a bit tickled this week at the thought of writing a sermon on joy. C'mon, my favourite Pooh character is Eeyore. People ask me how I'm doing and I avoid answering by saying something like "Gettin' there" or "Awake, besides that, pretty good." I have to be one of the dourest people going. You'll never (almost never) catch me shouting for joy at sporting events. Take me somewhere you think I will enjoy and there will be no way I'll ever tip my hand to let you know you succeeded. I'm just not a ya-ya kind of guy and to be honest I make it a point not to be. I'm a Presbyterian minister of all things. Go look at the pictures on the wall of Fellowship Room. I'm supposed to be so sour-dour that I scare the Hell out of people, literally. Ask me about joy and the best I can say is that I once had a crush on my sitter named Joy and as everybody knows crushes never go well. I was five. She was twenty. It never would have worked. Ask me about boredom or financial stress or anxiety, I can tell you about those things, but joy. Well, I'll just say that I am glad that I am not my source of joy. I will confess that I do have joy, but it comes from something other than me. Let me explain.

Joy is quite simply ecstatic and exultant happiness, great delight, pleasure, satisfaction. It's more than just being cheery all the time. It's shouting

for joy like Tom Cruise jumping on the couch on Oprah because he loves Katie.

There are small joys like when the Leafs actually win. There's the joy William feels when he gets in water (something he inherited from his mother) and the joy we get of seeing William really enjoy something. Joy is a powerful “yes” to life.

Unfortunately, joy is a very momentary thing that springs forth from the events of life as a gift. But, then it fades. One could say and many do that for all our achievements and prosperity we Westerners should feel quite joyful. Yet, for most of the time we're just plain bored and thus follows our inordinate fascination with entertainment. Eugene Peterson compares us to medieval royalty. Day after day we rise from the evening's feast and go enthroned upon our couches and recliners and summons the court jester with the clicker but hour after hour of channel after channel we're still bored.

We want to feel joy, but how do we get it? It only makes sense that all we need to do to have joy is to fill our lives with the things that we enjoy. Yet, it is a given that sooner or later after a garage full of stuff we never needed in the first place and myriads of friends that we've passed through over time it becomes evident that the things we enjoy will inevitably become things we used to enjoy. Another oft tried approach is to cleanse our lives of everything that causes us pain. To quote Peterson again, “A common but futile strategy for achieving joy is trying to eliminate things that hurt: get rid of pain by numbing the nerve ends, get rid of insecurity by eliminating risks, get rid of disappointments by depersonalizing relationships. And then try to lighten the boredom of such a life

by buying joy in the form of vacations and entertainment." Trying to create joy fails us, especially when it is self based joy.

As Christians we have a different take on what joy is and how to get it. I can't say it any better than Jesus did in John's Gospel. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15:9-13 NIV). The joy that we have is Jesus' own joy that he experiences in loving as he is loved by the Father, the joy that arises in laying down one's life for others. Andrew Purves says it like this, "Joy is the consequence of knowing Jesus and living our lives in him." Peterson says, "Enjoyment is not an escape from boredom but a plunge by faith into God's work." Joy cannot be found in seeking joy for joy's sake. We find it in seeking to know Jesus Christ and at the end of the day it is a celebration of what God has done. Peterson says this rather well, "The Christian way of discipleship is an overflow of spirits that comes from feeling good not about yourself, but about God."

Turning now to Psalm 126, it can be called a psalm of trust. It speaks loudly of joy for indeed there is no joy where there is no faith in God. I suspect that it originates after the Babylonian exile when a remnant of the faithful had returned to Jerusalem. God had done great things for them. The nations around them were saying as much. Indeed, the nations feared this returning remnant.

They returned with shouts of joy but as the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah show, it didn't take long for this remnant of the faithful to start feeling barren again.

Rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple was hard work for such a small number of people and they were meeting with conflict on every side and then there were those among them who were falling away. Yet, having experienced God's bringing them back from exile, they knew that God would once again restore them. They would shout for joy again just as they had before, just as the dry river beds in the desert mountains of Southern Israel turn green and blossom with all colours of flowers when the rains come in winter. I've seen these river beds in blossom and it is spectacular.

This Psalm contains one of the most well known passages in the Bible, “Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.” Joy does not arise from the elimination of the things in our lives that hurt. True joy arises while walking through the valley of the shadow of death and finding that it is the LORD with his rod and staff who comforts. Joy comes from knowing that God has done great things for us each and for all of creation.

This is how it happens. Speaking personally, a couple of months before William was born I was sitting on the living room floor stretching before a run. I looked out through the window and up towards the sky and..pow...it was like the LORD said to me, “Look at where I've brought you.” All the tears I had sown in the years before coming to Canada, in that moment I reaped a shout of joy. I knew I could trust God because I have very really experienced his steadfast love and faithfulness. I look back now on that moment and that shout of joy is how I

face the things that worry me, that scare me, that stress me. I look at Dana and William and by them I see the steadfast love and faithfulness of God to me. I look at the surrogate family that surrounds me up here and by them I see the steadfast love and faithfulness of God to me. I look at this church and at you people and I see the steadfast love and faithfulness of God to me. I know I've done nothing to deserve it. It's just the way God is. He loves us each as his own special child. Those who sow with tears do reap with shouts of joy provided we don't try to escape the trials of life but rather endure through them and see where the LORD will bring us.

We're in the season of Advent now and part of the discipline of this time of year is to reflect upon how God has brought joy to the entirety of his broken and futile creation in, through, and as Jesus Christ. To quote Andrew Purves, joy is "an understanding of reality based on the victory of Jesus Christ." "Christian joy is a joy that has a sole basis in what God has done to redeem the human situation." Those shouts of joy we have when it becomes clear that God has been steadfastly loving and faithful to us each give us a new set of eyes through which to see the world and everyone and everything in it. The cross is the victory. Resurrection is the consequence. Creation shouts for joy. But within this creation is a lot of grief, suffering, cruelty, negligence and that's the way it is. It cannot be escaped. We who know the love of God personally and who have been awakened with faith as a free gift in Jesus Christ, we are the ones he's commanded to go forth and in his name lay down our lives not for ourselves all these other people whom he dearly loves but they don't yet know it. It's hard to

turn away from the concerns of our own lives. But knowing what we know, or better said knowing Whom we know, we know we can take that plunge of faith and standing on the knowledge of the LORD's steadfast love and faithfulness take up the cross and follow him as he gets involved in the lives of others with the love of Christ he's gifted us to bear. “Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (NRSV). Amen.