

When the pandemic first started early in March last year, I had no idea how to do my job. Most of what I normally do was off-limits: no crowds, no shaking hands, no visiting the hospitals or nursing homes, no singing, no meeting in person. So I did the only thing I could really think of, which was praying over the Internet the services of Morning and Night Prayer—songs, prayers, and scripture readings, including a nightly psalm. Serious monastic communities who always meet for seven daily prayer services read all 150 psalms every week. If you were a frequent flyer for our Night Prayers, you may have noticed that I cycled through far fewer psalms. Psalm 126 was one of them—not only because it’s short, and some nights I was really tired, but also because this psalm, which spoke to the experience of the ancient Israelites in exile, resonated more than ever when we were called into an exile of our own.

The Old Testament tells the story of God establishing an exemplary nation through Abraham’s descendants, returning those descendants to the promised land after their enslavement in Egypt, and the rise, plateau, and really, really bad fall of their monarchy. In the middle of that timeline, God gave the people the commandments with the instruction that they should follow them in order that they might live long in the land they were being given. When the leaders of Israel displayed spectacular disregard for the commandments, and the neighboring nations subsequently invaded and conquered Israel, the people understood the misfortune of their nation as God’s punishment for their collective failure. They believed that God worked through their enemies to hold them accountable for the injustices against which the prophets railed. That’s how they ended up exiled in Babylon, cut off not only from their own homes, but also from the Temple, the home of the Lord. We think of God’s presence everywhere; but the ancient Israelites thought of God meeting them in the Temple, so they lamented through the long years of exile because they couldn’t worship in the place they understood God to be present.

Psalm 126 celebrates the restoration of the exiles who had so long dreamt of Zion—the mountain of Jerusalem where the Temple stood. It is a deeply communal understanding of God’s work on behalf of Israel over time, because the generation that was sent into exile did not live long enough to return home; their hope was not for themselves but for the generations that followed them. The beginning of the psalm looks back at what God did in the past—restored the fortunes of Zion so that even other nations recognized the great things God did for them. In the second half of the psalm, they look forward—confident that they can ask God to restore them

again because they remember that God has done so before. They know that God is faithful because God already has a proven record of *chesed*—steadfast loving faithfulness, even toward the people who themselves have been an inconstant, loveless, faithless mess.

God restored the earth after the flood. God restored Abraham's descendants after they were enslaved in Egypt. God restored the Israelites after the exile. We see over and over again that God is a god of restoration. But restoration implies that something somewhere along the way has gone wrong; otherwise it wouldn't need to be restored. Now, we can ask God for protection—an ounce of prevention being worth more than a pound of cure and all that. But belonging to a God who is good at restoring things means that we don't have to give up when things go wrong—big things or little things. And things do go wrong—both because of our bad decisions and because this world is broken, and the consequences of that brokenness, like the rain, will fall at random on the just and the unjust alike.

The psalmist asks for their fortunes to be restored like the watercourses of the Negev, a dry, barren desert that seasonally floods to provide life-sustaining water. That restoration can be sudden and intense: Google the Negev and you can watch video of it flash-flooding. But God's restorative power is often a good deal less dramatic—and may take a lot more time. The last verses of the psalm allude to the cycle of planting and harvest, where those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. We should expect the ebb and flow of life to encompass both joy and sorrow in the same way we expect summer to turn to autumn to turn to winter to turn to spring. The struggle, the sorrow, the loss, the pain, the cost of doing business in this broken world—they are not part of God's good intentions for us, but neither are they signs that God has abandoned us in times of trouble; help is on the way. We are bold to pray for restoration because we, too, have seen what God can restore.

About 19 months ago now I started praying this psalm, thinking that in two weeks schools and churches and theaters and would be open and travel would resume and this virus that nobody had heard of six weeks before would have burned itself out while we sat at home and waited. Our exile has lasted longer a couple weeks; and like the ancient Israelites in Babylon, we mourn for family, friends, and neighbors who won't make it back with us. But even in the midst of this ongoing tragedy—begun by an idiosyncrasy of nature and exacerbated by human recklessness—we still have hope that God can restore even this. Then we can say again, *The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.*