

“From Scarcity to Abundance”
Sermon from Psalm 126
Given Sunday, July 4, 2021
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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*When God brought us captives back to Zion,
we thought we were dreaming!
Our mouths were filled with laughter then,
our tongues with songs of joy.
And from the nations we heard,
“Their God has done great things for them.”
Yes – God has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.*

*Now set our captive hearts free, God!
Make them like streams in the driest desert!
Then those who sow in tears
will reap with shouts of joy;
those who go out weeping
as they carry their seed for sowing
will come back with shouts of joy
as they carry their harvest home.*

—

The great American author William Faulkner once said of these Psalms, “They are not monuments, but footprints. A monument only says, ‘At least I got this far,’ while a footprint says, ‘this is where I was when I moved again.’”

We are moving again, friends.

For those who originally sang this song, the movement was small in terms of ground covered - just one step closer to the temple - but it was big in their souls. Their journey was only on the surface about getting from one place to another. Even more than that, it was about the bringing of their spirits into communion with one another, and with the sacred that called to them, that led them in their waking life, that spoke to them in dreams.

What is your dreaming life like? What would it mean for you to be like one who dreams? Because of the verses that follow here - about great laughter, and joy that can't be contained - there's a pretty clear implication that these are the best dreams, the ones you wake up from smiling, the daydreams that interrupt your waking thoughts with imaginings of how good things might one day be.

But waking up can also be a bit disorienting, right? Do you ever have trouble making sense of your dreams? Or are they ever so ordinary, it's hard to separate your dreams from your waking life?

I sometimes have dreams where I attend meetings. Like, filled with people I know, around tables or on screens that I recognize, and we have conversations that make perfect sense.

I wake up sometimes and it doesn't register as a dream, because it felt so real - which then makes it really upsetting when I realize I have to attend the same meeting again later that day when everyone else is also really there, and awake, because I feel, you know, like I've already put that time in.

I imagine the returning ones in this Psalm, getting closer to a home only their ancestors knew, asking themselves, "Is this real? You're - you're seeing all this, too, right? I'm not imagining it - this city taking shape before me - a home I recognize, even though I've only known it in story and song?" I imagine the joy, the laughter, the homecoming was probably also a bit disorienting.

Could they speak that? Were they free to share, with each other, what was so hard about being away, and what might also be hard about coming back, to this land that is both theirs and not-theirs, both known and unknown? Can we speak that, to each other, about this time now?

I am drawn to this Psalm for lots of reasons, but one of them is it just doesn't feel so far away. You know how some scripture is lovely, or challenging, or interesting, but feels like it belongs to the long-ago, far-away context it was originally composed in. This Psalm doesn't have that finished-and-folded-up-and-tucked-away feel to it - it feels really present, or like it could be - it feels invitational, almost.

When God brought us captives back to Zion, we thought we were dreaming. Our mouths were filled with laughter then, our tongues with songs of joy.

What could we do with that? What were those moments, for you?

I went to the pool with my kids yesterday, and we were like those who dreamed - splashing, kicking, flipping in the water; other kids all around us, their mouths filled with laughter, their tongues with shouts of joy.

When we - any of us, all of us - first reconnected with our parents, our children, our grandparents, our grandchildren, after more than a year of keeping ourselves locked away, for their protection and ours - our mouths were filled with laughter then, our tongues with songs of joy.

When friends came to dinner at our house for the first time in sixteen months, when we passed plates piled high with food and hugged as we said goodbye - our mouths were filled with laughter then, our tongues with songs of joy.

When, in the middle of all that was so hard, we looked up and saw the rainbow stretching across the sky in the height of the afternoon, the blood moon rising in the middle of the night, and we remembered the gifts and the rhythms of creation - we were like those who dream: disoriented, thankful, in awe at the ordinary all over again.

But when, in the middle of all that was so hard, we suffered yet another loss - received word of a difficult diagnosis or a hard decision, were forced to say a goodbye we weren't ready for, were unable to mourn in a way that felt fitting - we were like those who dream: disoriented, staggering, unable to make sense of any of it.

And this is where we find ourselves now, emerging from a year and a quarter of scarcity. A year and a quarter of limited contact, of limited presence, of limited touch, of limited community. We grew used to it, in some ways. It started to feel normal - keeping distance, wearing a mask, staying home. There were gifts in it. The quiet was nice. The slowed pace gave us breathing space. There seemed to be a new extension of grace - everyone knew that things were changed, were hard, for everyone else, and we learned, for a moment, not to be so hard on ourselves, or on each other.

Now there is abundance - of things to do, of places to go, of ways to be... and this scripture helps us orient ourselves for

that moving again: Now set our *captive hearts free*, God!
Because there's more to reopening than unlocking doors and removing restrictions. There's the movement that has happened in our hearts, and the invitation that awaits the deepest parts of us now.

How might we bring our spirits into communion with one another, and with the sacred that called to us, that leads us in their waking life, that speaks to us in dreams? How might we do that in ways that honors where we've been, and what we've learned?

Writer Jenny Smith says we've just come through a marathon, it feels like - even if it hasn't been fast, it has been physical and emotional work - and instead of getting to rest, and rehydrate, someone official-looking has slapped another bib on our back and pointed us toward a new starting line, urging us to get going. But there are things we've learned during this time, and we would do well to abide by them. Whether we are giddy with all that's changing all around us or disoriented by it, our moving again can be healing for our spirits. Here are the road rules she suggests for this journey ahead:

"Side by side. No racing.

No competing with anything or anyone.

Resting when it's time to rest.

Saying yes to a new idea when it glistens with possibility.

Saying no when something feels too heavy.
Asking new questions in places we assumed the old answer.
Giving others permission to rest because we choose rest.
Questioning the speed at which we live and move.
Loving our people with beautiful boundaries in place.
Taking a nap.
Going to therapy and spiritual direction
because we're humans too.
Breathing deeply of God's grace and love and restoration.
Maybe this is how we disrupt the deeply engrained
oppressive realities of our world.
We choose to walk.
Together.”

And if we commit to that, maybe our movement isn't from the scarcity of the pandemic to the abundance of now - but from the scarcity of well-being in a life when we didn't have the time to think about it all, to the abundance of a slowed-down, drawn-close, new way of being together, new way of being in the world, our dreaming and our waking, our tears and our laughter, all one grace-filled reality. May it be so.