

Searched by the Psalms Series at Brentwood

March 21, 2010

Release to the Captives

Ps 126 & John 12:1-8

(Hymns – 712, 87, 530, 334)

The pivotal point in Israel's religious memory was the Exodus.
It was the event in which the captives gained their release,
in which the slaves gained their freedom.
This was the event in which God revealed himself
to be a God who favoured Israel above all
to the his covenant people,
a light to the nations and a blessing to all creation.

The Exodus is marked not only by release and freedom,
but also by responsibility.

On Sinai, following the escape from Egypt,
God re-establishes the covenant with Israel.

The obligation God takes on is to be magnanimous –
loving, forgiving, patient, and protective.

The obligations Israel takes on are recorded
in the ten *words* or *statements* in Exodus 20:1-17
(a more literal translation that *commandments*),
a combination of obligations towards God
and obligations toward other humans.

I think it is of note that there are no punishments listed.
Obedience is motivated not by fear of punishments,
but by the people's desire to flourish
in accordance with God's wise grace.

The release and freedom created by God
is met with amazement, laughter, and joy from God's people.

This is freedom from in order to enjoy freedom to.

We are freed from the things that hold us captive -
idols and lesser gods.

We are freed to live the lives God destined us to live,
to live the gifts of the Spirit –

love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-discipline.

God frees and we rejoice.

We fill the house with the perfume of gratitude.

This pattern of God freeing and the people rejoicing
is one of the core story lines of the Bible.

It happens over and over again.

In the first 3 verses, Psalm 126 refers in general to this pattern
when the people using this song or prayer of praise in worship
remember the great things the Lord has done for them
and how they rejoiced in response.

The specific event the author probably had in mind in the 1st voice
was the return from exile in Babylon.

This exile of the people of Israel –
after 420 years in their own land under David and his successors –
took place when Judah was conquered
and the people was deported to Babylon in 587BC.

Some 60 years later, Babylon fell to Persia
and some 40,000 Jews were allowed to return to the province of Judah.

The period of exile had a formative influence on how Judaism was practiced.
It was the high-point in the later period of the prophets, especially with Ezekiel.

It was the period in which the Torah emerged as central in Jewish life.
It was the period when Israel came together as a distinct religious nation
rooted in a common faith rather than a piece of land.

So, the return to their land from exile
was a further bonding experience,
giving them a deepened sense of confidence
in God's providence and their vocation or calling
to be God's people of blessing.
Again, central to this historical event is the pattern
of God acting and the people rejoicing at the results.

In the last 3 verses of the psalm, the people pray
that this pattern of God acting and the people rejoicing
will continue, especially in times of suffering and fear.
The "watercourses in Negeb" were an extensive irrigation system
established to redirect water to centres of human habitation.
These refreshing, live-giving waters changed Israel's fate.
But now those streams had dried up.
The source of vitality seemed to have faded away.
The prayer is for God to act as he had in the past,
renewing the exhausted springs of life
and reviving the joy and laughter of the community.

There is an interesting dynamic here that is worth examining.
The water alone will not revive a community.
The water is an essential gift,

a gift from God.

But it takes another gift from God – human ingenuity –
to make it work best for the flourishing of the community.
People in the community with different capabilities and talents
need to come together, find a common vision,
align themselves to work together to achieve that vision,
adjust the strategies they use as they proceed,
pray constantly for the continuing providence of God,
and cultivate the opportunities God provides
to serve the flourishing of the community
in its service to God.

In other words, God doesn't do it all for us.
God equips us with what's needed to do it with God.
But if we do not prepare for and respond properly
to the arrival of the life-giving grace,
represented in this psalm by life-giving waters,
we will not enjoy the full fruits of flourishing that God offers.

It's as simple as that.

We are all invited to work with God to produce blessing.
That's what the words and statements
(what we've come to call commandments)
were all about.

Here are the attitudes and behaviours
that will generate blessing,
not only for you but for all you encounter,
regardless of their relationship with your God.

Let's take just a moment
to think about how this applies in our personal lives,
then a moment more to explore what it might mean
for our life as a congregation here at Brentwood.

I think we build the watercourses for God's grace
by intentionally practicing the gifts of the Spirit –
love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-discipline.

We cultivate and build up our self-discipline
by paying attention to opportunities created by God
to practice all these qualities of flourishing.

This is what freedom feels and flows like.

This is what a life of rejoicing and laughter sounds like.
This is what gratitude for God's grace does within each of us
and for all those around us who come in contact with us.

This is how God's blessing flourishes.

One of the great insights that flows from the prophetic witness
and was written on the eve of Israel's time of exile
is found in Jeremiah 29:7:

*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

Bless everyone you meet with the gifts of the Spirit
so their lives may enjoy the refreshing irrigation of God's grace and mercy.
Even in physical and cultural bondage, Jeremiah is saying,
you can find freedom in your relationship with God
and practice the self-discipline of the gifts of the Spirit.
Paul in his relationship with his jailers is a good example.
Jesus, on the cross, as we shall see in a couple of weeks,
is the supreme example,
asking God to forgive those who put him to death.

For our life together here at Brentwood,
there are some instructive ideas here.
We have built many of the watercourses needed
to direct the flow of God's grace and mercy.
We have this place of worship.
We have a welcoming worshipping community.
We are nurturing our children in the love and admonition of the Lord.
We are gathering to be taught by the Spirit
what God's Word wants to make of our lives.
We are working with Burnaby Taiwanese Presbyterian Church
to discover better ways of cooperating
in sharing the Gospel with this neighbourhood and region.
We are using the resources this congregation has built up over the years
to construct a new future of even more faithful service to Jesus Christ
here at Brentwood Presbyterian Church.
We have been released from our captivity to fear of failure
and rejoice in our freedom to flourish.

Now, the challenge is how we use the waters of grace
flowing through these channels to invite and welcome
new people into our community of faith.
Will we invite, welcome, nurture, learn, serve, and rejoice?
I'm convinced that we will
by God's grace and with God's continuing help.

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