

Sheaves of Joy and Thanksgiving



Psalm 126
Matthew 6:26-34

November 24, 2024 GRCC
Rev. Rusty Eidmann-Hicks

True. We are in free fall among the stars. True: We don't know what tomorrow may bring. True: We don't know if we will prosper or decline, we don't know if tragedy or sorrow may strike. Also true: let's get up, count our blessings, and help someone.

Praise and thanksgiving are always found against a backdrop of uncertainty and pain. There are seasons when the harvest fails. Perhaps it was a drought, or a flood, or a windstorm that flattened the crops, or locust that ate every grain...sometimes the harvest does not come in. So, when it does, it feels like a blessing; it's deliverance from want and famine, and it warrants a time of rejoicing. While falling through the stars, we dance.

Psalm 126 speaks of the joy of harvest, of carrying in sheaves at harvest time. But it acknowledges that we go from times filled with tears and fear, to times of gratitude and thanksgiving. *"May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go*

out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.” (Ps 126:5,6)

Anyone who has journeyed through a long time of grief will resonate with these words. After the shock of terrible loss and a time of relentless tears, can come long seasons of empty sorrow. The ground feels barren, no harvest of joy is to be found. Days and weeks lack all sources of hope or satisfaction. But in time, the seeds of possibility and renewal begin to sprout; and the one who is grieving begins to re-enter life, to make new friends and to find new sources of interest and vitality – and then fresh and surprising springs of joy can blossom. Out of suffering or sorrow radiant gratitude can emerge.

When Harriet Tubman made her first escape from her plantation in Dorchester, Maryland, she described what it felt like to realize she had crossed the Mason-Dixon line and was now in free Pennsylvania: “I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.”

Behind Psalm 126 is the story of the people of Israel carried off into exile in Babylon after the defeat and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The Temple had been burned and torn to the ground, and its sacred objects carted off as loot from the war. Much of the population had been killed. Those in exile languished for 70 years, two generations, with little hope of re-creating the nation or its customs or religion. But grace happens. After drought can come the rain, after death, rebirth. In about 520 BC the Persian emperor Cyrus defeated the Babylonians, and released the Israelites from exile. Cyrus was Zoroastrian, respecting different religions, including the ancient faith of Israel. He not only allowed the Israelites to return to their land, but sent along the sacred golden vessels and ornaments from their Temple. He even gave them a generous grant to rebuild the Temple. *“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.’ The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.”* (Ps 126:2,3) What began with absolute disaster, ended with bright promise and renewal, a harvest of thanksgiving.

We celebrate this Thanksgiving with news of glacial shifts in our politics and government. Deadly missile fire is unleashed daily on Ukraine, Israel, Lebanon, and Gaza, destroying whole neighborhoods and families. We fear for what the future might hold with wars and rumors of wars. But that does not stop us from giving thanks. We still offer God thanks and praise for each day, for each moment of life, and for each person

we meet and can help. The light of our thanks is deepened by the dark. We know that seeds of kindness and faith grow into a harvest of community and friendship.

Our most sincere thanksgivings come after facing great trials. The beautiful hymn *"Now Thank We All Our God"*, was written by pastor Martin Rinchart at a time in the early 1600's in Germany when a great plague had swept through his village. He would spend the day carting the bodies of his neighbors and friends to the cemetery, performing funeral after funeral, striving to help the suffering and dying. When he would return at the end of the day to his family, he would gather his family around the table for their simple meal and sing in thanksgiving for all that God had given them. *"Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices. Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices. Who from our mother's arms, hath blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."*

Our Thanksgiving celebrations come from the ancient rituals of Harvest Home. It has very early roots - being found in almost all agricultural societies at harvest time. The ancient Celts and Saxons had autumn rituals of celebration and merry-making, which were the start of the Harvest Home rituals. A harvest doll made of the last sheaf of corn was dressed up and paraded through the fields. This later became the Christian Lammas - or Loaf Mass - in which farmers in Briton on August 1st would bring loaves of bread to mass as a token of thanksgiving; but only if it was a good wheat crop that year. Nowadays many Reformed churches celebrate Harvest Home by decorating their churches with fruit and flowers and vegetables, and people bring produce from their gardens to be given to the poor. Our own Thanksgivings are still celebrated with the knowledge of seasons of life when we have faced fear and sorrow, mixed in with gratitude and joy.

St. Augustine said that the human heart is always restless and that it can only find its rest in God. We are always looking for ways to satisfy our hungers. We look to people, or programs, or medications, or media, or entertainment, to bring us security and satisfaction. The problem is that none of them last long - in fact, they end up turning into another form of greed. We end up needing more and more fixes to feel a measure of peace and satisfaction. Little satisfies us for very long. We fear that we may lose what we have and are anxious about what lies ahead.

A teacher observed that one of the little boys in her class was pensive and withdrawn. "What are you worried about?" she asked. "My parents," he replied. "My dad and mom work all day to keep me clothed and fed and sent to the best school in town. They're working overtime to be able to send me to college. After work they cook and

clean and shop so I have nothing to worry about." "Why then are you worried?" "I'm afraid they might try to escape!" We fear for the future, instead of being grateful.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic Benedictine monk and scholar writes, *"It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy. Every moment is a gift. There is no certainty that you will have another moment, with all the opportunity that it contains. The gift within every gift is the opportunity it offers us. Most often it is the opportunity to enjoy it, but sometimes a difficult gift is given to us and that can be an opportunity to rise to the challenge."*

Seeds take a long time to come to fruition. Rains need to come at the right time, insects or birds can't eat them, or disease or fungus can't ruin them. Seeds can fall on a path and be trampled, or fall among weeds and be overshadowed and strangled. They can fall on places that have shallow soil, and have no depth in which to grow. Or they can fall on deep, rich soil that allows for an abundant harvest. Seeds of thanksgiving come from the joy of that harvest – when the rains come and the sun shines and the storms are gentle and the grain ripens and comes to fullness. If we strive to walk in God's ways day by day, if we seek forgiveness and to better ourselves, if we reach out to help others, then eventually, the harvest of faith draws near. We grow into thanks and joy.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. (Ps 126)

We are tumbling through the stars, and don't know what tomorrow may bring. In spite of this we still find God's provision and grace. We still get up and help others. We still sing songs of gratitude and praise. The seeds of our thanksgiving are watered by our tears, our trials and suffering – by patience effort and grinding work – by times of grief, pain and exile. But when thanksgiving and renewal come, then the harvest is that much more miraculous. The sheaves are cut, bound, and carried in, then our hearts are full. Happy Thanksgiving! Amen.