

Pentecost 3C + June 5, 2016

Finding Joy

by Pastor Nancy Raabe, STM, AiM

*“You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sackcloth,
and clothed me in joy.” (Psalm 30, v. 11)*

The psalms have been called “the prayer book of the Bible.” But they’re so much more than ancient verses!

They confront every human experience imaginable in a way that directly addresses us, in the midst of the very moment in which we are singing or praying them. But not only that: While God is speaking to us through these ancient songs, at the same time we are speaking to God using our individual voices. We are talking to God out of our own experience. God speaks to us, and at the same time we are sharing with God that which is deep in our hearts and longs to be expressed. The psalms give us that means for expression.

As written some 2,500 years ago, the psalms are human responses to God’s actions. Wherever God acts, his people respond with thanksgiving and praise. We see this thanksgiving clearly in the first verse of Psalm 30: “I will exalt you, O Lord, because you have lifted me up, and have not let my enemies triumph over me.”

But praising God is only one component of our lives of faith, for faith is the journey through lament to praise. Without the cross, there is no resurrection. So the

lament part of our journey—the sorrows, the trials, the suffering—is what makes our praise of God authentic. Without lament, our praise is hollow, empty, superficial.

I often think that this is why pastors of wealthy congregations have their work cut out for them. Many in their parishes have probably never known anything but comfort and convenience. They may not think much about God because they don't believe they need to. A friend of mine from seminary was pastor of a small congregation like this in Alexandria, VA, one of the richest cities in the country. They paid him well to come into the office just one day a week and lead the service on Sunday. When he suggested after awhile that he could also do some pastoral care, lead Bible studies, make hospital visits, or bring communion to the homebound, they said, "Why would we want that?"

This is the place at which we find ourselves in verse 6 of Psalm 30: "When I felt secure, I said, 'I shall never be disturbed. You, Lord, with your favor made me as strong as the mountains.'"

Perhaps this is where Atonement was 50 or 60 years ago. As I've heard it told, the pews were well populated, Sunday School and confirmation classes were full, and the budget was balanced. Things were going well. The congregation as a body may have felt no urgent need for God's intervention.

But things change. For the psalmist they changed abruptly. Look at verse 7: "Then you hid your face, and I was filled with fear." Forces seemingly beyond our control derail our sense of well being. For this church, the exodus of members began

some years back and then accelerated. Resources diminished to the point not long ago that it was hard to justify continuing. Maybe some of you still feel that way.

You may be living from a perspective of fear, just like the psalmist is in verse 7. But what happens then? Look at Verse 8. A hint of self-awareness returned as the psalmist remembers how he lifted one eyebrow toward toward God: “I cried to you, O Lord; I pleaded with my Lord, saying, ‘What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you or declare your faithfulness?’”

Think of events here over the last few years. Membership and resources were dwindling. The pall of death hung over this congregation. How easy it would have been to give in. But, like the psalmist, it occurred to you: What good is that? What purpose would the death of this congregation serve, when we are in the middle of a neighborhood that wants to build community; when our beautiful building is one block from a learning academy and two blocks from an ivy league college; when who knows what community group or exercise instructor might love to rent our space downstairs; and when we are the only ELCA church in this part of town?

“What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you?” Will the ashes of our history, the rubble of our former building, serve to praise God and testify to God’s faithfulness over the generations?

The turning point in the Psalm 30 comes in verse 10: “Hear me, O Lord! Have mercy upon me! Help me!” We know that God ALWAYS answers prayer, if we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. “Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you,” Jesus says in John 16:23.

And THEN comes the great rejoicing: “You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sackcloth, and clothed me with joy!”

Our readings today from 1 Kings and Luke 7 have to do with miraculous healings by Elijah and Jesus of the sons of two widows. But these accounts don’t tell us what the widows felt in response to their sons being restored to life. It is Psalm 30 that takes us through loss and lament into the midst of that exuberant experience.

Here at Atonement we aren’t quite yet leaping out of our sackcloths—but we will be. God has begun the work of restoring this church to life. I ask for your prayers in this process. From all of us, it will also take courage, conviction, and the willingness to think about being the church in a new way. There will be many new ideas, and all will take root. But together we will water and nurture the ones that do. We will be a living branch of Christ, the vine, and we WILL bear much fruit.

This is good news for God’s people.

Amen.