

Advent 3: Sunday, December 11, 2011

**Awesome Deeds We Do Not Expect: Transforming our Sorrow**

**Psalm 126, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, John 1:6-8, 19-28, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

Transformation is not something we can do for ourselves, because it is something we are incapable of doing to ourselves;

BUT transformation is something that occurs in us as we are open to being transformed.

**We are transformed when we open up space in our lives to the Spirit of God.**

Often, we hinder or limit our being transformed by closing down space for the Spirit in our lives.

Understandable, because we live in a world in which it seems almost impossible to create space for the presence of God's Spirit.

We see tears of sorrow in the aftermath of earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes,

In the midst of never-ending conflict and war,

In children, people starving because of famine or drought,

In the lives of the myriads who are caught up in the epidemic of human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and Underserved diseases that lack the economic support to combat them.

Maybe much of these things do not touch us – except as we encounter these stories in the news.

However, in our worlds too, we also struggle with sorrow  
– economic hardship, unreconciled relationships, struggling with health, family and marital issues  
– there is no end to tears – whether they are shed in public or in private.

In our Saturday morning Scripture engagement group, it was noted that **we often set ourselves up for sorrow when we want or expect God to do what we want, in the way we want - NOW**

For God to take care of all the difficulties of life **now**, rather than being like the worshipers of Psalm 126, who responded to the hardships of life by:

- choosing to believe,
- choosing to live in light of the reality of what God would do!

They exemplify creating space for God's Spirit.

“When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.  
Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
Our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among all peoples,  
The LORD has done great things for them.  
The LORD has done great things for us,  
And we are filled with joy.”

**When we read, the rest of Psalm 126 we realize that their present context is far from a place of being restored –**

They are praying for restoration – they long for the day when they will no longer shed tears and weep, but instead will be reaping songs of joy, songs of gladness.

So what are we to make of the vv 1-3?

In which they are declaring in **past tense**, a future reality they long for  
– they express what has not happened yet, as something that has already happened  
– in effect, choosing to live in the reality of what has not yet happened as if it has happened  
– instead of living in the reality of the sorrow that is going on all around them.

**So how can we identify with the worshipers who sang Psalm 126?**

Linda reminded me of our brother Julius Prucher, as one who understood and lived this kind of reality expressed in Psalm 126.

I only knew Julius in the days where he lived out what Psalm 126 declares, even in the midst of all his health issues

– “when the LORD restored us, we were like those who dreamed; our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”

But he had days of darkness, when he was hospitalized,  
- days in which he sensed God was far from him,  
- days in which he was sure God abandoned him  
- days of sorrow, days of tears, perhaps days in which he gave up praying “restore our fortunes LORD, like streams in the Negev (streams in the desert)”

He blamed God for not landing a job that would have moved him to Texas;

He blamed God for the dire health he was in; **BUT then he was transformed;**

Julius underwent a transformation in which he came to know that his life was in God’s hands, that he was being held by God, that God knew what he was doing and was caring for him. That if he had gone to Texas, he would not have had the care of a community as he had here when his health took a turn for the worse.

Such a transformation was not an act that Julius brought about in his life;

**Such a transformation was an act of God!**

Perhaps the question for each one of us – **to what extent are we open to being transformed by God’s Spirit?**

Last week, our Advent text, challenged us to allow a road for God, for the Spirit to come into our lives;

**Today, we are being asked – are we open to being transformed when the Spirit enters our lives?**

That “openness” is the only way to explain how we as resurrection people can actually live in a different reality,

To regard ourselves as restored people even in the midst of life's difficulties – actually living in light of our future reality of being made new, rather than in the brokenness of our present.

Do we live, not in denial of sorrow, **but allowing our sorrow to be transformed**, by living life as if the future of God's promise of all life being made new is indeed present?

Is God's future a present tense reality for us

– do we live in this reality as the worshipers in Psalm 126 did?

Being a missional people is to be a people who live in this way

– we are a sign that God is present in the world

– but we also provide a foretaste of life set free under God's reign

– living in the present, amidst hardships, as if the future reality is the present reality.

**In this way we are creative of the shalom of God through Jesus Christ.**

**It is not easy to express this kind of joy – our eyes are too full of the present.**

**This kind of joy needs to be cultivated in our lives.**

**That is can be cultivated is evident that there are so many who live life in ways that are contrary to the difficulties and hardships they face.**

Those within our community who spend time with the children of NA adults in Waukegan, often express that these children could respond to their life situations with despair, yet they, more often than not, respond with joy.

**The clue to living in this transformative way is found in our Isaiah and 1 Thessalonian passages.**

It is not up to us to find joy, to make joy; **but it is up to us to make a space, have a space in our lives that is open to the creation and cultivation of joy in our lives.**

Joy is fruit that the Spirit cultivates in us (cf. Gal 5:22 – the fruit of the Spirit)

The fruit of joy is not something we bring about in our life – the fruit of joy is an outcome of a seed being planted – it is an outcome of growth that the Spirit brings about in us.

A farmer cannot make crops grow, make crops produce fruit, but a farmer can prepare the soil, prepare the context for growth to occur.

How do we prepare the soil of our lives for the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of joy?

In times of struggle, do we make space for anxiety, despair, or even anger?

**OR do we make space for God?**

**For the work of God in us?**

As I noted, the clue to making space for God, making space for joy is in our Isaiah and Thessalonian texts.

The prophet speaks the text that Jesus declared of himself in Luke 4:18 – “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because he has anointed me. . . .”

Paul encourages the Thessalonian church, to “not put out the Spirit’s fire” or “not to quench the Spirit.”

**The clue to being transformed;**

The clue to living in the present in light of the future reality of what God is bringing about

The clue to preparing the soil of our lives

– **is to be open to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our lives.**

It was in Jesus being open to being anointed by the Holy Spirit that he was able to engage in a ministry:

- which was about proclaiming good news to the poor,
- binding up the brokenhearted,
- proclaiming freedom for captives,
- releasing prisoners from darkness,
- proclaiming the year of the LORD’s favor,
- to comfort all who mourn,
- to provide for those who grieve,
- to bestow upon them a different reality in the midst of the hardships of life – a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.”

The Spirit of God anointed Jesus to bring the future reality of God’s reign into the present

**The Spirit anoints us and enables us to do the same.**

It is in our being open to being anointed by the Spirit that we are enabled

- to rejoice always,
- to pray continually in spite of all the reasons to stop praying,
- to give thanks in all circumstances
- seeking to see the presence of God in the midst of life – when everything around us is trying to convince us that God is no where present.

In so doing, in the midst of the sorrow of life, we incarnate, we reveal as real a different reality

– **the reality of God’s future shalom in the present.**

And so as John makes clear to us,

We are God’s people who give witness to the light of God,

We give witness by participating in what God is bringing about, the inbreaking of a new reality.

We give witness, not just in word, but in actions – with one another, with our neighbors, with strangers, even with our enemies

We give this kind of witness, because joy is being cultivated in us, we are being transformed

– **because we have the courage to create space in us that is open to the Spirit’s anointing, outpouring into us.**

So do not put out the Spirit’s fire

– for that is what joins us to God,

That is what connects us to live in light of what God is doing in the world

– for God is faithful, God will do it!

In being filled, anointed, transformed by the Spirit of God – we live as ones, who are like Jesus, being agents who cultivate space for transformation happening in the lives of others with whom we share life in this world

- sharing good news with the poor,
- declaring freedom to the captives,
- giving sight to the blind,
- setting the oppressed free, and
- declaring the future reality of God taking root in the present.

Let us live in light of the reality of God's shalom.

Let us live as ones who dream, singing songs of joy

- bringing comfort and hope;
- bringing compassion and peace;
- bringing acceptance and love – in the midst of those who are sorrowing

**Let us reveal God in the way we live out our lives for those who are in desperate need to be set free.**