

Psalm 126
John 12.1-8
5th Sunday of Lent

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

Memory and Hope

I was at the drugstore two weeks ago looking for lotion. Jergens lotion. Jergens lotion that had no added scent. That's my preference in most everything other than food and flowers. There were no unscented varieties that day at my neighborhood Walgreens. But one scented bottled caught my eye: cherry almond—the original Jergens scent. So I looked around to see that no was watching and I unscrewed the lid and took a whiff. And in a milli-second I was back opening presents at my fifth birthday party. One of the gifts that year was my own bottle of Jergens lotion—wrapped by my mother in an empty Kleenex box to hide its shape. It was a very grown-up gift—to have one's own bottle of lotion. Or at least it felt like that to me at five.

Funny how that sense of smell can transport you immediately to another place and time. The smell of freshly cut lumber instantly takes me to the framed in second floor of the house where I grew up—a house my parents (with the unskilled help of their two daughters) remodeled over the course of multiple years.

That kind of involuntary memory—where all of a sudden you are remembering something that you weren't even thinking about before—is sometimes called Proustian Memory, after the French novelist Marcel Proust, who wrote a famous passage in which an unexpected smell from the past unleashes a flood of memories.

There's another kind of memory and that's what can be called voluntary memory—what we intentionally recall. Multiplication tables, names of people, the route from home to work—those are all things we consciously draw upon. Family stories are another good example of voluntary memory. One generation tells the next generation the story of how they immigrated to this country, how great Uncle Jethro disappeared during the Civil War or how Mama Isabella made her Christmas meatballs.

In an odd sort of way, those memories of the past have the potential to create a particular kind of future. A family takes entrepreneurial risks now because of the risks their family took to find a better life in a new country; several young men in the family drop out of college and stall out in odd jobs because of the misinterpreted reverence the family has for a missing soldier; generations of children become the hub of hospitality for their family and friends because of the stories of food and gatherings around the big dining room table.

The psalmist is doing a similar kind of remembering. Remembering the past:

When the Holy God restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,

“The Holy One has done great things for them.”

The Holy God has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. (vv1-3)

The psalmist remembers a time when God rescued the people and set their feet back on solid ground. Perhaps the writer is recalling their enslavement in Egypt and how God brought them out of the land of Pharaoh and into a land flowing with milk and honey. Or perhaps the writer is remembering how God brought them out of exile in Babylon and returned them to their home in Jerusalem.

Remembering a time when God brought deliverance shapes the possibility of a future where God will deliver them again. (Now let me just note that the phrase translated “restored the fortunes” is not really about restoring physical fortune as might be easy to hear in our consumer culture. The psalmist is not talking about having material wealth again as much as a reversal of God’s judgment¹ or an “historical change to a new state of affairs for all things.”²) The psalmist’s recollection of what God has done in the past forms a hope for the future—that the people are not left alone and helpless but are sheltered by the God who has provided for them in the past and will provide for them again in the future.

And so the psalmist, because of his trust in God’s provision, concludes the psalm with a cry to God:

Restore our fortunes, O Holy God,
like the watercourses in the Negev (those are stream beds in the desert that, while dry most of the year, can suddenly become raging torrents of water when the rainy season begins.)
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. (vv.4-6)

While a crisis is going on now, the future is not bleak. God has brought salvation for the people before and the psalmist implores God to be true to God’s character and bring salvation again.

I have heard some of you talk about parents, grandparents or other mentors who went through truly hard times and who were sustained by the provision of God. Even when everything seem stacked against them, they turned to God, clinging to God’s care in the past and trusting God to provide again for the future.

As we celebrate the history of our congregation this year we can look back in our history and find times when there were those who thought it was time to close the doors, sell the building and move out to the suburbs. And there were others who had seen God lead this particular band of God’s people in the past and believed that God would continue to do so in the future. And here we are—strengthened by the memory of faithful people who trusted God—and in that memory we find hope for a future with God, trusting that God is watering the seeds we are planting now for a future harvest of joy.

Now go back with me to where we started—to involuntary memory and the powerful recollection of smell. In the gospel reading, Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead and now the religious leaders are planning to put Jesus to death.

¹ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “Psalms” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IV, Nashville: Abingdon, p1195.

² H. J. Kraus, quoted in McCann, p1196.

Jesus is back in the home of Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha. And the house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume Mary uses to anoint Jesus. It may be the very perfume purchased to anoint the body of Lazarus. Aromatic oils were used to anoint bodies at the time of death and also used to anoint a living person as a prophet or a king. Now Mary uses the oil to anoint a living person for death. Or perhaps she anoints him as king. Or perhaps the perfume calls forth both.

But what we know, as the readers, is that the perfume provides a memory for the future. We smell that perfume and know the scent intended for death is the scent of God overcoming death. And we will smell that fragrance again in the early hours of Easter morning when the women go to anoint Jesus' dead body and instead find the living Christ. The fragrance intended for anointing is an anointing of mercy and grace the likes of which we can only imagine. Even as God has been merciful and gracious in the past there is an extravagance of God's mercy and grace that we have yet to know. We remember with "joyful hope [Christ's] resurrection and the promise of the renewal of all things."³

In worship together, we remember we come from the arms of a Creator who created the world in love and in whose love "we live and move and having our being."⁴ And this love is so great that, ultimately, "the Creator leaves no problem abandoned and no evil unredeemed."⁵

That is the underlying memory and hope that Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about in what has become the hymn "By Gracious Powers"—and we will sing that hymn after the sermon.

It is the memory and hope we live out of and into in this season of Lent as we prepare for the mystery of Easter. As God has been with our ancestors and with us in the past, God will continue to be with us and the generations to come in the future. We live in the memory and the hope that ultimately, despite gloomy times and all that threatens to undo us and the world, God will be with us, leaving no problem abandoned and no evil unredeemed.

³ McCann, p 1196.

⁴ Acts 17.28.

⁵ John Thornburg, <http://www.congregationalsinging.com/essays/essay01.htm>