

“When the Lord Changed Zion’s Circumstances for the Better”

Psalm 126 (Common English Version)

When the Lord changed Zion’s circumstances for the better, it was like we had been dreaming.

Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; our tongues were filled with joyful shouts.

It was even said, at that time, among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them!”

Yes, the Lord has done great things for us, and we are overjoyed.

Lord, change our circumstances for the better, like dry streams in the desert waste!

Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts.

Let those who go out, crying and carrying their seed, come home with joyful shouts, carrying bales of grain!

The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God!

Someone asked me this past week if I was ready for this Sunday, if I was nervous or excited about our return to the building for in person Sunday morning worship. I quickly replied yes to feeling all the above along with also feeling a sense of fear and uncertainty, wonder and worry, with an overall feeling of frustration because I still don’t have all the answers nor do I have a roadmap

which will guide us into this new reality which is being titled as post-pandemic church life even though we aren't completely finished with the pandemic yet.

I'm not sure that was the answer this person was looking for when she asked this question. She probably wanted the simple "yes, I can't wait or maybe even "I don't know" as the preferred answer to her question rather than the long, winding, up and down roller coaster of emotions and feelings I laid at her feet.

In that moment, as the question was being asked, I decided to give my authentic answer because in reality, there is nothing simple, nothing cut and dry about this moment in the life of Midway Christian Church because in the mix of those who are gathered for worship, I know that there are a few of us who have been here since the beginning of the pandemic, Sunday after Sunday, figuring out new technology, missing the faces in the pews while leading worship in this weird empty silence while for some of us, this is the first time since November that we have been in this sanctuary for in person worship, if we could call our experience that, because between the temperature checks, the plastic gloves, and a sense that even though we were sitting in the pews, we knew it wasn't the same.

I also know that for a few of us, we were not ready to come back to such a large in person gathering so we stayed at home and are watching the service on

our devices like we have done for the last year while for others of us, this is the first time since March 8th, 2020 that we have been in this sanctuary at all and looking around, there have been so many changes to this sacred space that it does not look like what we remembered. And it is not just the sanctuary which has changed. The very face of our community of faith has changed as well.

Over the last year, we have lost loved ones through death. And it still hurts our hearts that we were not able to say good-bye to them as a community of faith in our usual way of celebrations of life and gathered meals. The other noticeable change for our community of faith is that we have gotten so used to seeing everyone wearing a mask that we have forgotten what each other looks like without the mask and it is hard for us to recognize our friends, our neighbors because all we see when we meet them is from here up.

So much has changed for our community of faith over this past year and it doesn't stop with just the examples which I named because in the mix for those gathered for worship at this moment is our biggest change yet to come. For all of us, this is the first time ever as a community of faith that we are entering into another way of being, a way of living out our Mission of WELCOME as a both/and church with both a physical building, a physical presence in the community of Midway, KY AND a virtual community which connects us to

others across our state, our nation, even our world, expanding our community of faith to include people we may never meet in person but who are active, who will be active within the life of our congregation.

You see, there is nothing simple about this moment in the life of Midway Christian Church....yet, for a time such as this, all of us, as those connected to the community of faith, known as Midway Christian Church, both physical presence and virtual community, all of us are being called to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

The whole experience has been and continues to be surreal. It really does feel like we are waking up from a dream, wondering if we just imagined all of last year, just like our text describes.

“When the Lord changed Zion’s circumstances for the better, it was like we had been dreaming. Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; our tongues were filled with joyful shouts.” This hits home for us. This captures how we are feeling at this moment. Yet the way the prophet Ezra describes the same moment also captures our emotions, our feelings about this moment as well: “[Those] who had seen the first house, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this house, although many others shouted loudly with joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping”.

Both are right. Both capture the exciting, the challenging, the life giving, the up and down emotional roller coaster we are experiencing in this moment as a community of faith.

We can so relate to the words of our text because like for us, they describe what the Israelites must have felt when they returned from exile. They had returned home but it was not like what they remembered from before. Everything had changed. The Temple no longer existed. Many of their friends and family did not return from exile either because they decided to stay or because they had died. When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from exile, they were returning to something different, something new and they had to figure out their place in this new reality.

The beauty of our text is that it forces the Israelites to discern, to name the fears, the worries which surround the question of how they will live in this in-between time without their “known” place. The psalmist even wonders "how can people dream and laugh and give a loud cry of rejoicing without their known place, without the community of faith resembling what they once knew without everything going back to way things were before the time of exile, before they were separated from the house of the Lord?"

But the psalmist doesn't stay in this place of worry, of fear, of longing for what they remembered as "church" for long

Because in just the next few verses, the psalmist answers his own question by remembering how God has acted in the past, by remembering how God has promised to do so again, by remembering how God has transformed the people's place before, taking them from the known into the unknown, taking them from slavery to the promise land, taking them from Exile and bringing them home once more. The words of "Psalm 126 remind us that our place, as people of faith, if it is connected to God is not bound by physical space. Rather our place becomes transformed into a vision, into a dream of God's Shalom becoming a reality here on Earth for all of God's people." And if we "live into that dream, the dream moves closer to becoming reality"

In other words, Psalm 126 reminds us that as people of faith, as the people of God, as ones who are called to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world in a time when there are more questions than answers, the words, the promise of Psalm 126, reminds us that we are people of memory and hope. We are people of joy remembered and joy anticipated. And because of that, we are called into a way of being, a way of understanding our place, that "is not a wishing for a better tomorrow. Nor is it a nostalgic longing for the return of the

good old days." RATHER, this way of being is always grounded in the promise of God, trusting God to act again, trusting that God will bring about healing and wholeness for all of God's people. For us as people of God, this way of being, this way of understanding place calls us to not think in physical terms but rather in faith terms. It is an invitation for us to "crack open the as of yet unseen future so that we as God's people will know how to proceed, how to trust, how to come together in community even when everything else remains uncertain".

So here is the good news for us as we enter into this new way of being as Midway Christian Church, as we live out our Mission of WELCOME as a both/and church with both a physical building, a physical presence in the community of Midway, KY AND a virtual community which connects us to others across our state, our nation, even our world, expanding our community of faith to include people we may never meet in person but who are active within the life of our congregation, today as we enter into this new way of being a movement for wholeness in fragmented world, we will continue to love God and one another. We will continue to know that we are grounded in the presence of God. We will continue to hold to the promise that no matter what, God is in the process, leading us, guiding us, calling us to become the people God created and calls to be.

Because as people of memory and hope, we know that God has acted in the past, that God is acting in the present, and God will continue to act forevermore to bring about the vision of God's Shalom made reality here on Earth, just like God promised God would since the very beginning. So in the meantime, as we live into this new way of being a both/and community of faith, may we wake from this dream, inspired, renewed, restored, and ready to do our part to bring about God's Kingdom here on Earth just as it is in heaven. May it be so. Amen.