

Psalm 126 and National Lament: Black Lives Matter  
Preached by Kyle Matthew Oliver at St. Paul's Parish  
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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; **Psalm 126**; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Our psalm today is the perfect prayer for the season of Advent. It's a song of in-betweenness, then as now. Of hope, yes, perhaps, but not a cheap hope. Maybe a hope in the midst of lament. Let's hear the translation from our prayer book:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, \*  
then were we like those who dream.  
Then was our mouth filled with laughter, \*  
and our tongue with shouts of joy.  
Then they said among the nations, \*  
"The LORD has done great things for them."  
The LORD has done great things for us, \*  
and we are glad indeed.  
Restore our fortunes, O LORD, \*  
like the watercourses of the Negev.  
Those who sowed with tears \*  
will reap with songs of joy.  
Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, \*  
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves. (Psalm 126, BCP)

Of course, the poetry of the original Hebrew and this artful translation is much of the initial appeal here. Both the music and the message of those final verses are simply stunning. When the Lord restores the fortune of Zion, it is a bountiful harvest for those who have been in waiting.

It's not hard to imagine this psalm being a favorite of the young Jewish man who went on to preach over and over about the upside-down kingdom of God. There is an unmistakable pattern to Jesus's teaching, to Jesus's promises, to Jesus's prophetic actions, to Jesus's presence with us still by the power of the Spirit. The message is that God cares about the suffering of God's people, especially the most vulnerable. And God will deliver them. God longs to grant release, recovery, redemption, restoration.

It's all those "re"s that make this psalm powerful, and hard. In the opening verses, the people *remember* a time of great promise:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, \*  
then were we like those who dream.  
Then was our mouth filled with laughter, \*  
and our tongue with shouts of joy.  
Then they said among the nations, \*  
"The LORD has done great things for them."

The LORD has done great things for us, \*  
and we are glad indeed.

But here's where it all comes crashing down; here's where we realize where we are and what's at stake. Here the Psalmist speaks to God in the imperative voice: the command form, you may have heard it called in language classes. But here it is a plea:

*Restore* our fortunes, O LORD, \*  
like the watercourses of the Negev.

That one shift in perspective changes everything. Now we realize we're in the midst of what one scholar calls a National Lament: O Lord, we remember the bounty, the optimism, the reputation in the sight of our neighbors. They are lost to us. Restore our fortunes. Burst forth in the desert like a river when the rains came.

Those of you who have studied the narrative arch of the Hebrew Scriptures, perhaps in Pilgrims class, perhaps while studying *The Story* last year, will recognize here one of the "troughs" in the cyclical ups and downs of the life of the people of God.

God reaches out. The people respond in faith. The people get complacent. Complacency turns to disobedience. Disobedience turns to hostility at the bearers of God's message of repentance. Finally, God chooses a messenger that the people cannot ignore. The people repent. God forgives. And the cycle begins again.

Of course, it wasn't only so for the Jews of the Ancient Near East. Advent 2014 has coincided with the deepening of our own sort of national lament.

We're not pleading for a bountiful harvest, or the restoration of our homeland, not literally. Our songs today are punctuated with different refrains: Hands up, don't shoot. I can't breathe. Black lives matter.

The killing of African Americans Mike Brown and Eric Garner, and the subsequent acquittals in recent weeks of the white officers who took their lives, have brought an urgency to the conversations about the racial injustices that still plague our nation, and still grieve the heart of God.

On Thursday, black staffers on Capitol Hill staged a walk-out in solidarity with those who are suffering. Senate Chaplain Dr. Barry Black led the prayer: "Forgive us when we have failed to lift our voices for those who could not speak or breathe themselves."

Among those who have helped bring these conversations home for me is our parishioner Remington Gregg, who shared these reflections a week or so ago on Facebook and gave me permission to share them here:

This is not a question of pro- versus anti-law enforcement. Nor is it a question of absolving those who died. One of the reasons why so many people are enraged is because there seems to be a complete lack of comprehension by some to admit that there is even a problem. That there is suspicion among some—I stress some—members of society when they see a black man ... People cross the street. Security guards follow us whilst shopping in Brooks Brothers. And executives disregard our resume because a name sounds too 'urban.' Many just want an honest conversation about how, in 2014, the United States still propagates individuals who see pillaging in Seattle and call it 'shenanigans,' but see the same thing in Ferguson and call folks 'savages.'

Somewhere in the cycle of sin and repentance comes the point where the people have that honest conversation. I don't think we're there yet, but we're making progress. This psalm is an excellent spiritual song to sing on our way together. And this season, with its call to keep awake, is the perfect time to continue making steps forward as a nation.

For those of us who don't have first-person experience of violent discrimination, waking up means tuning in to the voices crying out. Osheta Moore of the Shalom in the City blog recently wrote, "I wonder if the love that is spun in the words, "I'm listening and I'm sorry" can change the very fabric of this world? I think so. I think this is who our God is ..." She goes on to name the various ways she is listening, including this one:

I'm listening to Christians who don't want to acknowledge racism. I'm sorry it's unsettling to look this darkness in the face, but Jesus looked darkness in the face for you. In his very body he suffered pain and abuse to express your great value to God. In light of this, can you look darkness in the face by listening to me and millions of black women when we cry out unsettled by the devaluation of the bodies of our black boys, men, fathers, and brothers? Will you ask God what you should do with such a precious gift?

No matter what our race or color, let's make sure we're not squandering God's gift of life. Let's make sure we're not avoiding uncomfortable conversations or assenting to the status quo with silence.

Of course all lives matter, as some have started shouting in misguided reaction to our growing cultural refrain. That's not the point for the time being, in the wake of so clear a message that our systems of law and justice continue to be broken for some. At this time, in this season, black Americans feel understandably exhausted and betrayed. It is the responsibility of all Americans and especially all Christians to claim for themselves the message that black lives matter, and to stay awake for opportunities to make that proclamation more than just a slogan or a hashtag. But slogans and hashtags are a start.

In this nation, in this city, in this neighborhood, it should be impossible to hear "then were we like those who dream" without remembering or at least being reminded about a time when people of goodwill throughout our nation were inspired by one man's dream, claimed it for themselves, and responded with integrity and courageous action.

It will take no less commitment from all people of goodwill today to tackle a problem that too many still believe has already been dealt with. May we remember that our walk with God and neighbor will always be of a more cyclical character, our progress always hard-won and fragile.

And may Advent 2014 continue to be a time when we keep awake in hopeful expectation for the time when we can all proclaim—not only with our lips but in our lives—that black lives matter. Restore our fortunes, O Lord. Your people need you.