

Hope Restored
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Psalm 126, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11



“Mind the gap.” Those words are painted on the floor of some subway stations in London when there is an especially large gap between the platform and the subway train. “Mind the gap” is also a useful expression for these days of Advent, and really for anytime when we are caught between times. Advent calls us to reflect on the place we are between the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem and his promised second coming. Some of us are caught between the expectations that we have a happy Christmas season and our own feelings of grief, ill health, dis-ease, or depression.

In some ways, painting the phrase, “mind the gap,” on the subway platform and announcing it occasionally over the loud speakers is silly. While something could drop down the gap, a penny, a small bag, there is not much of a person that could get down into the gap – it is usually only inches wide, not feet wide by any stretch. Most of the people who use the subway will likely plant their feet firmly on the subway car or on the platform and not have any mishap. Occasionally, someone must get stuck in the gap, though, pulled off kilter and threatened with bodily harm unless the foot comes free before the train leaves. And isn’t that how some of us feel occasionally during this season that our society proclaims is so joyful? We are stuck in the gap, pulled off kilter, left to feel outside of it all, definitely not in the right place at the right time. Of course, others of us are in the flow this season, breezing right over the gap and enjoying the festive time of year. But still, from time to time we feel caught in between, in the gap.

So what does our Scripture have to say to those of us who feel caught in that gap-place? There are disparities that the psalmist is dealing with in the Psalm we read this morning. Listen to it again, this time from the *Tanakh* – the Jewish Biblical Society translation:

Psalm 126:1 A song of ascents.

When the LORD restores the fortunes of Zion -- we see it as in a dream -- our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues, with songs of joy. Then shall they say among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them!"

The LORD will do great things for us and we shall rejoice. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like watercourses in the Negeb. They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy. Though he goes along weeping, carrying the seed-bag, he shall come back with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves.

The Psalmist remembered back to a time when the Lord brought the nation of Israel back from exile, and, because God dealt kindly with the nation in the past, the psalmist looks forward to a time when the Lord will again do such great things that there will be rejoicing – dancing in the streets, songs of joy, a bountiful harvest. It will be such a joyous times that those from all nations will proclaim that Israel's God has done great things for them.

When have we been so joyful that the occasion seemed like a dream? Certainly, there have been joyful times in each of our lives—our marriage or the birth of a first child can be a time that has a dreamlike quality. What might make us sing for joy as we come into church? Our psalm is a psalm of ascent, meant to be sung on the way up to the temple. When have we come to church singing and praising God as we arrive? Can you remember a time of joyful singing, a time of dreamlike joy? Perhaps for some of you as a community it was the day you first worshipped in this sanctuary. Do you remember that day? I'll bet there was a special service, a feeling of accomplishment for all the work you had done, and thanksgiving to God for God's support and presence throughout the project. Looking back on the blessings of our lives is often easier than seeing them in the moment, isn't it? We are caught in the moment in living our daily lives and we sometimes forget to look up and see where God might be acting. Sometimes we just feel we are in the gap time between the blessings of the past and the unknown future.

The psalmist seems to be writing from a time of drought, a time when water is not flowing freely in the Negev desert, indeed from a time when farmers must plant seeds with trepidation because they do not know if there will be rain and, consequently, they do not know if there will be a harvest. We can look around the sanctuary and say that we too are living in a time of drought – not enough people to fill the pews, not enough money to do all that we want to do inadequate numbers of volunteers to do the work of the church. We don't know if there will be a flood of new people or a sign of God bringing growth to our congregation.

Planting seeds is always an act of faith, an act of hope. If we were farmers trying to eke out a living in a near desert, planting seeds would be a courageous act of hope. And then, if we tried to write our feelings down, something like this psalm might have been crafted. The Psalmist looks back, looks around to see where he is now and looks ahead with assurance. In the now the planters are going out in tears to sow their seeds, but the psalmist trusts that they will return rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves. And indeed, perhaps we are farmers called to plant seeds of faith in the fields around us, no matter how dry they may seem to us. Perhaps we are called to plant and trust that God will give the growth.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy" (John 16:20).

"The task of sowing in tears is ours today, for we stand between the great acts of salvation in the past and the desired act of deliverance in the future. Thus, we sow in tears. Why? Because it takes so much work to sow, and we don't see the fruit of our work right away. We labor in relationships; to establish a career; to gain knowledge; to learn skills, [to keep the church going, to offer the Good News of Jesus Christ to those we meet.] It is so difficult and takes so long. If we didn't love what we did we would have abandoned the effort long ago. Perhaps we have already abandoned many efforts. But we must sow in tears. Yet the promise is that just as restored fortunes came once, that they will come again. So we labor in hope, and we can almost

anticipate the laughter that will yet fill the room and our hearts.”¹ Another gap – the space between blessed hope and tears.

But sometimes, as Kathleen Norris wrote, “It is hard to believe what we hear, that we are a blessed people, standing in God’s favor. Hard to believe that God will bring righteousness to our world as mysteriously and yet naturally as a seed sprouts and grows out of the earth. We know it is foolish to put stock in such promises, when we have devastated God’s creation with war and willful misuse. For centuries we have turned good topsoil into barren dust. We have poisoned the earth and its waters so badly that what grows there is often damaged and unfit to eat. Promises, promises. Pie in the sky.”

“To believe in a promise requires a level of trust that is increasingly hard to come by. These days, the very words that would engender and foster our trust have been stripped of meaning. High-sounding mission statements do not prevent corporate bosses from routinely betraying their employees, retirees and stockholders. The powerful words of Scripture have not prevented clergy [and coaches] from abusing the trust of parishioners and their children. And ordinary words in the mouths of politicians have become weapons against trust itself, betraying anyone who hasn’t amassed enough wealth and power to insure against betrayal. A nuclear accident becomes "an event." A fatally misguided foreign policy becomes a "mission accomplished," which, years later, is still claiming the lives of Iraqi civilians and American soldiers every day.”²

It becomes harder and harder to listen to the promises of Scripture. The marketers from one side or another have made it sound as though we have to believe in their version of the events of Scripture in order to truly be called believers. We hear the words “*Love Came Down at Christmas*” much like we hear the words “Eat Wheaties.” We see the endless wranglings in congress between the Conservatives and the Liberals,

¹ Dr. Bill Long, “Lent V--March 25, 2007, Psalm 126,” available online at <<http://www.drbilllong.com/Lectinary/Ps126II.html>>, accessed on 7 December 2011.

² Kathleen Norris, “Standing on Promises,” *The Christian Century*, (November 29, 2005, p. 21.)

between the Born Again Christians and the Mainline Christians, between the Michigan mitten people and the Wisconsin mitten people, and we can hardly bear to listen. No wonder our faith can seem to many like yet another marketing ploy. We hear so many. That is why silence and listening both are needed to dampen the noisiness of our daily lives. In the silence we can acknowledge the gaps between the present, the past and the future.

But “if we will trouble to listen, to bend an ear to this Sunday’s readings, we hear from a prophet, a psalmist...that no matter what befalls us, God is faithful, and God’s promises are true. The psalmist insisted that God would see to it that we who are lost would find our way home, and we who sow in tears would reap with joy. The prophet offers beatitude, promising the consolation of gladness to those who mourn. Both prophet and poet presume our intimate knowledge of pain and loss, but they assert that far better things await us, joys we can scarcely imagine. When we stop to listen to the psalmist, or to the words of an ancient prophet and let their words sink in; when we stop to ponder why we are weeping and when was the last time we felt a deep suffusion of joy overcome us; when we do any of those things we might begin to connect with the promise held in their words. We might realize afresh that God acts in our world, just as God acted in the psalmist’s world and just as God acted in the Palestine of Mary and Joseph’s time.

As we contemplate the coming celebration of Jesus’ birth, we are reminded that while we may have tears now, the tears shall give way to the hope of God’s promises, maybe not today or tomorrow, but in the fullness of time. As we are mindful of the gap between our expectations and our present reality we are also reminded this time of year that God’s people can count on God’s restoration. Our hope shall be restored. God’s people can count on being the people of the Promise. God’s people can count on the life-giving rains of grace and peace flowing down upon us. The rain shall come, even though we do not yet know when they will arrive. We, God’s people, can count on the miracle of God’s incarnation among us. God is with us! Immanuel. Amen.