

## Lenten Laughter

Michael Jenkins

Text: Psalm 126

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Monday of this past week I was sitting in a dentist's chair staring up into the exceptionally bright light that allowed, in turn, a technician, a hygienist, and finally a dentist to peer down into my oral cavity trying to figure out the origin of a pain I was having in my jaw. I'm not sure but I think that a plumber also came by and had a look in my mouth too while he was in the building working on their spit sink. Lying there, patiently, allowing various members of the staff to stick incredibly sharp objects into my mouth, I was asked questions like, "SO HOW WAS YOUR WEEKEND?" and "WHAT DID YOU SAY YOU DO FOR A LIVING?" and so forth, each of which received a response that (even to my ears) sounded something like "Ouuuuughgharghghh". It was at this time that something struck me.

If I told you about my strict discipline of dental care which involved years (sometimes decades) between visits to a dentist and historically has resulted in almost no damage to my teeth – except for a couple of root canals – you might laugh, despite the fact that this experience has been somewhat painful for me. And, if I compounded this story by telling you that when my dentist was up to his elbows in a molar with the sort of pneumatic drill they use on concrete pavement he paused to ask me if I was in much pain, and I said, "After chairing a theological faculty for fifteen years a root canal is a piece of cake," you might be tempted to laugh – although I know you are far too sensitive to do so.

We all know that relatively minor painful events elicit both winces and smirks: for example, many of us have experienced the gallows laughter of our friends when they learn we just returned from a cruise to Cancun with an embarrassingly bad case of an intestinal ailment that has kept us housebound longer than we were on vacation.

Almost anything painful can become funny. It has been said that the magic ingredient is time. But I think it is more complicated than that, especially when it comes to Tragedy with a capital "T." I think what is needed for a really painful event to become something other than painful, something perhaps even edifying and uplifting has to do with a transformation of our perspective. Time alone doesn't heal, but given time, God can. And this is where the Psalms have so much to teach us.

The Psalms describe the inner history of the external history of the people of Israel. Here are the emotional and spiritual expressions of a people who remember ancient promises made, deferred, apparently forgotten, and eventually kept; slavery and bondage, as well as deliverance and freedom; defeat and destruction of their homeland by a foreign power and exile far from their ruined country, and ultimately a return from exile, followed by another oppression. Here is recorded the rich, full inner life of a people trying to make sense of their tragedies and travails in the presence of the living God, the God whom they believe to be intimately involved in their history. Psalm 126 and other Psalms like it hold the secret to how tragedy is transformed to laughter, even though when biblical scholars describe this type of religious poetry it is given a fairly bland category: "The Psalms of Ascent," Psalms, that is, sung in official royal and religious processions.

But when we read examples of these Psalms their value comes shining through. Here we have the whole

People of Israel talking to itself, reminding itself where it came from and where it now is and who it was that delivered them from peril and pain. Let's listen to a few of Psalm 126's neighboring Psalms:

Psalm 124: "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side – let Israel now say – if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive."

Psalm 129: "Often have they attacked me from my youth – let Israel now say – often have they attacked me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me."

Psalm 132: "O Lord, remember in David's favor all the hardships he endured; how he swore to the Lord and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob, 'I will not enter my house or get into my bed.... until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob.'"

The Psalms as a collection, and these Psalms in particular, tell the story of the wise soul of a nation which has seen all of life's threads, woolen and silk, tangled and straight, mottled, dull, terrible and bright, woven together into a breathtaking tapestry. The perspective the Psalms bring is the perspective of wholeness. These Psalms have made their peace with God. After wrath and lamentation, terror and forsakenness, these Psalms have come out in a new place, bearing the scars of great suffering, but delivered and transformed. Let me say that again: The Psalms have made their peace with God.

The Psalmist who cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" is the very same Psalmist who finally says, "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters. In the midst of the congregation I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him!" (Psalm 22)

Condensed into a few lines of poetry we have lessons that took centuries of pain to learn. "Those who went out weeping... shall come home with shouts of joy."

May I tell you a very personal story?

Some years ago, at the request of a publisher, I wrote a series of letters to my adult children which became a book "Called to be Human." In one of those letters I explained to my daughter, Jessica, that after years of arguing with God about how God could improve the world, I had finally made my peace with God, and with the universe God created. The distance between those arguments and that peace stretched over decades in my life.

It had all started, I explained to Jessica, when my younger brother, Keith died. Jessica never knew Keith because he died at the age of twelve in the same year she was born, 1982. Keith and I both grew up as "only children" in that he was born the year before I went off to college. I was earning degrees and a career and starting a family while he grew up.

Keith himself had been born with a congenital heart defect. His whole life was a succession of harrowing emergency trips from my parents' home near Lufkin to the Heart Institute of Houston.

I learned of Keith's death, ironically, just as I walked in the door after worship one Sunday when I served a church in the Dallas suburbs. I had been detained at the church for a meeting after worship. I received a message from an elder that I needed to get home as quickly as possible. Debbie greeted me

at the door of our house with a hug and the words, “Your mother just called. Keith died a few minutes ago.” Ironically, I had preached a sermon that very morning on Isaiah 6. It was titled, “The Shaking of the Foundations.” Needless to say, my foundations were shaken.

I grieved for months thereafter. I wept through my words. I preached the same angry, sorrow-laced sermon a dozen different ways: “How could we claim that God is good if God created a world like this, a world in which innocent children suffer all their lives and die young?”

Grief is the most powerful constellation of feelings in the world, and grief drove me for months, maybe years. I recognized that grief is the price tag that life places on love. In my head I understood that someday this is one tab nobody can pick up for you. But, in my heart, I could not accept any theological calculus that lets God off the hook.

The Psalms can compress centuries of experience into a few lines of poetry. But I am not a poet, and I cannot possibly trace the struggles my soul went through over the course of those decades trying to come to terms with God and God’s creation. What I am about to say wasn’t something I came to quickly or easily or lightly. And it wasn’t something I learned in a book about “the problem of evil and suffering,” though I read everything I could get my hands on.

My learning exercise was a lot more like the one Aeschylus describes in his story of Agamemnon than any intellectual exercise I went through in philosophical theology. You may remember those words from Greek drama: “God’s law is that he who learns must suffer. And even as we sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, even against our will, wisdom comes to us by the awful grace of God.”

Eventually I came to realize that freedom is essential to this universe which God made; the phenomenal beauty and wonder of creation requires freedom, dangerous freedom, crazy, random, sometimes seemingly chaotic freedom. The safety and security I wanted so badly would make for a monochromatic and mediocre world. Only a world in which it is possible for my twelve year old brother to die can offer the joy that lit up my brother’s face when he and I visited the Caddo Indian Mounds in our native East Texas and the belly laughter my little brother erupted with when playing with our infant son, his little nephew.

As I said to Jessica in my letter to her, there’s a theological dimension to all of this. If God can love this creation, with all this creation has cost God, then I suppose we can love creation too.

God loves creation, every bit of it, because God is love. And creation is that which God created in love to be loved. For all its terrors, horrors, and cesspits, creation still takes our breath away. I’ll bet it takes God’s breath away too.

And, so, the Psalmist, speaking for a people scarred by a long history of disappointment and deliverance and pursued by a whole host of enemies, and slave masters, and captors, while not forgetting the lamentations, learns also to laugh again. The Psalmist refuses to abandon a single particle of the lamentations his people have known, but on the other side of all these laments, he finds joy waiting in God’s shalom, God’s wholeness and peace, which passes all our understandings.

The Psalmist staggers like a sleepwalker in a dream but awakens laughing. And across the centuries, he speaks those words that have encouraged generation after generation: “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy; those who go out weeping bearing the seed for sowing, come home with shouts of joy.”

May it be so.

Charge before benediction:

“Sometimes I go about pitying myself, when all the while I am being carried by great winds across the sky.” Ojibwa saying.