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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

October 24, 2021

Year B, Proper 24, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Jeremiah 31:7-9](#)

[Psalm 126](#)

[Hebrews 7:23-28](#)

[Mark 10:46-52](#)

Restore our fortunes, O Lord; like the watercourses of the Negev.

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The Negev is a desert in Israel, and it doesn't rain much there. The watercourses of the Negev desert are dry stream beds. They sit dry and empty for most of the year. And when it does rain in the Negev, those dry stream beds swell with water. They can even create flash floods. From dryness to overflowing, in the blink of an eye. Certainly a fitting image for our psalm to give us today.

Rain in the midst of drought. Badly-needed moisture from heaven, coming maybe harder and faster than we might prefer. But also the occasion for us to return inside at 10:00, something we would have done soon in any case, but the weather forcing our hand. So today is a kind of homecoming day. It's a milestone that brings hope that we are maybe on the downward swing of the pandemic, that there are new beginnings ahead of us. So the rain brings blessings, brings joy, brings healing.

And it's healing that's still mixed with grief and challenges, isn't it? The rain feels so good, and it gives us hope that maybe we might even be getting through a whole fire season this year without evacuations in our area. Remember when that

wouldn't have seemed unusual? And of course we know it's just a tiny amount of what we need to end the drought, and we know that this drought is just one piece of the ongoing reality of climate change. But still it's water in the desert.

The same with the pandemic. So much is better, thank God. We have robust vaccines that are keeping people who would have died off ventilators, keeping people who would have been hospitalized in their homes, keeping people who would have had a mild illness from noticing symptoms altogether, and keeping people who would have been asymptomatic carriers from getting infected in the first place. So many of us can do so much more than we could six months or a year ago, reconnecting with loved ones, going places and doing things. We're relaunching many of our church activities. It is so much better. And yet so much has been lost. So many people have been lost, more than 700,000 in this country alone, a whole Washington, D.C.'s worth of people, and over 5 million worldwide. And we still live with precautions, unvaccinated children, people with immune difficulties that leave them unprotected, people left behind economically, and a long road ahead before we discover what "normal" means again. So it's complicated.

In today's gospel reading Jesus restores the vision of a man named Bartimaeus who's lost his sight. He longs for it back, he asks Jesus for it, and he's healed, and follows Jesus on the way. It's a wonderful story. But today the reading that feels more provocative to me is our reading from the First Testament, from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is prophesying at a time when the Babylonians are about to sack Jerusalem, destroy the Temple and deport the people. And he's pointing forward to a time when nevertheless God will bring the people home. And in Jeremiah's prophecy he talks about people who are blind and people with physical disabilities among those who are coming home. Not about healing those

disabilities but about people with their physical impairments as being fully embraced as members of the community that's being restored.

Jeremiah also says that God's people will come back with weeping. There's joy mixed with tears. And in fact that particular prophecy will later come true. One of the great things about the Prayer Book and its way of immersing us in scripture is that if you read the readings for each day in the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer you sometimes find unexpected connections. This past Friday one of the Morning Prayer readings was from the book of Ezra which actually tells the story of what happens when God's people do come back from Babylon, and they start rebuilding the temple. When the foundation stone is laid, the people shout with joy. And at the same time among them are a few who are old enough to remember the first temple that had been destroyed, and they begin to weep for what's been lost. It says, "The people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping." Joy mixed with tears. The new temple doesn't bring back the old one. What's lost is truly lost and the grief is real and it mingles with the joy and the healing. That's what healing is. It's not about erasing our losses, but about knitting them into a broader pattern, one where the pain and sorrow is still there, and yet is wrapped up into beauty and wholeness.

I have a dear friend and fellow priest who serves a parish in the East Bay; her name is Liz. Some of you met her three years ago when she served as preacher for our Celebration of New Ministry when I became rector here. Liz recently published a book, a memoir; a memoir about grief. She tells the story of two tragedies. One came when her mother, who struggled with alcoholism throughout her life, committed suicide. The second came a year later when Liz's newborn baby Fritz died suddenly at six weeks old. In her book Liz maps the territory of grief: crushing pain, depression, absurdity, unexpected moments of grace, the pain of well-intentioned people saying devastatingly inappropriate things, the stark

realities of cremation and ashes, the practice of parenting one sibling when another has died. It is a beautiful book, one that's at the same time hard to read and hard to put down; hard to read, because it is honest and unflinching about sharing the experience of heart-crushing loss, and hard to put down, because it is written with such love. It's a book that includes a lot of healing; not shallow healing that makes everything better, but costly healing that recognizes what has been lost. Joy mixed with tears; tears mixed with joy.

When Jesus came to his disciples, raised into new life, one of the ways they recognized him was his wounds. In the gospels of Luke and John it says Jesus showed them his hands and his feet, his wounded side. The very joy of Easter still carries the scars of Good Friday with it, the trauma and violence of the cross inscribed forever into the glorious body of the risen Lord who sits at the right hand of God. It's a paradox and it can be hard for us to take in. We might prefer happy endings that shove the evidence of suffering away for good. But real healing is stronger than that. Joy that can't endure the reality of grief isn't real joy.

Friends, we have seen some losses. In our individual lives, in our society, in our world. And having God's love in our lives doesn't magically erase that. It doesn't bring back Fritz. It doesn't bring back those millions of lives we have lost to COVID-19. It doesn't bring back George Floyd or Breonna Taylor or Ahmaud Arbery or Andy Lopez, or those who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the species or coral reefs we have lost to climate change or those who died in the floods in New York last month. Our faith doesn't teach us to hide from the griefs of the world. It teaches us to lament, to weep about them with overflowing eyes and hearts, knowing that we can do that with confidence because there is a God who hears and who is making all things new.

I believe there is justice and joy and fellowship with all the saints for those we have lost and that God has a future for them beyond what we can ask or imagine. I believe the same is true for our world and God is inviting us to join in. You have a place at the table, with all your griefs, with all your scars. Here there is healing. Here there is grace.