



Shouts of Joy

December 14 • 2008

Focus scripture Psalm 126

Additional Scriptures

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Luke 1:47–55

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

John 1:6–8, 19–28

Generous God, your gifts are more than we can imagine. You have delivered us from the exile into which our selfish ways have brought us, and you restore us to the new life you have promised. We are thankful, and we rejoice. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access *Spirit Sightings* for connections between current events and the focus passage.

God promises restoration and healing. God has done great things for God's people in the past and is doing great things in our own lives today. With the community of God's people, we proclaim that God is faithful. We rejoice in God's promises and continue to work and pray for the fulfillment of this vision. We shout for joy.

Focus Scripture: Psalm 126

Imagine a crowd of pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem and the temple. They have come from far and near to celebrate a festival. At last their destination is in sight. From the crowd come songs of praise and thanksgiving. God has brought them to the centre of Israel's worship – to the place where God's presence comes very near to them. *Zion* is an ancient Hebrew name for the area around Jerusalem and for the hill on which Solomon's temple stood.

Psalm 126 is a "psalm of ascents," one of a group of 15 psalms (120–134) to be sung by those on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It is a song of thanksgiving for all God has done for the community of Israel.

This is a psalm about exile and return, about the restoration of God's people. When those who were exiled in Babylon return to Zion, they can hardly believe it. They are filled with joy. Though Solomon's temple has been destroyed, it will be rebuilt. The people will once again come to give thanks for God's great gifts. God has restored their lives just as God sends rain to water the Negeb desert, an arid area in the south of ancient Palestine. God, the psalmist says, can send rain to make the desert blossom.

The psalm ends with a metaphor of planting and harvest. We sow seeds into the arid soil and water them with our tears. Perhaps these are all the seeds that are left to us. We might have ground them into flour from which to make a meal. Yet we plant them with hope that something more will come. And God gives a rich harvest. We return with joy, bringing home not just a few plants but sheaves of grain. God gives abundantly.

This news of God's abundant grace is known "among the nations." The psalmist tells that the nations see what God has done and acknowledge God.

The message of hope is clear. God has done great things in the past and will continue to do them today. With the psalmist, we continue to work and pray for the fulfillment of this vision.

In **Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11**, the prophet also speaks of return from exile. Those who mourn will rejoice; they will rebuild the ruined cities and restore the community. God's prophet is called to bring good news to the oppressed and comfort to those who mourn. God's everlasting reign – marked by righteousness and peace – will be seen by all nations.

Luke 1:47–55, offered as an alternative to the psalm, is known as the Magnificat or Song of Mary. It is a song of great rejoicing as Mary remembers all that God has done and will do. Through the child she will bear, there will be a new raising up of God's people and new hope for those who are poor and oppressed. All nations will see it and rejoice.

John 1:6–8, 19–28 introduces John the Baptizer, sent by God as a witness to the Light of God that was coming into the world. John is not the Messiah, but one who prepares the way for God's coming among us. Looking to the future, the gospel recalls God's past activity in sustaining the people of Israel.

In **1 Thessalonians 5:16–24**, Paul gives a brief list of instructions for new Christians. God is faithful and we rejoice.

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This Sunday, observed by some as "Rejoice Sunday," is a time to give thanks for God's restoring and healing power as we have seen it in our own lives and in the life of our community. Where do you see seeds of love and care – planted in hope – beginning to flourish and come to harvest? What signs of God's faithfulness cause you to rejoice?

