RESTORE US, O GOD, IN JOY

Psalm 126

December 13, 2020

Ever lost your wallet? Hard to imagine something more flummoxing. Our wallets contain the proof of our identity, tell others we’re licensed to drive a car and get on a plane, carry our cash and credit cards – in other words, just about everything we need to move about in the world.

Bill Fulton lost his wallet, but he didn’t seem to be as panicked as the rest of us. Maybe that’s because he lost it in 1959, and 61 years later he’d pretty much forgotten about it.

Bill’s not sure exactly when or under what circumstances he accidentally dropped his smooth leather wallet with a cowboy design behind the wooden bleachers at Baker Middle School in Baker City, Oregon. It was probably during a basketball game between the Baker Bulldogs and some long forgotten opponent. There it sat for 61 years until worker Nathan Osborne found it on June 17, 2020, while tearing out those old pre-World War II era bleachers during a renovation project at the school. Osborne found the wallet right where Bill had dropped it, along with stuff other students had dropped back there during the school’s history: some old homework, lost library books, and a program from the 1964 talent show.

The next day, Baker Middle School secretary Melanie Trindle bought the newly found wallet to Fulton’s home in Baker City. “He was pretty much amazed,” said Trindle. “He just kept saying, ‘Thank you. Thank you so much.’”

After that long, my gosh, it stayed in good shape,” says Bill. “It’s just hard to believe.”

Bill was overjoyed to have it back, but not necessarily because of what was still in it. His Social Security Card was still tucked in its usual place. He didn’t have any cash to begin with, so none was missing. His bicycle license was in there, bearing the address of the home he lived in at the time. Bill remembers that he needed the license because of his job delivering medicine for Rodamer Drug. The only thing missing was his student ID, which Fulton swears he always kept in the wallet. While all those things were important at the time, the real value of the wallet for Bill was the memories it brought back of a wonderful period in his 73 year old life.

After high school, Bill went off to the Vietnam War, then to Berlin, and back to Baker City where he worked for Ellingson Lumber for 30 years, retiring in 2012. Now Bill spends his days hiking in the mountains with his dog Smokey. To use his own words, Bill has “covered a lot of country” since 1959. “Where did all the time go?” he asks with a deep sigh. “It‘s hard to believe that the times have gone so fast.” If only for a moment, feeling the leather of that long lost wallet reminded Bill that it’s all been worth it, and reminds him of who he is.

Finding something we’ve lost – especially something as valuable as a wallet that reminds us of who we are – is cause for both relief and joy. On this third Sunday of Advent, as we light the candle of joy, we celebrate the fact that God exposes our lost and hidden identity and, to borrow the words of the psalmist, restores our “fortunes.”

Psalm 126 is one of the psalms of “ascent,” or a musical piece that pilgrims would sing on their pilgrimage up to Jerusalem—to Zion and the Temple. Like an ode to a lost wallet, the psalm is divided into two parts, each beginning with the restoration of the “fortunes” of Zion and God’s people. The phrase “restore our fortunes” is difficult to translate from the Hebrew, says OT scholar James Mays, but it’s usually used to denote the radical change between the conditions that existed as the result of God’s judgment and wrath (as in the exile) and the conditions that result from God’s restoration, forgiveness and divine favor. It means the restoration of the situation between God and God’s people that existed before the people’s apostasy.

The “fortune” in Amos 9:14, for example, describes the rebuilding of ruined cities and the restoration of prosperity as symbolized in the planting of vineyards. In Jeremiah 29:14, the “fortune” is the return from exile as God gathers God’s people from “all the places where I have driven you.” The people who were once lost, scattered, and forgotten would now be found, brought together, and remembered forever for what God had done for them.

Notice, however, that the phrase is used as a past v. present contrast between the two parts of the psalm. The first section brings up memories of the past. Back in the day, the psalmist seems to be saying, things were great. everyone laughed and shouted for joy (v. 2), and the people of Israel had a reputation among other nations as those for whom God had done “great things” v. 3). Humans have a tendency to remember “the good old days” with fondness, and something like recovering a wallet or finding a photo from a bygone era makes us nostalgic. The best biblical example I can think of is in Exodus where the people are starving, and they criticize Moses for leading them out and away from the “fleshpots” of Egypt. They had remembered the barely subsistence rations of their slavery as brimful with hearty stews. Wasn’t like that. But that’s what they remembered now, when times were hard.

Maybe it’s part of our healthy defense mechanisms to dwell on good things, but the psalmist seems to imply that the passage of time and the painful remembrance of sin can turn the good old days into only a memory. Reputations can be lost, good memories clouded by hard truths, and joy squelched by the realization of what we’ve lost.

The psalmist, however, doesn’t dwell on the past, but invites God to restore the people’s memories by giving them a vision of the future. Those shouts of joy whose echoes have long faded can be lifted again if we return to the Lord.

“Restore our fortunes, O Lord,” prays the psalmist in the present tense. What good things the pilgrims remember about the past they pray for in the present. Zion can be restored, sins can be forgiven, new life can emerge and a fresh start can be embarked upon.

The psalmist equates God’s forgiveness and reconciling love to the way water flows in the desert – a vision of refreshment and saturation and sustenance in the midst of the harsh and brutal reality of sin (v. 4). Such a vision turns tears and weeping into shouts of joy, and the seed of hope can grow into a harvest that will sustain the people forever (vv. 5,6).

The psalmist thus teaches us that joy isn’t just a good feeling that arises spontaneously. Instead, we feel joy most intensely after the resolution of a period of distress. It’s one thing to be happy to be carrying around a wallet that we take for granted, but it’s quite another to find that wallet after a long period of searching for it frantically or after resigning ourselves to its being lost forever. It’s one thing to live in God’s grace when everything’s going well, but it’s quite another to experience the reality of that same grace after a period when we ourselves have been lost, searching, or distant from God. It’s not just something you nod and smile about, but, as the psalmist says repeatedly, it’s something you have to *shout* about (vv. 2,5, 6).

The scandalous truth—known by mystics throughout history and affirmed in the pages of our sacred texts is that when we connect with God, it is as if we are plugging our souls into a pure current of high-voltage joy. King David lets us know in Psalm 16 (v. 11) that he knows that God is a joyful being, and to enter or awaken to God’s presence is to enjoy a bracing jolt of invigorating delight followed by increasing levels of unending pleasure. Yes, there is indeed a place for quiet reverence, the dignity of robes and stoles and candles and stained glass. But my suspicion is that among the barefoot poor, we learn something that the well-heeled seldom discover: God is joyful, and God’s joy is contagious. When we tap into the joy of the Lord, when we step into the pure joy that burns like a billion galaxies in the heart of God, we’ll soon find ourselves shouting, dancing, singing, leaping, clapping, swaying, laughing, and otherwise jubilating and celebrating.

As with Lent, Advent is a season of preparation, self-examination, repentance and restoration. The culture around us celebrates the “joy” of Easter and Christmas, but it’s really more of a general sense of warm, fuzzy feelings connected to holiday memories with family and friends.

Real joy, however, only comes after we’ve been willing to allow God to deal with the brokenness of our lives, which is what the preparatory season of Advent is designed to do. We can’t really express the joy of being found, in other words, unless we are first able to name the fact that we’ve been lost, our identity compromised, and our fortunes squandered on things that have no ultimate value. We light the candle of “joy” during Advent because we want to recognize that the coming of Jesus is the climax of all history and, in His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has redeemed that checkered human history not only for you or me, but for the whole world. That’s why the babe in the manger is the ultimate discovery. When we were lost, God Himself came and found us!

Bill Fulton could only keep repeating, “Thank you, thank you” when that long lost wallet showed up at his door in the hands of a caring school secretary. The third Sunday of Advent is an opportunity for us to say “Thank you” to God for giving us the ability to discover our true identities, to redeem our memories, to restore our fortunes, and to shout with joy. Amen.