

## Restoration

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

21st Sunday after Pentecost - October 24, 2021

Texts: Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 126; Mark 10:46-52

SCRIPTURE READING Job 42:1-6, 10-17

*God answered Job's complaint from a whirlwind, and turned his world upside-down and inside-out. After Job repents, however, God restores all things to a new and better order.*

Then Job answered the Lord: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 126

When God restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.

**Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy.**

Then it was said among the nations,  
"Their God has done great things for them."

**Our God has done great things for us, and we rejoice.  
Restore our fortunes, like streams in the desert.**

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

Those who went out weeping, carrying seed for sowing,  
**even they shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.**

GOSPEL READING

Mark 10:46-52

*Jesus and his disciples are making the inevitable journey to Jerusalem, where all Jesus' predictions of arrest, death - and resurrection - will be fulfilled. As he travels, we see how his reputation has preceded him in this story.*

They came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.



Perfectly framed in my window lives a tree so lovely I can hardly tear my eyes away from it: orange and yellow, glowing like living flame, and behind it, a blue so blue you might think heaven looks like Minnesota in October. A breeze lifts the leaves, and they drift to earth. More and more blue appears. Too soon the sky will be sullen and gray, the branches shivering and naked. I love this bright tree. I love it all the more because I am losing it; it is vanishing even as I feast my eyes on it.

I did nothing to merit such beauty. I don't even own the tree; it belongs to my neighbor. I did not earn these eyes that behold my tree, or this heart that opens to beauty. And I have done nothing to deserve its loss. To love is to lose; all things pass.

Throughout the long book of Job, this tormented hero declares that he has done nothing to warrant all his loss. Over and over, he proclaims his innocence. He denies the verdict of his unhelpful friends that his misfortune is

God's just punishment for some secret sin. He calls on God to vindicate him. "I don't deserve this and you know it, God!"

And in the end, God declares Job right and his friends wrong. But that isn't the point. Job had a different lesson to learn. The fact he was a good and God-fearing man did not merit his early prosperity. And the loss of everything he valued had nothing to do with any misdeeds. When in the end he repents, it is not for some terrible hidden crime, but for having questioned God's grace and mercy. Grace and mercy are at the heart of the book of Job: it teaches us that all the goodness we enjoy is God's gift - as well as all the goodness we ignore and treat carelessly. All beauty, wonder, joy and wellbeing are the free gift of God.

So what is the source of pain and evil? We know that too much human pain comes to people who, like Job, have done nothing to deserve it. But unlike Job, we often bring our woes on ourselves, maybe not as individuals, but as a species. Who are the "we" in this contemporary hymn?

We covered over your colorful earth with gray cement.  
We cut down trees and stripped the soil wherever we went.  
We scarred the hills for gold and coal,  
Blind with greed inside our soul,  
Our goal: to have complete control.  
Lord, have mercy. Can we be restored?

The noise of traffic is drowning out the songbird's song.  
Your voice within us is telling us that we've gone wrong.  
You call us from our selfishness,  
To be blessed—and to bless  
To turn to you, to begin anew.  
Lord, have mercy. Can we be restored?<sup>1</sup>

We are the we. Not you or me personally, but all of us. Lord, have mercy. Like love, mercy is a concept both simple and hard to grasp: simply, it is the undeserved, unmerited goodness and compassion of God. Mercy lies at the very heart of who God is; God is mercy, and God is grace. God is compassion: which means God *feels with* us in our sorrow. God's steadfast love faithfully endures, whether we keep the faith, or abandon it. Mercy is worked out in restoration. Is the earth too far gone to be restored? Are we?

To restore means to return to an original state. What we never had cannot be restored; so when God promises restoration, it means that we were created with original goodness, original blessing; what causes us pain now is the loss of what we once knew and enjoyed. In a

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren, The Restoration Project, quoted in Richard Rohr Daily meditation, Thursday, October 21, 2021.

world full of woe, we are like fish out of water; we have lost our natural state of being. What loss does your heart ache to see restored? I don't need to know you well to know that you have lost things you valued: you have lost relationships, you have lost loved ones. Perhaps you've lost your own health or wealth. Collectively, we humans have lost our way: we have lost our ideals, our trust in one another and in the divine; we seem to have lost even the ability to live with civility toward each other. Wouldn't you love to see all these things restored? This is the good news: God *does* promise restoration.

All three of our readings speak of divine restoration, restoration that flows from mercy. "And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before" (except for the children, who were one for one, because children cannot be replaced!). In the Psalm, "When God restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy." And in the Gospel, it is the blind man Bartimaeus whose vision is restored. He was not born blind; he knew what it was to see. He once had the gift of eyes to be dazzled by the world's beauty. He knew what he had lost. And he begged Jesus to let him see again. He begged for mercy.

Did you notice the similarity and the difference between this and last week? The disciples, too, begged Jesus for something. Jesus asked them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" In almost the same way, he asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" The disciples begged for glory. Bartimaeus begged for vision. Job begged for justice. What they all received was mercy, free, unmerited restoration to the center of God's love and to the service of God's people. "We are called from selfishness to be blessed - and to bless."

Job prayed in mercy for the friends who had unjustly accused him. The disciples received renewed lives, not as power and glory but as self-surrender and self-giving. And blind Bartimaeus? No longer blind, he simply followed Jesus from then on. This is the good news: restoration happens, not just for our comfort but so that we can provide comfort to others. Not because it's our duty, but because it's a privilege. "Blessed are the merciful; for they shall receive mercy," Jesus said. And blessed are those who receive mercy, for they shall be merciful. That's how mercy works. It's not repayment, it's an overflowing fountain of love within us that we cannot contain, even if we try.

The radiance of my tree will fade with every hour, every breeze, every storm. But here's the good news: beneath the falling leaves, the twigs and branches are already swelling with buds that will survive the winter and open in the spring, a fresh festival of green. And beneath the losses you endure, God's restoration has already begun to swell and grow in you, a festival of life. May God in mercy restore your vision and give you eyes to see the goodness all around you. Amen. Thanks be to God.

## **Prayers**

~Merciful God, open our eyes to see all the ways that you are restoring our world to beauty and to blessing. Open our hearts to be part of your work of restoration.

~God our refuge and strength, we pray today for the people of Haiti, who have undergone so much loss; and for the turmoil surrounding the kidnapping of North American missionaries and their Haitian driver; keep them and their families strong, and guide negotiators to a safe outcome

~Thank you for this community of faith that we share; and thank you for the community of Rochester, where so many come for healing. May they find what they seek, body and soul.

~We pray also for covid sufferers, those who risk their own wellbeing to care for them, and those seeking to eradicate the disease. May we find through this pandemic better ways to care for one another and to care for our world.

~Grant us grace and mercy to follow willingly where you lead us, trusting in your unfailing love, the same love the was in Jesus, who taught us to pray: Our Father and Mother in heaven, hallowed be your name....