

*Hold on*

First Congregational Church Branford  
Psalm 126; October 28, 2018, 8:00am  
Rev. Suzanne Personette

Psalm 126 is generally thought to have been written by a man who'd returned from the Babylonian captivity. He writes about an expectation of good things to come.

When the Lord 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,  
'The Lord has done great things for them.'  
The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb  
May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.  
Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

The word of God for the people of God.

Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable and pleasing in *your* sight, O God, our Rock, and our Redeemer.  
Amen.

So, can you feel an expectation of good things to come for yourself, and for the church?!...

Professor Collier's talk at 10am about FCCB won't be faith-based (note: it ended up being so!), but you and I know that the Lord has done great things for us in the church's almost 375 years. Were you aware that many scriptures encourage us to look back at our history, to see that God came through for us, and to realize,

even when things may appear to be bleak, *especially when things appear to be bleak*, that he's going to come through again. The best barometer of someone's behavior is their past behavior, their history - if they did it before, they're going to do it again! If someone has lied and cheated, they're probably going to do it again! If God has brought you from weeping to joy before... he's going to do it again. Hold on.

Psalm 126 takes place in 538 Before Christ. The Jews had been exiled to Babylon 70 years earlier. Seventy years is a long time to be away from your home, from all that you love, and know. But, then, Cyrus, the new king, made a proclamation that allowed all the Jews to go home! In a moment, God turned things around. It was too good to be true. They were now back in their homeland of Jerusalem. They'd suffered so much. And, God delivered them. This psalm is a much needed reminder of how God brings us from tears to joy.

You may say, well, 70 times is a long time to wait!, but we need to understand that for God, time is insignificant. God moves when the time is right. Hold on.

From tears to joy. After yesterday's horrific crime, and after a week of hate bombs I think what we most want right now is for God to bring us from *hate to love*.

I think about what God did in Jesus - sending him into a world of hate, showing us how to love, then raising him from the dead to new life. And, so we learned that hate *never* has the final word. Love wins. God comes through. Jesus himself never promised to take away our sorrows, but he did promise to transform them into joy... What I *most* hold onto, beloved, is that if God could raise Jesus from the dead, then surely God can attend to the world - to save us - again. After what he has already done, surely God can attend to your life and mine - and to our church's life. Hold on.

Here on Reformation Sunday as Dr. Collier speaks to the church's history, and as we contemplate our stewardship season, I can't help but think of those in the church who know the way things were back in the day - I don't mean 375 years ago!, but 50-60 years ago, when every pew was filled. But, before we get too melancholy for those days, the truth is, by the late 1960's, those pews were slowly beginning to empty, and have been emptying ever since. At a quickened pace these last 10 years.

But, remember, as the psalm points out, because God came through for us before, we can trust him with today and tomorrow. While I don't know what God has in store for First Congregational, just as I don't know what God has in store for each of us, I do know Who this church and Who this people belong to. I may not know what the future holds, but I know Who holds the future. And, that's good enough for me, today. Sure, it's scary. We've gone from being big, with an

adequate amount of funds to support us, to being small, with not enough to support us. That's a tough thing for a church of 4 million dollars to hear, but those endowments *are* set aside for other things. Besides, I think those who endowed the church desired that we be self-supporting - you know, from our *own* stewardship, our own pockets, what we're able to raise from year to year. That's what is most genuine and true. It's how most churches operate - from the collection plate, right?, on what we bring before God each week. That's on us.

We just gotta hold on and realize that God's always headed down the path of joy - from weeping to joy. To restoration. If that's hard to believe, it was hard to believe for the Jews returning to Jerusalem, too. From suffering to joy.

I'm sure in 375 years the church has been through many times of peril, of grief and loss and hardship, and then God *did something*, and the church was restored to its joy. In recent years, you've been through a lot since Rev. Gary Smith left. It hasn't all been bad! You've continued to be the church, to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, protect widows. You've been church. But, the discernment team has identified a certain malaise in the congregation from all that's happened, and they want our joy to be restored.

Hold on. Because what we can know for sure is that that time is coming. *Even when things appear to be bleak, we have to hold on.*

Let me share something a member wrote me, who gave their permission to share it - it's a marvelous truth:

"Frankly, I am right now exhausted by FCCB. I can look back on so many joyful, energetic, uplifting experiences. It is not in my personality to embrace change and the last 10 years have been very painful for me and so many others. Sadly, these losses reflect where I am at this stage in my life. There are a lot of days when I want to say goodbye to FCCB, curl up in a quiet corner and try to find God again".

That's how it might feel. Burned-out from all the challenges, and all the service you've given to the church in this time.

I wrote the person: Can we just sit with that - and ask Jesus to come sit with us, too. I know what he'll say, *come to me all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. And, I will give you joy.* May he ease your burden, may he ease the church's burden. We're tired and need him to take the wheel. Then I said, hang in there, Christian - hang on for the joy!

In Twelve Step rooms, people can become so despairing, because recovery is so hard, and they want to leave, so those who have experience say to them, hang on, wait for the joy! *Don't leave before the joy!* Hold on, hold on.

Joy is not only on its way, it's here now. It's in our laughter, it's in all the hullabaloo surrounding the church fair - right, Elaine?!, it's in our stewardship, it's in our intergenerational offerings, it's in a coming season of Christmas. Can joy

really be upon us, long-suffering FCCB? Long-suffering, FCCB? - oh, come on, 5 years - give me a break! lol I imagine that's how Job must've felt when God restored him after his time of suffering. Can joy really be upon me?? There's a member among us who has been having one health crisis after another, as well as family challenges. How hard it must be to carry on without any good news. How hard it has been on me to minister in the face of no good news! Can there be any joy left? Yes, I say!.....*hold on!* And, to all of us, hold on to what is good here and now, *in this moment*, the love and forgiveness of God, the support of friends, the promise that in the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be. Hold on.

Joy is mentioned *four times* in this short psalm. Four times! Think of Abraham's wife, Sarah, she knew the bitterness of being barren - she would've shed many tears over the years. But God gave her the gift of Isaac, and she said, *God has brought me laughter.*

Hey, here's a joy in the morning story I recently heard from a member. I was sharing with them about how well they speak in front of others, how articulate they are. They responded: *When I was a kid, I would crawl under my desk before I would speak in front of the class - I stuttered for most of my life.* The person shared that in their work life they've had to give presentations, and they do some other things publicly - and they said they don't have much of that fear anymore. How great is that? Out from suffering - to joy.

I know that sometimes our life may feel like a desert. The Negeb desert is in the southern part of Judah, a dry and arid land. But, during the winter and spring in 500BC, rains could suddenly send waters rushing through the desert! What? Yes. Grass and flowers would spring forth suddenly, almost overnight. *So, do it again, God.* We pray for restoration and blessing for ourselves, for our church, for your world. Pour out your Spirit like streams in the Negeb. Open the floodgates of heaven and pour out your blessing on us, the church, the world.

We really can have an expectation of good things to come. Hold on.

Times of trouble and sorrow do not last. This is God's promise - even when things appear bleak - God will turn tears to joy.

And, beloved, the even greater promise is that one day, we will have all the eternal joys that await us in heaven. World without end. All love. Just love. Not only then, but now. All Love. All Love. More love to you. More love to you. More love to you..... Love wins..... it always does. Amen.