

# WHAT CHEER

**A Community Thanksgiving Eve Sermon on Psalm 126—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart  
November 25, 2015—St. Mary Roman Catholic Church, Milford, CT**

1.  
15 years after the original Thanksgiving, just before Milford's settlers arrived in Boston, Roger Williams was on his way out.

Williams, a promising young Puritan minister, came to Boston in 1631. He soon got in hot water over his feelings about freedom of conscience, urging the local government to not prosecute people for actions like taking the Lord's name in vain or ignoring the Sabbath. Meanwhile, Williams had befriended Native Americans and questioned whether any English charter should claim land that the Natives had lived on for centuries.

In 1636 the Puritan elders were ready to send Williams back to England but before they could, he fled. It was then as Williams looked south of Massachusetts for refuge, for land to purchase and settle on, that he encountered Native American acquaintances who greeted him with, "What cheer, Netop?" meaning, "What's up," or "Anything good goin' on, friend?"<sup>i</sup> Those words, written down later by Williams, eventually became the city motto for Providence. I can only imagine that Williams recalled the greeting so vividly because they were asked at such a crossroads; with so much promise just five years past him, and only uncertainty ahead.

2.  
As we arrive at Thanksgiving and hear the words from Psalm 126 I imagine how each of us inhabit a pivot a little like Williams,

standing where we can both look back and try to look forward at what awaits us.

This time of the year we begin to ask and be asked with greater frequency questions like the Native Americans'. As some of us reunite with aunts and uncles, cousins, parents and children, grandkids or grandparents, and friends who live far away, we take this time to give hugs or shake hands and ask, "How've you been?" "What's new, friend?"

Thanksgiving has become the time to take stock of the year soon departing. Later, our December holidays—Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Festivus—let us give and receive gifts that on a practical level prepare us for the year to come. This is why my wife Ashley and I supplement Santa Claus' gifts to our children with gifts of sweaters, coats, caps, gloves, socks and underwear. Not what the kids want, but beneficial nonetheless. But here in November at Thanksgiving we look back, take stock of the blessings of the past and perhaps the present, and begin to consider what to hope for into the next year. What cheer did we find this year? What cheer might we find in the year to come?

3.  
This is what the Hebrews seemed to be doing as well in tonight's Psalm reading—looking back to their recent history with God and begin to articulate their hopes for the future with God.

Our best translations of the Hebrew suggest that the first three verses are all about

praising God for a restoration, likely the recent end of the Babylonian exile. ‘When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, the Hebrew people, it was a dream come true! The exiles came back and reunited with those left behind. That was a time that we laughed and hoot-ed and holler-ed. That was a time of joy. BACK THEN people were saying, “Wow! The Lord has done great things for THEM!” The Lord HAS done great things for us! It was great big party time! What cheer that was!’

Then the Psalmist pauses, takes a deep breath, and pivots to the current situation. ‘But what cheer now, God?’ The psalmist asks. ‘Lord, restore our fortunes. Let us flow with cheer like riverbeds that have lingered in dryness until a storm comes and then “Whoosh!” it is filled! God, let those of us who feel sad and alone as we sow the seeds, be able to reap our harvest with more hollering for joy. Let it be said that those who go out sobbing and holding the promise of seeds to sow come home someday with sheaves on their shoulders ready to get a joyful party started once more.’

‘The Lord has done great thing for us, and we rejoiced.’ But now we’re in crisis mode again. ‘Restore our fortunes, O Lord.’

I love Psalms in general because they theologically express what are often unadulterated emotions and passion, parallel what I hear my children to me. And this Psalm is no exception. You know what I’m talking about: like after my family has just done something cool like go to an amusement park, the kids say to Ashley and me: “That was great! Let’s do that again!” Or after they found my old yo-yo from middle school and I

showed them some tricks: “Wow, Dad, do it again!”

“Lord, that was great,” the Hebrews say, “now restore us once more. Do it again! Do it again!”

It’s interesting when we decide to switch from trying to take care of a challenge or crisis ourselves to seeking divine intervention. Like my friend Jenn who played clarinet in our college marching band. When our football team was down a touchdown or ten points (which happened with great frequency), Jennifer would lead the band in a cheer: “G-O-O-D, do something good!”

But if the score did not turn in our favor, and we found ourselves down two or three touchdowns, Jennifer would lead a slightly modified cheer, yelling “G-O-D: Do something, God!” What a cheer!

Restore our fortunes, Lord! Do it again! Do something, God!

#### 4.

When the exiles returned, Jerusalem faced a new challenge: Now what? Its temple and walls needed rebuilding, the exile had been seventy years so very few of the originals were left, most hadn’t grown up in Judah and had to be assimilated like refugees back in their own homeland. ‘Who are we?’ the Israelites asked themselves. How do we pick up the pieces? God, this is like the Exodus where saving us from the Egyptians meant another challenge in wandering in the wilderness. Restore our fortunes again, Lord! Do something, God!

We as people of faith and as U.S. residents tend to agree that we face a crisis today, but

may disagree on what is ailing us collectively. Donald Trump for an easy example says he wants to make America great again, but in what ways? Can we agree what was great about the US at any given time? In the early 1960s family units may have seemed stronger and industry was a bedrock of the economy but Civil rights were out of whack and medical advances were nowhere where they are today. We hear that Americans are less religious today, but we probably don't want people to return out of some sense of guilt or because some horrible worldwide crisis has precipitated their renewed attendance. We may cry out, Do SOMETHING, God, but what is that SOMETHING? How do we make our cheer to God more specific? What are we pivoting toward?

Heap on top of that all our individual and family crises, the medical diagnosis, the job outlook, the family tension—these things that challenge our spirits and our lives may put us at a loss of how to give thanks right now.

The bad news may be that when somebody asks us: 'What cheer, friend?' Our answer may be: 'I don't know; I don't know where I'm going. I'm a dry riverbed, a worker going out to sow with little hope that the seeds will grow. I have a past, but no hope to pivot to.

5.

But there is Good News. First of all, the Hebrews were able to find some restoration. Now, the challenges kept coming. The second temple was not as big, at least not at first, prophecy mostly ceased, the eternal flame and the Ark of the Covenant were lost. Six hundred years later the temple was destroyed and in the two millennia since Jewish people

have suffered discrimination and holocaust, at least some of it by the hands of people from other faiths like Christianity. But every time, out of what I believe to be a combination of God's grace and intense religious hope and action by Jewish men, women and children, faith in the one God as revealed in the Hebrew Bible has been sustained and restored, through the transformation from temple Judaism to rabbinical Judaism, and much of it in this country, the United States, thanks be given to God.

More specifically, at the time that Psalm 126 was likely written, that hope was sustained by the work of God in Jerusalem and the work of faithful Jews who undertook rebuilding walls and the temple in a modest form. They may not have had the fortune of Solomon, they may not have had their cries and hopes answered exactly as they wished, but they had the fortune of faith in a faithful God.

b.

The Good News for today is that God restores us through action and faith.

It is amazing how much God blesses us from within and around us, if we notice it and take action.

When I visit people in the hospital I have three major goals:

- 1) pray with them or offer a prayerful hope;
- 2) remind them that they're a beloved member of their community/the body of Christ; and
- 3) help them view their crisis in light of past crises through which they have persevered.

Prayer helps us to let go of the things we can't change. But then there's the things we can change. 'So,' I say, 'You've had a heart attack, and you're going to have to go to a convalescent home for at least six weeks. What cheer is there in that? Where is God in this moment? Well, what did you do when you had your knee replaced two years ago? You made it through, you persevered in hope, your family and friends supported you. I believe God sustained you in hope even when you thought it was too much. I believe God is here today, urging you onward, restoring you I pray in health but if not in that God is restoring you in hope and faith.'

And with that I usually see a light in people's eyes, you know, right, God was there before and I didn't know it or how could I have forgotten God's presence then, or I don't like relying on God but I will do it again. God helps us give thanks for what has been, empowers us to pivot toward a hopeful future and helps us define what that future may look like. God hears us cheer: Do something God! And God replies, I did, I blessed you. Now, let's go!

The Good News is that we have much to be thankful for, the presence of God's Spirit and the traditions of our faiths to give shape and direction to our future. In Jewish and Christian traditions, we hold fast to words from the Shema which in turn inspired Jesus' love commandment: Hear O Israel the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all

your might. And for Christians: And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

God has done it, God has done it again; God has done something, God has done something good. Something good in creation, the world, in the United States, and in Milford. God has given us as Roger Williams argued the freedom of conscience. The freedom to love. Our conscience and our love sow seeds that will not always bring us exactly the harvest we wish for but it will benefit us richly nevertheless, and we will be restored and fortunate like a flowing river or a harvester with sheaves of grain on her broad shoulders.

6.

Roger Williams loved his Native American neighbors that day for their expression of love and care. Williams sought to honor his faith and with others discerned a future that included the founding of Providence and Rhode Island and the writing of the first English dictionary of Native American languages. After he died, Williams inspired our founding leaders to include the freedom of religion in the first Amendment of the Constitution.<sup>ii</sup>

Having recalled the founder of Providence, let us give cheer for God's Providence, which is at the heart of all of our thanksgivings this holiday. Thanks be to God for providing us this time together as caring neighbors and people of faith, for providing this life together, and for providing God's Spirit that witnesses to hope and faithfulness. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> See sites like <https://www.providenceri.com/ArtCultureTourism/what-cheer-day-2012-rhode-island-at-war>

<sup>ii</sup> *Rhode Island's Founders: From Settlement to Statehood*, Conley, Patrick. Pages 25-34.