

2nd Sunday of Advent

Near the end of the last Chiefs game a sense of foreboding prevailed over Arrowhead. The Raiders had positioned themselves for a game-ending go-ahead field goal, but the snap bounced off the quarterback's chest. A ref blew his whistle for a penalty, and the Chiefs pounced on the football. Because the clock had not been running at the snap, the penalty was not a false start, but an illegal shift. The Chiefs kept possession and won the game. Fans of both teams thought they were dreaming—those of the Raiders, of course, dreaming a nightmare.

As our cantor began singing Psalm 126 today, we heard these reflective words: “we thought we were dreaming.” These dreams came not after a mere three hours of play for a team already dominant in the ranks, but after 70 years of exile for a people deprived of freedom. In the 6th century BC, the Babylonians had entered Jerusalem, destroyed the city, captured its people, and hauled them away, where they struggled to maintain their identity among a larger and more powerful nation. Then, a generation later, when a sense of foreboding prevailed, King Cyrus made his own snap decision and let them go home.

Today's first reading from Baruch takes place in Jerusalem, where the few people left behind in poverty can see from the heights the return of the exiles. The psalm recalls the voices of those exiles on their way home: “When the Lord brought back the exiles of Sion, we thought we were dreaming. Then was our mouth filled with laughter; on our tongues, songs of joy.” You wonder if some of the Babylonians considered it a nightmare. Perhaps they accused Cyrus of inept leadership. But Psalm 126 says other nations were impressed. They said among themselves, “What great deeds the Lord worked for [those captives.]”

If you think winning a football game in the final seconds causes gladness, think about release from long captivity: a prisoner set free when new evidence brings exoneration from the crime; an estranged family member who finally agrees to come over for Christmas; a person struggling with substance abuse who comes to terms with their addiction. You can fill in the blanks from your own life. You may be dealing with a situation not of your own choosing from which you cannot see a way out. You may then pray the second part of Psalm 126, “Bring back our exiles, O Lord.” Bring me back to a place of rest. Farmers, full of tears, have gone out to sow seeds. They wait a long time. But then, “they come back, they come back with a song, bearing their sheaves.” We want that too.

Advent has this Pollyanna quality. It brims with optimism. Last week one sports commentator after that game quoted this aphorism, “You make your own luck.” When you perform well at what you do, other good things will happen to you. Sometimes your excellence makes others so nervous they fumble a ball. And if you think you are not excellent, then look at the bible's record of what God has done: It was the Lord who brought back the exiles of Sion. Indeed, it was the Lord who sent his Son into our world in the fullness of time. If we can't feel optimistic when considering our own past, then we can look at what the Lord has done and remember that the same Lord is on our side—a ref who knows the rules.

If Advent brings a smile to your face, it's because you understand what the Lord has done, and because you believe in what the Lord can do.