

Advent Psalms 85 and 126: Turn Again, LORD!

From beginning to end the subject matter of the psalms is the Lord of Israel. In various ways the many lament psalms or prayers for help that are so pervasive in the Psalter speak to and about God; in so doing they inform the one reading them of what this God is like and why one turns in that direction in times of trouble... What happens is what always happens in prayer: a theological understanding of the One to whom the prayer is lifted is both implicit and explicit in the prayer. We learn about God as we pray. We say what we know and believe about God as we cry out. That is certainly the case with the psalmist.

(Patrick Miller, *The Lord of the Psalms*, from the Introduction)

How often do you experience doubts about God's existence or God's character? What seems to trigger those doubts? How do you express those doubts?

How is reading and praying the Psalms impacting your view of God in Advent 2020, in this time of worldwide pandemic and national turmoil?

1. **Psalms 85 and 126** are community laments. **Psalm 85**, like last week's **Psalm 80**, is from Book Three of the Psalter, in which, on both individual and national levels, the psalmists are wrestling with troubles and seeking understanding and reassurance from God.

Psalm 126 is from Book Five and is one of the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134). Like Psalms 120, 123, and 129 of this group of pilgrimage psalms, **Psalm 126** focuses on trouble; it shares how God worked in past difficulties and how God's restoring work is still needed.

As you read **Psalms 85 and 126**, look for how they have a similar shape. What *similarities* do you notice as you compare the first stanzas (85:1-3 and 126:1-3)?

Psalms 85 and 126 may have the same Old Testament context. What is that probable context?

What *differences* do you notice in these 2 opening stanzas? Imagine what might account for these differences.

What life experiences of restoration of your own or others come to mind?

2. How do both of these community songs of lament ask God to "do it again"? (**85:4-7, 126:4**) What words would you use to make a request like that in Advent 2020?

The BCP translates **85:6**, “Will you not *turn again* and *quicken* us, that your people may rejoice in you?”

3. Notice how *confident trust* seems to develop in the psalmists as these requests for restoration are being made.

What do you think causes this *trust* to come from *reality* rather than *denial*? (**126:6-7**)

How is this an “already” and “not yet” perspective?

4. **Psalm 85** takes a unique turn in **85:8a**. After the community is led to watch for God to act on their prayer in **85:7**, the psalmist switches to first person in **85:8a**: “Let *me* hear what God the LORD will speak,” making a bold request and sharing what he hears in **85:8b-9**, a divine oracle.

What will God do for his people who fear him? What will God do for “his saints” who may still be tempted to turn back to “folly”? (**85:8b-9**)

5. **Psalm 85** ends with a powerful reflection on God’s covenant with his people, personifying the *divine qualities* that are promised in the covenant and displayed in his relationship with his people. (See Exodus 34:6 and Lev. 26:6-8.) “Verse 10 presents the touching picture of these four qualities coming together in an intimate embrace in the person of God.” (Tremper Longman, *Psalms*, p. 314)

Like the psalmist did in **Psalm 85**, reflect on what each one of these four qualities means to you in Advent 2020. (*steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace*)

Commenting on Psalm **85:10-13**, Walter Brueggemann writes:

Here the entire vocabulary of fidelity is thrown toward the future—steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, faithfulness twice, righteousness three times—all in the “will” of the not yet. At the center of this hope is YHWH: “The Lord will give.” Psalm 85 imagines the steps of this God into a future of well-being. As a result of that divine resolve, the earth will yield and yield and yield. There is more to come, and it is good. There is more to come because, God, long before Martin Luther King Jr., said, “I have a dream,” a dream of *shalom*. We live toward that dream because God’s dream will not be defeated.” (Walter Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid*, pp. 32-33)

New Bible Commentary calls “O let him set his feet on the way” in **85:13** the equivalent of Rev. 22:20. “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”