

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent 2, Series B
Saturday, December 5th, 2020
Sunday, December 6th, 2020

Sermon: “Restore Us, O God!”

Texts: Psalm 85

Focus: The world is in ruin because of human sin.

Function: That God would restore us by repentance and grace.

Structure: Four Pages (Law-then-Gospel)

Locus: “We pray in this petition, in summary, that our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven” (SC, Seventh Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Trouble in the World

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. “Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation towards us!”

(Ps. 85:4, ESV).¹ Ever since March we have been waiting for the world to go back to normal—whatever “normal” means. The covid-19 pandemic—and our human response to it—has turned our world upside down and inside out.

Daily life is barely recognizable compared to what it looked like 9 or 10 months ago. Many people work at home now, isolated from their colleagues. Even with “virtual meetings” on Zoom, there is no longer a sense of community. Whatever happened to water cooler conversation? If your office *is* open, then one cough or snuffle can get you sent home from work.

Parents, teachers, and students cry and scream at each other endlessly while trying to navigate the on-again-off-again school, never knowing from week to week whether it will be in-person or “remote” learning (don’t say “homeschooling,” or you’ll ruffle feathers).

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Restaurants and other small businesses struggle to stay *in* business while they're not permitted to offer dine-in service. And, let's face it, who's going to sit outside to eat in the 20's or 30's?

On top of all that, we have to take *reservations* for Christmas Eve services! Who ever thought you would need to call ahead to make sure you can go to church? I don't like it either, but it's where we're at.

We long for life to go back to the way it was. So the words of today's Psalm resonate deeply in us: "Restore us again, O God of our salvation.... Will you not revive us again...?" (Ps. 85:4a, 6a).

Trouble in the Text

While the Church has made Psalm 85 its own prayer, in historical context, it is the Jewish exiles in Babylon who cry out for God to bring back the good, old days. "Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us! Will you be angry with us forever? ... Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?" (Ps. 85:4-6, *in passim*). In other words, "How long, O Lord, until you reverse our bad fortune and restore us to the Promised Land? How long until you forgive our sins and give us a second lease on life? Have you forgotten about us or just permanently placed us on the naughty list? What gives, God?! When will you do something about our terrible situation?"

The Jews were in exile because God punished them for their sins. He had been very patient with his people, repeatedly sending the prophets to warn them to repent and turn from their wicked ways (2 Kings 17). Unfortunately, they did not listen. And while God could put up with a lot of evil—even idolatry—as soon as they started killing their kids by offering them up as

human sacrifices, the Lord finally said, “Enough is enough! I’m putting an end to your kingdom and wiping you off the map” (2 Kings 21).

In 586 B.C. God sent King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to destroy Judah. He laid siege to Jerusalem and starved out the inhabitants of Jerusalem to the point that they engaged in cannibalism and ate their own children. Then when he finally breached the city, his soldiers killed so many people—including civilians—that the streets ran with rivers of blood. The Babylonians tore down the walls of Jerusalem and burned the Temple to the ground. They took the best and brightest of the Jewish people—royals, nobles, priests, and merchants—and carted them off in exile to Babylon. The remainder were left to farm the land, eking out a subsistence living from the soil. But there were not enough survivors left to bury all the dead bodies, so they just dumped all the corpses into a mass grave and burned them south of the city.

So our text, Psalm 85, is the heartfelt cry for relief from the Jewish exiles in Babylon, who suffered in a foreign land where they were not allowed to worship or pray to their God. The prophet Daniel got thrown into the lion’s den for praying to Yahweh. His friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into a fiery furnace because they would not bow down to the king’s statue.

How long must God’s people endure such oppression and punishment? The prophet Jeremiah told them that the nation would remain in exile for 70 years (Jer. 25:12; 29:10). But 70 years is a *long time*, and who can blame them for crying out for God to save them? “Restore us again, O God of our salvation” (Ps. 85:4). Put an end to your anger and BRING US HOME, where we can live in our own houses, eat from our fields and drink wine from our own vineyards, gather publicly without fear, and pray and worship when and where we will.

Grace in the Texts

Yet even in the midst of despair, the Jewish exiles held onto hope. Psalm 85 is a prayer directed to the LORD God, Yahweh, the very one with the power to do something about their situation. The first three verses (Ps. 85:1-3) recall a time when Yahweh forgave his people and restored their land, perhaps referring to the cycle of the Judges or the time of the Kings. According to James Mays, “the recollection of the past is a frequent feature of corporate prayers,” in which the people of God appeal to God’s actions *in the past* as the basis that God will deal with their *present* situation in the near *future*.² In other words, God’s people look back in order to rediscover hope.

And indeed, the final verses of this Psalm look to this deliverance with confident hope. “Yes, the LORD *will* give what is good, and our land *will* yield its increase. Righteousness *will* go before him and make his footsteps a way” (Ps. 85:12-13). These future indicative verb forms are statements of fact of what will happen in the future. They are not half-hearted subjunctives. They are not a wish or hope or prayer for what God *might do* or *could do*. They are a confession of faith in what God *will* do because of what he *has done* in the past.

Even the prophet Isaiah, the great “prophet of the exile” (Mays) holds forth this joyful hope in our Old Testament reading: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak *tenderly* to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa. 40:1-2).

These words of comfort (Gospel) are spoken to a *repentant* people—sinners who turn from their ways and return to God for his mercy. Indeed, that’s the basic meaning behind the Hebrew word translated as “restore” in Psalm 85. The Hebrew word is שׁוּב (*shūv*), which means “turn” or “return.” It’s the Old Testament word for *repentance*. God saves us by bringing us to

² Mays, *Psalms*, 276.

repentance, so that we turn away from our sin and return to him. As Paul writes in his epistle to the Romans: “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (Rom. 2:4).

Judah’s dream finally came true (cf. Ps. 126:1). In the 530’s B.C., Cyrus the Persian conquered the Babylonian Empire and issued an edict allowing the Jewish people to return to the Promised Land. He even paid for them to rebuild the Temple. God answered their prayer. He *restored* them just as they had asked. He granted them the salvation for which they longed.

Grace in the World

But the return of the exiles was an imperfect peace. At the least, it was incomplete. “Salvation had come; but the need for salvation remained.”³ Though safely back in the land of their fathers, the returned exiles remained sinners in need of a Savior. Ultimate salvation would not come until Jesus the Messiah died on the cross for the sins of the world. Ultimate restoration will not come until Christ comes again on the Last Day to raise the dead and make all things new.

The prayer of Israel is our prayer too: “Restore us again, O God of our salvation” (Ps. 85:4). But the restoration we need is much more than an end to the pandemic. Even if life gets “back to normal” in 2021, was normal even that good to begin with? Even if the pandemic ends *tomorrow*, the world will still be a wreck.

I want the pandemic to end as much as anyone. Yet, even before the corona virus, wasn’t our world still full of wickedness, sin, death, and disease? The ruin of the world around us was still evident. Our bodies died because of sin. Our souls were sick because of sin—our souls *are* sick because of sin. We need God to restore us. We need God to bring us to *repentance*—the cry of John the Baptist in our Gospel today? We need the salvation that only Christ can bring.

³ Mays, 277.

When Jesus died on the cross, he forgave our sins. When he rose again, he opened for us the doorway to heaven and eternal life. When he comes *again*, he will raise us to new life in a new heaven and new earth. He will set the world to rights. He will resurrect our bodies and restore the creation. He will make “all things new” (Rev. 21:5). Only then will “steadfast love and faithfulness meet” and “righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10). Only then will God’s glory truly dwell—not just in the land of Israel but in all the earth.

That Day will come. Christ is coming soon. So together we pray, “Restore us again, O God of our salvation...” (Ps. 85:4). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.