

*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim,
shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might, and come to save us!*

Restore us, O God!

Let your face shine, that we may be saved!

*O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.*

Restore us, O God of hosts!

Let your face shine, that we may be saved!

Psalm 80

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

This ancient human cry rings true across the ages. The Psalmist voices the anguish of Israel, the people of Jacob and Joseph, the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh: *Great Shepherd, the one who is supposed to lead us and protect us: Listen! Stir up your might, come and save us.*

Though the language would be different, it's easy to imagine those same cries coming today, from Aleppo, from Mindanao, from La Ronge, from Manus Island and Nauru: *How long will you reject our prayers? You have us given us tears instead of bread, a full cup of tears instead of water. Our global neighbours offer only pity and indifference; our enemies laugh at this pathetic resistance.*

Restore us, O God; let your face shine that we may be saved.

This prayer can be personal as well as collective; it's a familiar refrain in many of our hearts as well. *Restore us* to health from bodies that are weak. *Restore* our families from the chaos of conflict. *Restore* our hearts that are broken from angry words and disappointments. *Restore* our spirits that are weary from stress, from anxiety, from loss, from prayers that have been unanswered and cups that are full with tears.

Restore us, O God; let your face shine that we may be saved.

Merry Christmas, by the way. :) There is good news in this; there must be. That also is an ancient cry, that Hope has come near, that God has remembered and responded, that the powers of destruction have been brought down and the lowly have been lifted up, that “the hopes and fears of all the years” have indeed been met.

But unless we’re willing to simply paper over the reality of suffering in our world and our lives in the name of Happy Holidays, we have to find a way to find a way to hear together both of these cries, of hurting and hoping.

Part of the answer lies in how we understand that word “Restore.”

Do any of you recognize this bench? It’s been sitting beside the door to the parking lot since this summer, so maybe you’ve seen it there. But before that, do any of you remember it?



Many of you have actually seen this wood hundreds of times over the past several decades. Before the renovations of this building, there was a double-row of this dark wooden strip running around the sanctuary. And there was of course the big wheelchair ramp at the back, with the same heavy wooden railing. When we did the renos, the ramp was no longer necessary, so the railings were torn down. And

the design folks decided the double-wooden strip was outdated, so the lower row was removed.



The wood from both of those was put in a pile outside. It was no longer needed and out of style, no longer useful.

But a couple of amateur carpenters saw some potential in this scrap pile. One of them took some of the wood and built it into some planter boxes for his front yard. And I took some of it home and cut it up, and stripped and sanded, drilled and screwed, hammered and glued, and finally painted.

And then I brought it back to the church where it came from, in the form of this bench. It definitely is not the same, and you wouldn't have recognized the wood if I hadn't told you where it came from. But it was restored.

We typically think of "restored" as meaning "put back to the way it was," returned to its original form and intended purpose, like the restored classic cars on Cruise Weekend, or a piece of antique furniture that is stripped and refinished.

But there's a different kind of restoration, where the thing being restored isn't made the same as it was, but it is restored to usefulness, restored to purpose and identity and beauty. Made "right," not made "what it used to be."

That's the kind of restoration I see in the biblical story of the People of God.

The psalmist uses the metaphor of a vine for the People of Israel:

*You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.*

Psalm 80

It's a pretty clear metaphor. Israel saw itself as the vine, chosen by God to bless the world. God rescued them from Egypt, cleared out the land of Canaan and established the nation of Israel there. And there they thrived, spreading out their branches, covering the land with shade and good fruit.

But no more:

*Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.
Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
the stock that your right hand planted.
They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.*

Psalm 80

There is genuine bewilderment at this injustice. God is the actor in this poem, the One who rescued the vine, who cleared the land and planted the vine and made it grow. Why then would God then abandon her vine?

Elsewhere the biblical writers turn the focus onto Israel's unfaithfulness, that the people turned away from God and reaped the consequences for their choices. In this Psalm, that is noticeably absent. This is the cry of the innocent, those who

relied on God yet found their vine cut down and burned, their fields ravaged and their people destroyed.

The psalm is surely a response to the destruction of the nation Israel, the annihilation of the northern tribes and the Exile of Judah. The vine of Israel was truly cut down and burned.

*O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?...*

*But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

Psalm 80

Restore us. This prayer went unanswered. Israel was never restored, not to anything close to the glory of the vineyard stretching from the mountains to the seas. If restore means to put back to the way it was, then God failed to restore Israel.

Instead, six centuries later, a traveling rabbi made this claim:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

*He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit,
while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes
so that it will be even more fruitful.*

*You are already pruned
because of the word I have spoken to you.*

Remain in me, as I also remain in you.

*No branch can bear fruit by itself;
it must remain in the vine.*

Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches.

***If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit;
apart from me you can do nothing.***

John 15

As he does elsewhere, Jesus is retelling Israel's story with himself as the center. Jesus is the vine restored, Jesus is the answer to the ancient cry. Some other time we can explore the fuller implications of this claim of Jesus as the True Israel, but for today let's stick with a simpler question:

What kind of restoration is this? When the people in the psalm cried out for God to let her face shine on them, I'm pretty sure they had in mind the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel in mind. End the Exile, rebuild Jerusalem, make Israel great again. (☺)

Instead, the restoration that God brought came through a baby. Who grew up to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was at hand, that he was the promised salvation, Who died on a Roman cross. Who was raised from the dead. Whose name is God-with-Us.

Jesus used the language of restoration: he lived into the prophecies about the Messiah, he used the language of Jewish revolution, he spoke of the Temple being restored, the Kingdom of God breaking in. The Romans killed him because he was a threat, that's what they did to revolutionaries. And after Jesus was no longer with them, his followers went around preaching the good news of restoration, not as something they hoped would come, but as something they were already experiencing.

What kind of restoration is this?

NOT what was asked for:

Reclaiming and Renewal - shaped into what was truly needed

But this was not what the ancient people of Israel asked for. Not at all. The restoration that Jesus brought was like the restoration of this bench, where old wood is reclaimed, taken apart and remade, reshaped, renewed into a new thing for a new time.

For the People of God, Jesus brought a renewed understanding. He responded to the essence of their cry, the longing for God's face to shine, for God's presence. That was Jesus' purpose, to be God-With-Us, to show what God's love looks like, to bring salvation not from enemies but from selfishness, from fear, from death. Jesus gave the People of God not what they wanted, but what they needed. (If you have the Rolling Stones in your head, that is what I'm talking about).

Another thing is that the Restoration of Jesus was not the end of anything. We tend to see restoration as the last word: “And then Rapunzel was reunited with her parents and restored to her rightful place as a princess, and they all lived happily ever after.” There’s just a bit of that in the Psalm:

But let your hand be upon [us]
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.

Restore us and end our suffering; give us life and we will never turn back, the end.

But Jesus’ restoration didn’t end the suffering, not at all. Even the innocence of the Christmas story is tinged with terror, as King Herod slaughtered the children of Bethlehem in an attempt to rid himself of this new rival. There was no happily-ever-after for Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus, just real lives with all of the conflict and uncertainty that goes with that. Even on Easter, when Jesus rose from the grave, death did not end. There was change, Jesus’ followers celebrated that death had lost its power, but it wasn’t the end of the story.

The restoration that Jesus brought was actually the opposite, the beginning of something rather than the end. John’s gospel talks about followers of Jesus being “born of the Spirit, born from above.” A re-birth, a re-framing, a new perspective.

What kind of restoration is this?

NOT what was asked for:

Reclaiming and Renewal - shaped into what was truly needed

NOT the end of anything:

Rebirth - the start of a new way of being

Charles Dickens got this right in A Christmas Carol. Ebenezer Scrooge was this grumpy old guy, miserly in every sense of the word. He hated Christmas because it wasn’t productive, and of course, seeing everyone else be happy reminded him of how unhappy he was.

On Christmas Eve, he’s visited by three ghosts. The first takes him to his own past, the rejection of his family, the regrets of selfish decisions. The second ghost takes him to see all the suffering in the world, the debtors prisons, the child laborers that he was profiting from. And the third ghost takes him to the gloomy end of the story, where Tiny Tim dies and Scrooge’s own death goes unmourned.

And then (spoilers) Scrooge wakes up on Christmas morning and everything has changed. He's now the biggest fan of Christmas, throwing parties and making up with his relatives and giving away his money to charity. It's a whole new world for Scrooge. Of course, nothing has really changed at all—his past is still just as sad, there's still just as much suffering in the world, and, sorry folks, Tiny Tim still needs his cane and Scrooge's death isn't that far away.

Scrooge's Christmas conversion doesn't end any of that. What it is transformed is Scrooge himself, so that he's now able to see the world differently and start a new way of being. He's living as though it's a new world, even though it isn't yet.

That brings me to a third observation: Jesus *embodied* the restoration that he offered. There's a word that people smarter than me sometimes use, "reification." As in, to reify, to make something abstract more concrete or real. In my humble opinion, reification is a silly word, all prefixes and suffixes without an actual root word at all... But they tell me that the "re" comes from the Latin for "thing," so reification is literally "thing-making."

To make an idea real by behaving as though it is real. For example, sometimes we talk about the church as the family of God. That's just an abstract concept, we're not biologically related (well some of us aren't anyway...), we don't fit the legal definition of family, etc. But when we treat each other as family, we make that abstract concept a reality. Treating you as my brothers and sisters makes you my brothers and sisters in a real way. That's reification.

What kind of restoration is this?

NOT what was asked for:

Reclaiming and Renewal - shaped into what was truly needed

NOT the end of anything:

Rebirth - the start of a new way of being

NOT speculation:

Reification - made real by living the new reality

In the same way, Jesus reified God's promise of restoration. The Kingdom of God is here and now, Jesus said, and then he lived as though that were true. He made

the Kingdom real by living it. He made God's love real by living with love. He made God's Presence real by being God's presence.

Jesus brought restoration by living restoration.

The word that keeps coming back in all of this is "new." In our prayers for restoration, we tend to focus backward—take us back to before the war started, heal the wounds from that bad relationship, undo the wrongs that I have done. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." I believe that's what God does, cleansing and healing and giving second chances.

But not by erasing the past or putting things back the way they were. Instead God takes all of it, even the bad stuff, and reshapes it, renews it, gives it meaning and purpose, and creates something new.

Are we open to the new thing God is doing among us this Christmas? That's what Christmas is, more than anything, naming and hoping and trusting in the rebirth, renewal, re-incarnation of God's presence among us, here and now.

This is who God is. Even at the end of the biblical story, the apostle John's vision called Revelation. This is a familiar text to most of us:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;
for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,
and the sea was no more.*

*And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,
coming down out of heaven from God,
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said,
"See, I am making all things new."*

Revelation 21

Modern Western pop theology has given most of us an image of replacement, as though God says some magic words and “poof”, the old world is destroyed and replaced by a shiny new perfect world.

But there’s a different way to look at this text, as well, revelation, seeing differently. Imagine Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas morning—the world is the same, but he sees it with new eyes: “Then I saw, a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth, the way things were, had passed away and the sea (representing chaos) was no more.” And on down, the one who was seated on the throne said, “Look! I am making all things new.”

I. Am. Making. Grammarians call that the “Present Progressive Tense.” So let me be the first to wish you a Present Progressive Christmas! ☺ It’s happening, as we speak. Reclaiming, Renewing, Rebirthing, Reifying. Restoring. All things new. I Am Making.

May our eyes and hearts be open to see and live into God’s new birth among us.
Amen.