

Refocus, Restore, Rejoice

Rejoicing in God is not something we often intentionally do. We rejoice with friends and family at different events in our lives: a birthday celebration; an anniversary; the birth of a newborn. Sometimes after the celebration has ended, we take a moment to rejoice in what God has accomplished in our lives. What would be the impact of refocusing our joy?

Focus scripture: Psalm 126

Psalm 126 has the tension of both past tense and future tense; the writer remarks on what God has done – restoring the people of Israel from exile – and sheer joy that came from that knowledge. God didn't just use the people Israel in this restorative act. God used another nation to bring it about. As expressed in verse two, God uses others to perform God's purposes, and in so doing spreads the knowledge of God's deeds. As a post-exilic work, this psalm gives way to a new need for restoration. The return of the exiled people had occurred, but the building back of what had been lost was yet to come.

As many know, water often represents life and abundance. Where there is water, there is life; there is agriculture, there is prosperity. The watercourses in the Negev were the constancy of life. The psalmist is aware of the nature and importance of water, and this reference helps the hearers recall God's provision throughout the history of the Hebrew people. The psalmist prudently gives thanks for what God has done, and is certain of the provision that will come, "with shouts of joy."

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11 begins with an introduction of one sent by God to declare a holy word of restoration for the people Israel. The servant's words have power because they do not imply the importance of the servant, rather the work of God through the people to restore what has been destroyed. This news of restoration is for the oppressed, broken-hearted, captives, and prisoners. These categories have a mark on every Israelite of this time, whether exiled by the Babylonians or left in the wake of the destruction that took

place. These first few verses grab the pain with which these people were dealing, and so too the restorative verses that present the very nature of God. Out of brokenness can come restoration and rejoicing.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 Paul gives us a best-of list. They are actions that should be reflected in our everyday lives so that our daily living may glorify God. The section begins with "rejoice always." In everything we do, we should rejoice in God and in that rejoicing all the practices listed will set us on our way to sanctification.

John 1:6–8, 19–28 introduces John the baptizer. The writer of the fourth gospel wants to dispel any notion that John is somehow more important than the Messiah. He is a witness only, one who is preparing the way for the light by pointing to the Light. John draws on the words of Isaiah to refocus misconception of his messiahship and point to the Christ who is to come. In emphasizing the personhood of John, any reader can put themselves in the place of John as the witness to the Light. We can all testify that we are not the Light, and we can all testify to the Light.

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The readings in this third week of Advent live into the joy of God. Rejoicing in the therapeutic nature of God. Refocusing on the one who is to come. While readings from Isaiah and Psalms focus on the idea of restoring and rejoicing. The reading from the letter to the Thessalonians bridges this week's readings from the Hebrew scriptures to the gospel reading, as we look to refocus ourselves and the world around us on the coming Messiah.



Focus scripture
Psalm 126

Additional scriptures
Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11
Luke 1:46b–55
1 Thessalonians
5:16–24
John 1:6–8, 19–28

God, your coming into the world is not a single moment in time, but a never-ending cascade of moments in which we may participate in the joy of your creation. Grant us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to know the true meaning of rejoicing in you. Amen.

Lection Connection
links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Children in this age group often enjoy telling stories about things that have happened to them. Older children are able to remember key events in their lives that were particularly important to them. Some will have heard family stories and will enjoy hearing and telling these stories over and over. As they recognize that they are a part of these stories, they begin to narrate the stories from their own point of view and experience of events.

One of the ways we define ourselves as a family, community, and faith group is by telling and retelling our family stories. This week's focus passage offers children the opportunity to hear a story that was an important one for the Hebrew people in biblical

times. As children hear the people remembering and celebrating a story of God's faithfulness, they will be encouraged to remember and celebrate the stories of God's great actions in their own lives and in the world.

This week also has a focus on joy and celebration, and excitement will no doubt be building in the children these days.

Be aware that for some children the joy of this season can be mixed with sadness, especially since holidays can sometimes be stressful times when children experience anxiety over family situations. Pray that the children will recognize the good things that God is doing in their lives and that they will also discover that rejoicing with others helps to build community.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Psalm 126, and [biblical background material](#) (p. 19).
- ❑ Bring Bibles, matches, [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2).
- ❑ Bring, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 7), *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 7), and *CD player*; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Set a worship space with purple or blue cloth, Bible (with bookmark placed in focus passage), [Advent wreath](#) (see p. 100), and offering basket.
- ❑ Bring copies of resource sheet "[Advent Candle Ritual](#)" (p. 100); save copies for next week.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "May You Find Peace" (p. 26 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #19 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

Engage

- ❑ Bring this week's resource sheet "[Great Things](#)."
- ❑ **Bible research group:** bring copies of this week's resource sheet "[Psalm 126](#)."

- ❑ **Action group:** bring this week's resource sheet "[Psalm 126](#)."

Respond

Choose one or more of the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- ❑ **Art zone:** finger-painting or mural paper, variety of paints, brushes, glitter, coloured paper strips
- ❑ **Music zone:** sturdy paper bowls, string, jingle bells, self-adhesive stickers, metallic garlands, recording of lively music
- ❑ **Advent zone:** half a sheet of poster board, pastels, craft supplies (such as, cotton wool, yarn, tissue paper, construction paper, pipe cleaners)
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** copies of this week's resource sheet "[Joy Ornament](#)," raffia, rubber bands, ribbons, hooks

Bless

- ❑ Bring song "Celebrate Emmanuel" (p. 6 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #10 on the *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7), lyrics for the song "Invocation" (p. 19 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7).



Refocus, Restore, Rejoice

Scripture

Psalm 126

FOCUS To celebrate the good things God has done for us

Gather

Welcome the children as they arrive, introducing guests and newcomers. Explain that this is the third Sunday in the Season of Advent, a time when people wait and look forward to the birth of Jesus.

Opening ritual

Advent ritual Invite children to gather in the worship space. Distribute copies of the resource sheet

“[Advent Candle Ritual](#)” (p. 100) and invite three volunteers to lead the group in the ritual for the third Sunday of Advent.

Song If possible, sing “May You Find Peace” (p. 26 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #19 on the *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

Receive the offering and extinguish the Advent candles to signify the end of the gathering worship.

Connecting with the focus

Invite children to talk about emotions by sharing some of the things that make them feel sad, angry, and happy.

■ What are some things that make you feel excited? Why?

Explain that the Bible story for today is from a time when exciting and wonderful things were happening to God’s people.

Engage

Prepare for the Bible story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship area and use the bookmark to open it to the Psalms. Explain that the book of Psalms is a collection of poems and songs that people have been singing for thousands of years. Some of these psalms or prayer songs were sung when the people were feeling sad. Others were sung when people were feeling happy or thankful.

The Bible story

Rehearse the refrain from the resource sheet “[Great Things](#).” When the group can say the refrain as prompted, tell the story on the resource sheet, based on Psalm 126.

■ What did Elijah want the children to remember about God?

Explore the story further

(To enable the children to explore the scripture reading further, according to their interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.)

Bible research group The children in this group will have an opportunity to learn more about Psalm 126. Distribute Bibles and copies of the resource sheet “[Psalm 126](#)” and invite the group to review the information and discuss the questions together.

Action group The children in this group will have an opportunity to embody some of the words in Psalm 126 by creating actions. Follow the instructions in the bottom section of the resource sheet “[Psalm 126](#)” to create movements to accompany the psalm.

Reporting Invite the research group to report on their discoveries and the action group to share their movements for the psalm reading.

The Bible story and us

Psalm 126 talks about people who were so happy that they wanted to tell everyone about the great things God had done.

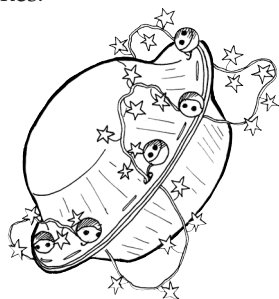
■ What great things do you think God is doing in our world today?

Invite children to imagine such things as seeing a beautiful sunset or hearing some really good news on the radio.

Respond

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- ❑ **Art zone: Joy painting** The psalm offers a message of hope and joy. Invite children to use the art supplies to create abstract paintings that illustrate the hope and joy that is celebrated at this time of year. Have them choose sentences or phrases from the psalm to add as titles for their paintings and create a display of the paintings in the church hall. Talk together about the joy of God's love for us and all creation.
- ❑ **Music zone: Making music** Like the Psalmist, we can use music to remember and celebrate God's steadfast love. Invite children to make "tambourines" by stapling two paper plates together, punching holes around the edges, and threading garland wire through the holes. Twist ends of garland together to secure and tie jingle bells to the holes with string. Help children print the words "God has done great things for us and we rejoice" on one side; decorate the other side with self-adhesive stickers. Enjoy some lively music together by singing songs accompanied by the tambourines.
- ❑ **Advent zone: Advent banner** Invite children to add a third "panel" to the banner. This week have them print the words of **Psalm 126:3** in the middle of the poster board and use the materials provided to create a swirling image of joy around the words.
- ❑ **Outreach zone: Thank you gifts** Psalm 126 uses harvest images to talk about joy. Invite children to make decorations from raffia, following instructions on the resource sheet "[Joy Ornament](#)." Have them use fine-tipped felt markers to write the words of **Psalm 126:3** on one length of ribbon and "Thank you for what you do" on another length of ribbon. Talk about who they might these gifts to: church office staff, ministers, volunteer leaders.



Bless

Gather in the worship space and relight the three Advent candles, symbolizing hope, peace, and joy. Invite children to name ways they can share joy during this season.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the chorus of “Celebrate Emmanuel” as a reminder that God is always with us.

Pray Invite two volunteers to alternate in reading the lyrics for verses 2–5 of the song “Invocation” as a closing prayer.

Blessing Send each child out saying, “(Name), God is with you, now and always.”

Reflect

In what ways did the children enter into the joy of this session? How might you support those children who seemed unable to join in? Which Respond zones meet the learning needs of the children in your group?



GREAT THINGS

(including a paraphrase of Psalm 126)

Involving the children in the presentation of Psalm 126 will give them the theme to remember long after the story is over.

When old Elijah sat down in the shade of the big tree, the children hurried to sit around him. They knew Elijah would tell them stories of long ago, of the time when their people were slaves in Egypt or when they lived in Babylon and longed to return to Jerusalem.

As they jostled and scurried to sit close to Elijah, they wondered what the story would be today. Elijah's eyes were closed. He did this sometimes, pretending to be asleep. Then Elijah would act surprised when he opened his eyes and saw the children sitting there.

"Disturbing my nap again, are you? Can't get a moment's rest here anymore," Elijah complained. But the children knew Elijah was playing with them. Elijah loved to tell the stories of God and God's people.

"Well," Elijah said, "I have something a little different today. You have heard the stories of when our ancestors were slaves in Egypt and how hard and miserable our lives were there. I have told you about living in Babylon and how much we wanted to be here in Jerusalem. I will never forget the day we were able to come here, to come home. What joy! Everyone was shouting and praising God.

"All the way here, and it took many days to walk from Babylon to Jerusalem, we gave thanks to God. We even wrote a special prayer song to praise God and to give thanks for all that God has done and does for us.

"You can help me with it. I will say a part. When I point to you, all of you, you say this part:

God has done great things for us.

You go, God.

'When God said we could return to Jerusalem, we thought we were dreaming!

Then we began to laugh and shout for joy!

All the nations around us looked at us and said, "God is doing great things for them."

God has done great things for us.

You go, God.

'O God, be good to us now, as you have been in the past.'

God has done great things for us.

You go, God.

'If we begin our day in tears, end our day with shouts of joy.'

God has done great things for us.

You go, God.

"So, children," Elijah said, "always remember that God has done great things for us. Every day, give thanks to God. Now, why don't you go and play, so this old man can take a little nap."



Psalm 126

Bible research group

1. Some Bibles have titles for each psalm. Find Psalm 126 in your Bibles.

■ **Does this psalm have a title in your Bible? If so, what is it?**

2. Psalm 126 is part of a group of psalms (**Psalms 120–134**) that have an overall title of “Songs of Ascents.” Ascent means “to go up” and these psalms may have been sung by pilgrims as they travelled up to Jerusalem, which was on a hill.

3. Here are some words from Psalm 126 and what they mean:

the Lord: God

Zion: another name for Jerusalem

watercourses: deep, narrow, dry valleys where streams of water suddenly appear when it rains

Negeb/Negev: the word means “dry” and “south” and is the name for the desert region of southern Israel

sow: to plant seeds

reap: to bring it or harvest plants or fruit when they are ripe and ready to eat or cook

sheaves: bundles of grain that has been cut and tied together

4. In Psalm 126 the people remembered all the good things that God had done for them.

■ **What are some words that describe the people’s joy?**

■ **What are some words that describe the people’s hope?**

Action group

1. Ask participants to think of actions that demonstrate each of the following words or phrases:

Verse 1: “those who dream”

Verse 2: “mouth was filled with laughter”

Verse 3: “great things”

Verse 4: “watercourses” (a river)

Verse 5: “tears”

Verse 6: “shouts of joy”

2. Read Psalm 126 aloud slowly, pausing at each word or phrase to invite participants to do their actions.



Joy Ornament

1. Take a bundle of wheat grass or raffia and secure one end with a rubber band.
2. Ask a partner to hold on to the banded end of the bundle.
3. Separate the tied bundle into three strands and braid the strands together.
4. When the braid is finished, secure the other end with another rubber band.
5. Tie ribbons over both rubber bands.
6. Mark the word "Joy" on one ribbon.
7. Secure a hook in one rubber band to hang the ornament on a tree.



Advent Candle Ritual

Making an Advent wreath

Materials: real or artificial evergreen branches, or green garland; five candle holders; four blue candles, or three purple candles and one pink candle; one white candle

1. Form the branches or garland into a circle (symbolizing God's love which never ends).
2. Place the four coloured candles in a circle evenly spaced around the wreath.
3. Place the white candle (Christ candle) in the middle.



First Sunday of Advent

Reader 1: Today is the first Sunday of Advent.

Reader 2: We light the first candle, the candle of hope.

Light the first blue or purple candle.

Reader 3: We wait in hope and longing for Jesus' birth.

Second Sunday of Advent

Reader 1: We light the first candle again, the candle of hope.

Light the first blue or purple candle.

Reader 2: Today is the second Sunday of Advent and we light the second candle, the candle of peace.

Light the second blue or purple candle.

Reader 3: We wait in hope and longing for Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Third Sunday of Advent

Reader 1: We light the first two candles again, for hope and peace.

Light two blue or purple candles.

Reader 2: Today is the third Sunday of Advent and we light a candle for joy.

Light the third blue or the pink candle.

Reader 3: We wait in hope and longing to celebrate Jesus' birth.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Reader 1: We light the first two candles, for hope and peace.

Light two blue or purple candles.

Reader 2: We light the third candle again, for joy.

Light the third blue or the pink candle.

Reader 3: Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent and we light the last Advent candle, for love.

Light the fourth blue or purple candle.

Reader 4: We wait in hope and joy as we prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ child.