I am going to be reading Psalm 126. The 126th Psalm was probably written by someone who had been enslaved and was now returning home. Someone who had been removed from their homeland and now they were coming back home.

The writer of Psalm 126 is lifting up a second Exodus, over 500 years before the birth of Christ, when God once again led enslaved people out of slavery and back home. Formerly enslaved people returning home is a common theme in the Bible. I invite us to remember these words as I share a little bit about the history of Allison Creek.

**Read Psalm 126**

To catch a glimpse of the history of Allison Creek I am going to be talking about pews. Specifically, the pews that we have brought into this Family Life Center and that the folks along that back wall are sitting on. Those pews were built sometime in the 1850s and have served this church for its entire 165 years of existence. They were obviously well built.

These pews were built under the direction of white people in this community who wanted to build a new church where they could worship God. They valued worship and worship of God was central to their identity. In fact, the church leadership declared a day of fasting on August 20th, 1856 and prayed for the Holy Spirit to bring revival to this church. People sat on these pews in the 1850s and prayed for God’s Spirit to visit this congregation.

The people that prayed those prayers for revival, however, did not build those pews where they sat. These pews were built by the ancestors of Liberty Hill Church. The craftsmen who built these pews were African-Americans who were enslaved.

The same people who sat in the pews and prayed for the fresh winds of the Spirit did not fully understand texts like Psalm 126. Texts which celebrate how God breaks down walls of injustice and lets the enslaved go free.

In fact, the white ancestors of Allison Creek did not want these pews to be built level. Let me ask the ones sitting in the pews. What do you notice about the bottoms of the pews? Do you see the wedges on the bottom of the pews?

When the pews were originally constructed by African-American craftsmen, the craftsmen were instructed to build the pews with a downward slope. So that way, if the white members of Allison Creek started to fall asleep in worship they would fall right out of the pew. The wedges that you see were added later.

I want to share another story about these pews. I want to share a story of what I think about every time I see these pews. These pews remind me of one of the worst examples of leadership I displayed as pastor of this church.

The Liberty Hill folks here have a pastor who doesn’t make leadership mistakes. Isn’t that right? In fact, I keep this slinky on my desk and I can thank Pastor Thelma for this. You gave me a leadership book one time. A book about how children’s toys can teach us how to be good leaders. I keep this slinky on my desk from reading that book. This slinky reminds me how to lead. (Demonstrate to guide people forward but not too fast and don’t leave people lagging behind).

Anyway, when I arrived here at Allison Creek these pews were not in good shape. They had pew cushions on them, and the stuffing was falling out. And not only that. The pews were trimmed in this nasty North Carolina Tarheel Blue. I know some people believe that God is a UNC Tarheel because the sky is that color, but I went to Clemson and I don’t see it.

Some people wanted to replace the pews with new pews, and some wanted to restore the old pews. The congregation was split down the middle. We talked about both options and then it got to December of that year. I told the Session, our governing body, that we needed to make a decision that night. Some members of Session were rotating off and I did not want the new Session having to make that decision.

So, I pressured those men and women that night and told them they had to make a decision. You know what happens when you try to make a decision and you are anxious? You can only think about 2 solutions. Either this or that. If you are anxious, you can’t find creative solutions.

So, we took a vote that night. The Session voted 6-5 to replace the pews. No one left happy that night. Even the ones who voted in the majority. But a final decision had been made.

But you know what. God’s Spirit sometimes chooses to intervene in church decisions. The next month four new elders rotated onto Session. Mark Sleeper was one of those elders. Mark, in his first Session meeting says, can we make a different decision about the pews? Mark said, can we put new pews downstairs and restore the old pews in the balcony? You know, compromise?

Literally, the rest of Session looked at each other and said, “we never thought about that.” With barely 15 minutes of discussion, this new Session voted unanimously to put new pews downstairs and restore the old pews for the balcony.

If faced with a similar situation in the future, I will handle it differently. And I know what I would do differently. So, when I see these pews, I see a reminder that God takes a less than perfect pastor who has lots and lots of shortcomings and is seeking to make me into something better than what I was.

And so that is what I think these pews can mean for all of us. These pews remind us of a horrible time in our history when people were enslaved on the land where we now build our homes and play with our kids and grandkids. These pews remind us of a history in this church where white people sat in one area and persons of color were kept in chains and forced to sit in a balcony that is still present today.

But today at Allison Creek, when I look up into the balcony, I do not see people forced to be there against their will. I do not see people sitting on these pews in the balcony and hearing about how God blesses the institution of slavery. Instead, I see white faces and black faces sharing a common faith commitment. I see people sitting on these pews who welcome others to sit beside them regardless of the color of their skin.

So, these pews tell our history. A history where God is in the business of transformation. Transforming old sinfulness into new life and ministry.

So whatever brokenness we may feel today, let these pews be a visible reminder that God creates and recreates and sets us free from whatever may be holding us back. Today we join in worship together as one body guided by one Spirit.

Today we are invited to share in the one body of Christ through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Everyone who is broken is invited forward to partake and share in God’s grace and in God’s reconciliation.

Today we give witness to the transformation that comes from God through Christ. AMEN.

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-Given: April 7, 2019 in joint service with Allison Creek and Liberty Hill AMEZ (York, SC)