

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2022  
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

*Restoration Is Near*

This morning we're going to talk about the word "*restoration*." What does it mean to restore something? Let's start with an old piece of furniture. Way back when Lois and I were newly married, her parents gave us an old threshing table. It was made out of oak, and had something like six or eight leaves that went with it, and so we knew it would (or at least could) make a beautiful dining table for us. Problem was, it had been sitting in their barn for years, and so had bird droppings and oil stains all over it. So her parents decided first to have it restored. Which in this case meant of course washing it, but then also sanding it, and next staining it. The hope was *to make [it] beautiful again*, to bring out the unique grain of its unique wood. The bird droppings came off easily enough. But the oil stains were just too deep to sand completely out. But it was and is still beautiful. It's heavy as all get-out to move! But we've served a lot of meals around that table throughout our 38 years of marriage!

Sometimes it actually is possible to restore an old piece of furniture *to "like new" condition*, to get all the scratches and blemishes out, then stain it, and finally, top it off with a new coat of varnish or polyurethane. But either way, we could say that to restore something means in part to simply make it beautiful again.

Or, it could mean to *return [something] to its original condition*. Like an old car. Sue Buchholz has told me how her husband DeVerne used to love restoring old cars. Like his beloved 1967 royal plum Chevrolet Camaro. It's certainly not "new"; but it's something even better: *antique*. Which sometimes even *make[s] something priceless in value*.

Having an old work of art restored can *give [it] new life*, suitable for hanging in one's home, or even in a museum, where it can be enjoyed by many people, not just a few. Restoring an old building can *make [it] usable and useful* once again. We all know that Doug Bartel has his own "fix-it shop" where he restores all kinds of equipment to a usable condition. Like the used lawn mower Lois and I bought from him several years ago. It's not new, but it works!

We could say that restoration happens in our bodies when we heal from illness or injury [*physical healing*]. Like Deryll and Jan's daughter-in-law Rinda, after her horrible auto accident on Highway 50 between Walton and Newton in March of '21. Those of us who have had Covid have all experienced restoration as *recovery from an illness*. (Except of course for those unfortunate enough to have long Covid. I wonder what it would mean for Pastor Darren Remple of Ebenfeld MB to experience restoration? Or our own loved ones who are battling cancer?)

What about restoration as healing of a different kind, namely *healing of relationships*? We all know how relationships between people can be injured or become ill. And just as illnesses and injuries can *sometimes require[s] the help of others*, namely doctors and nurses with special training, so too can the healing of relationships benefit from outside help.

Sometimes restoration requires justice [*Bring about justice*]. You may have all heard of something called "restorative justice." Ironically, we Mennonites are often given credit for originating it. (Which unfortunately doesn't mean we are able to do it very well.) It stands in sharp contrast to what we could call "retributive justice," in which the purpose and goal is retribution or punishment. Nearly our entire legal system is based on retributive justice. But what if it were based on restorative justice, in which the goal is restoration, healing, repairing, returning? Which isn't to imply it's easy. It is actually very difficult. It involves and indeed

requires the offender being held completely accountable, to face the fullness of the harm they have caused. And then, to do what they can to make amends for it. The goal is healing and restoration for both the victim and the offender. Some of you may have heard of the program called “Victim-Offender Ministries,” just down the road in Newton. Not surprisingly this program was started by Mennonites.

One thing we learn from these different examples is that restoration *is a process, not a quick fix*. And the process will require patience, determination, and hard work.

But what about this morning’s passage from Psalm 80? What kind of restoration is the psalmist talking about here? Notice first of all that it is a prayer—a plea—to God [*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel*]. The implication being that some kinds of restoration only God can provide. And notice secondly that in this case, the restoration being pleaded for is not individual but communal. “*Restore us, O God,*” the psalmist writes on behalf of the community. But who were these people? And in what ways did they need to be restored?

Fortunately, the text includes clues. They were the children of Israel. Most likely those in the northern kingdom. So, the restoration they were all praying to God for may very well have been *rescue from [their] enemies, and [from] oppressive conditions*. It may have included a *military victory* over the powerful armies of King Nebuchednezzar before their final conquest of Israel had taken place. Or by this time, it may simply have *been rescue from [their] bondage, and return to their homeland*. Return, in other words, to their original condition, to whom they used to be. Not “like new,” necessarily. Not without scars and stains. But at the very least, a return to their former beauty. Like a piece of old, fine furniture that had fallen into disrepair, or a work of art that had been neglected and had lost its original beauty.

Almost certainly, the restoration they pleaded for included a restoration or repair of relationship, namely their relationship with God. That relationship had become badly damaged, and they were solely to blame. And so the salvation they yearned for, while it may have included *salvation from [their] enemies*, almost certainly also included *salvation from themselves [ourselves]*. (Ironic, isn’t it, how we sometimes need to be saved from ourselves?) And it most certainly required *asking for and being given forgiveness*. *Forgiveness from God*, forgiveness *from one another*.

Now, what about us? What about First Mennonite Church of Hillsboro? What is the restoration we yearn for? Here are at least some possibilities. Do we need to be rescued from our enemies (whoever they may be)? Do we need rescuing from our own selves? Do we long to be restored to a former state, to the way things—and we ourselves—used to be? Do we desire to be remade, good as new? Or would we be satisfied to simply be made beautiful once again?

Is it healing we most need? Healing from illness of some kind? Healing from injury? How about healing of relationships? Our relationships with one another, for starters? How about our relationship with God? Where might forgiveness be needed, whether the need is to ask for it, or to grant it?

Seems safe to assume that the restoration we long for will need to be a process, rather than a quick fix. It’s going to require patience, determination, hard work. Above all, it’s going to require our total reliance on God. Because, like the Exodus, only God can pull off this kind of miracle.

Finally, in this season of Advent, we are compelled to think more broadly, to pray for the restoration not just of ourselves here at FMC, but of the very world we live in. Where in our

world is justice most needed, a justice that is actually restorative, rather than merely retributive? What places in our world need to be repaired? Restored to their original state? Good as new? Or simply made beautiful once again?

In this season of Advent, we are reminded all over again of our need to wait. But it is not a purposeless, pointless waiting. We know what we are waiting for. Namely, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of his reign.

So let us take heart. It may need to be a process, rather than a quick fix. It may require patience, determination, hard work. It may require absolute reliance on God, above all. It may even be a miracle we are waiting for. Nevertheless, the restoration we so badly yearn for is near. Our restoration is near.

Amen.