

“Worship – In a Foreign Land”

Lent 5: Radical Renovation

Psalm 137: 1-6

March 29, 2020

Music is an important part of our lives. It has the ability to express emotions ranging from the highest highs to the lowest lows. In the Bible, the Psalms have long been thought to be songs. There are songs of great joy, like Psalm 100:

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.*

*Worship the Lord with gladness;*

*come into [God’s] presence with singing.*

And then there are songs of lament, like the one we’re confronted with this morning, Psalm 137.

*By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.*

Let’s put this Psalm in an historical context first. The people of God were defeated in a battle and taken captive. They were forced to live in a foreign land. This “exile” of the people of God to Babylonia seems to have come to those who survived the destruction of Jerusalem, their holy city.

So even after the destruction of their city and the center of their worship life, the Babylonians took the people of God away from their home, their land and their center of worship. They were forced to live in an unfamiliar land without any of what was familiar in life or in faith.

And so from this place, we hear their song of lament:

*By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.*

This Psalm is a reminder that the people of God must never forget what has happened to them. In remembering, they wept:

- They wept over the death of so many loved ones
- They wept over the loss of almost everything they owned

- They wept over the destroyed city of Jerusalem and her great temple
- They wept over the agony of a forced march from Judea to Babylon
- They wept over the cruelty of their captors
- They wept over the loss of such a pleasant and blessed past
- They wept over the forced captivity of their present
- They wept over the bleak nature of their future

The people of God wept, and then the Psalm says they *“hung up their harps.”* While this may be seen as an end to the song, it can also be seen as an act of defiance. While there were no songs left in these captives, they hung their harps on the willow trees. They didn’t break their harps into pieces, or throw them into the rivers, indicating that they saw the end of their singing to be a permanent thing. They hung them in the trees, saving them for what would surely be a new and better day.

*“For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”*

The conquerors mocked the exiles. They saw their songs as some kind of performance, something to be produced for the entertainment of others.

*“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”* comes the response.

The people of God knew why they sang. It wasn’t for the entertainment of either friend or foe. It was for God. The songs of God’s people came from their relationship with God. It would take a long time to sing those songs in a foreign land. Nothing was familiar. Their hearts were hurting. They didn’t know how to sing their songs in this condition of exile.

This portion of the Psalm ends with a harsh reminder: if the people of God forget Jerusalem – God’s holy city – then they run the very real risk of losing their ability to share the song.

*“Let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth.”*

In other words, if the people of God forget the city of God, the right hand would lose the ability to play the harp, and the tongue would lose the ability to sing.

Exile may be a familiar condition to us right now. It's been 3 weeks since we gathered in our sanctuary. Earlier this week I received communication from the Bishop saying that It will likely be another 6 weeks before we come together to worship in our familiar space surrounded by our beloved community and singing our faithful songs.

While in our own kind of exile we may not be able to physically gather in our "Jerusalem," or see one another face to face. But we can still sing the songs of God and worship together.

Let me share some ways that we can do that:

Keep the ritual and structure of your worship habit.

- Get up on Sundays and gather as a family for worship at 8:30 or 10:30
  - ✓ You will be able to find a new recorded worship experience every week on our website
  - ✓ Join in with responsive readings, prayers and hymns – just as you'd do here in the sanctuary
  - ✓ Remember that worship is really between you and God, so don't worry so much about how you look or sound; make a joyful noise!
- Bring your family, especially your children, to church with you
  - ✓ There will be a children's moment each week message specifically for your children
  - ✓ Gather them around the TV or your computer screen and watch it with them
  - ✓ And then take some moments to discuss it with them
- Take your children to Sunday School
  - ✓ Watch for messages from Lynnette about Sunday School ideas. These may come to you via email, or they may be posted on our website or the church Facebook page.
  - ✓ If you're not receiving these, or if you are having trouble with the technology, be sure to contact Lynnette and she can help you access that

- Remember, too, that giving is an act of worship. As you are able, please maintain that habit.
  - ✓ The church mail will continue to be picked up and processed, so you can give that way
  - ✓ Continue to keep up your electronic giving through your bank or the church's electronic giving administrator, Vanco
  - ✓ Take advantage of either the Give+ app on your phone, or the giving option on our church website
  - ✓ And don't forget about other organizations whose resources are being pushed to the limit in these times. Consider a special gift through the church to R.O.C.K., the FISH Network, or UMCOR.

Keep the routine, but also try to develop some new worship habits

- Try a family Prayer Walk
  - ✓ As our need to get outside increases as the days of social distancing add up, we can get out for a purposeful walk
  - ✓ Walk through your neighborhood and pray for the needs of people and places that you see
    - Pray for families with children and their unique struggles
    - Pray for your elderly neighbors who are more isolated now than ever
    - And pray for God's healing for those who are ill
  - ✓ Pray quietly. You can be on the scene without making one.
    - This isn't a time to have evangelistic conversations
    - Instead, pray for God to open doors of communication and community naturally
  - ✓ Let your prayer lead you to action
    - Deliver food to an elderly neighbor who might need some
    - Call a friend to tell them you've been thinking of them and wanted to just chat
    - Offer to watch over (from a safe distance) your neighbor's children to give them a little break
- Pray virtually with your church

- ✓ Beginning this week, I am going to be online “live” for a time of prayer. I may use Facebook Live, or I may choose ZOOM as the platform. Either way I’ll send out an invitation to attend if you can and instructions on how to join.
- ✓ If you have prayer requests you’d like to include in our weekly prayers, email or call the church office.
- Study the words of the Bible
  - ✓ Use some of your new-found time to develop a habit of reading the scriptures
  - ✓ Study them with a group – also this week I’m going to be setting up an online Bible Study. I’ll be online Mondays at 10am and Tuesdays at 7pm and for this first study we’ll be looking at the Psalms using “Life Lessons With Max Lucado” – again, watch for the invitation and join me!

Whatever you are doing to worship in this time of social distancing, be consistent with your habits, attentive to your spirit, and patient with yourself.

- Habits are developed when we do something consistently
  - ✓ Doing something over and over again will help develop a habit
  - ✓ It doesn’t happen over night
  - ✓ It might not even happen in 3 weeks
  - ✓ But if you participate in your spiritual practice consistently over time, you will develop a habit
  - ✓ You already have a worship habit
  - ✓ Continue to nurture that habit, even as we are away from one another
- Pay attention to your spirit
  - ✓ Our spirits are designed by God to be hungry for God
  - ✓ God has created us with a void that is only filled by God
  - ✓ So when you are hungering for other things
  - ✓ When you are filling a void with food or mindless activities
  - ✓ Ask yourself if the void you are filling is actually a hunger for God
  - ✓ Your spirit knows its need to connect with the living God
  - ✓ Pay attention to it!

- Be patient with yourself
  - ✓ You will not do this perfectly, no one will
  - ✓ Keep trying
  - ✓ If you miss your scheduled time, practice your spiritual habit when you think of it
  - ✓ If you realize it's been a while, don't be defeated
  - ✓ Get up and try again
  - ✓ God will continue to work in you

I understand the feeling of exile – and it extends beyond the church:

- Yes, I miss being able to gather for public worship,
- And I miss seeing the children at Sunday School and in our worship space
- But like many of you, I've also missed my spring break vacation,
- And I've missed going out to eat at my favorite restaurant, getting my hair cut, (and getting my nails done)

But the good news is that exiles were eventually returned to Jerusalem, the Temple was rebuilt, and their holy celebrations could continue in the holiest of places. And even before that, the people of God found new ways to worship in new places.

Our time of exile will end, and things will slowly return to the way they once were. But until then, keep the ritual and structure of your worship habit as best as you can, develop some new habits, attend to your spirit, and be patient with yourself. We can “make a joyful noise to the Lord,” even in this “new land.”

AMEN.