

October 2 – World Communion Sunday

Singing the Lord's Song

Psalm 137 1-6

The people of Israel had been taken into captivity. We continually see pictures of refugees, even to this day, who have been forced by war to leave their homes. Sometimes the individuals have chosen to leave, other times they were forced out and yes, even now sometimes they are taken away by the victors to a place they would not choose to be. We see how discouraged they are. We see the fear and uncertainty etched on their faces. So we can picture pretty clearly how the people of Israel felt and looked as they sat beside a river in Babylon. They did not want to be here. They believed that their God had been defeated by the gods of the Babylonians. Now they were being mocked by their captors and told to sing the Lord's songs. No wonder this Psalm begins with, "We sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion."

Now most of us have not had to experience the trauma of forced relocation. But we have all known those times of extreme sadness and discouragement where tears fill our eyes and we long for the "Good Ol' Days."

I have visited with people soon after they have heard a terminal diagnosis for themselves or a loved one. They are experiencing extreme grief. Often they talk about how just a few days or weeks ago things were so different. They are in a place of exile that they never wanted to be. I have had conversations with grandparents who are learning that their son or daughter is getting a divorce and the spouse gets custody of the grandchildren. They have just learned that they might not be allowed much contact with them. They are devastated. Their plans, their dreams are in ashes. They wonder if their grandchildren will ever really know them. I have sat beside people as they cried following accidents that have left them incapacitated. Suddenly they are facing issues like needing to be in a rehab facility, or no longer living independently or needing to give up control of vast portions of their lives to children or friends or advisors. They are in the wilderness thinking longingly of the past. And I see many a person walking beside a loved one who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's watching them slip a little farther

away from them with each passing day. The present is difficult and the future is scary. They cry silent tears for what was. So you see, we understand the pain these Israelites were feeling when they shed tears beside the rivers of Babylon. We have all experienced those moments where life has placed us in situations we do not want.

Fortunately, we are rarely mocked when we are in these situations. We feel for the Israelites who were told by their captors to sing happy songs of Zion. But sometimes we are almost as bad. We say, "Quit crying and deal with it." "Put on your big boy/girl panties." "Look for the positives instead of dwelling on the negatives." "We don't want to talk about it anymore." What we are doing is denying their pain and discouragement. It is hard to listen to, to be with people in their pain. Yet that is part of what we are sometimes called to do.

But like the Israelites we often have questions about where is God in the midst of this situation. They, as I said, wondered if God was defeated and they had to now worship the god of the victors. That was often expected of vanquished people. We too, wonder where God is at these challenging moments in our lives. I spend much time helping people work through those kinds of questions. I had a friend become angry when he heard people were praying for him after he learned he had terminal cancer. He said, "What good is that?" It was a form of lament doubting God's presence. He got through those times but the doubting was real. I have sat with couples after a child died as they asked, "Why did God let this happen?" I have heard, "Why me?" when people are going through really tough times.

In all of these situations I share my beliefs. I believe that God does not target us for difficulties. We are not having this done to us to teach us something. We are not going through this because "God doesn't give us a load heavier than we can carry." I share that life is unpredictable. Because these bodies are mortal we will get sick and we will die. I had a physician friend who always said, "People should never wonder why they get sick. They should celebrate all the times they are well! It is easy to understand why we would get sick. There are so many things that can and do go wrong in our bodies. What is miraculous is that we are well so much of the time!" Once we get past

the feelings of anger as to why God is doing this to me then we begin to look at the bigger question. How is God with me at this time? This is what this Psalm shares.

It began with tears and discouragement. It progressed through testing and doubt but finally they said that they needed to sing because we cannot forget. They could not forget about God who had rescued them from slavery in the past. They could not forget that God had promised them that they would live in Jerusalem. They could not forget that God had promised that a descendent of David would reign. They sang the Lord's songs as a symbol of hope, of memory of defiance and of possibility.

The good news is that they didn't forget. During this time of captivity they created the synagogue form of worship. No longer could their faith be sustained by the temple and its sacrifices. They needed something different. They began to worship together on the Sabbath. They would sing the songs of Zion, they would hear the sacred texts, and they would talk about how to remain faithful in a strange land. From these communal gatherings came the synagogue service. Along with this the rabbi became their teacher and leader. This has allowed them to be a global faith. It likely would not have happened, or at least as soon as it did, if the Temple was standing. It prepared the way for Jesus, who throughout much of his public ministry taught and acted like a rabbinic teacher. God didn't plan the disaster for this to happen but God was in the midst of the disaster and working at making things new.

This is the reminder for us as well. When we are at our lowest we need to remember God is with us. We need to sing God's praises even though we feel like weeping. There is something very powerful in raising your voice in song praising God, even when you feel more like crying. The more we can affirm our faith in the midst of trials, remembering all the times God has been with us in the past, the better we will be able to get through the present trials. And sometimes, like the Israelites, when we look back we are amazed at what good God has brought out of these times of trials. It doesn't always happen this way but we can affirm that we are never alone.

I think of a man in my church who lost his wife of just a couple of years when an undetected blood clot, that was the result of a fall, broke loose and went straight to her

heart and killed her. They were both in the early 20's. He was devastated, as any of us would be. He questioned God and was very angry for a bit. But he kept coming to see me and talk with me. I kept reminding him that Mandy would not want him to stay stuck in this dark place. They had been making plans for the future. What were his plans now? He often was angry when I asked because he just wanted to focus on his pain and his anger. But we kept talking and one day he said, "Mandy was insistent that I finish my degree. I just signed up for fall classes in her honor." He started putting the pieces of his life back together. His younger brother asked him if he would help with the church youth group. He wasn't sure about getting involved in church but he would do anything for Josh. It has been 15 years and during that time I have watched his life evolve. He has married again, has a good job and a son of his own. The last time I saw his dad he said he had a word from his son for me. It was, "Thanks for being there. Thanks for reminding me there was a future. Thanks for helping me to see that God never forsakes me."

So, when you are struggling with life, sing to the Lord a song of Zion. Proclaim your faith even when you feel lost and hurt. Remember how God has been with you and you will begin to understand how God is with you now and in God's love together you will create a new tomorrow. It will be different from what you expected, perhaps, but centered in love and ultimately filled with possibilities.