

“How Can We Sing?”

Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137; Luke 17:5-10

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October 3, 2010

Nearly 2,600 years ago (586 B.C.E.) the city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and many of its people were carried away into exile. They were descendants of Abraham, the one to whom the LORD had said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12: 1-3). They were God’s chosen people, blessed to be a blessing and they were in exile, disoriented and depressed.¹ And “by the rivers of Babylon, there [they] sat down, and there [they] wept, when they remembered [their home].” Their wicked captors mocked them and demanded that they “sing [them] one of the songs of Zion!” And there **in that “strange land”** they wondered: **“How can we sing?”**

Their world was turned upside, and reality **was out of tune with the promise and their theology**. How could they sing “one of the the songs of Zion” (Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87), which proclaimed that the city was indestructible, when it was now destroyed!? “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her” (Lam 1:1-2). How could the LORD keep the promise and make of them “a great nation” when they had lost “their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their heart’s affection, and also their sons and their daughters” (Ezek 24:25)? **They had every reason to hang up their harps on those willow branches** (v.2).

But they refused to be silent. In an act of imaginative, faithful resistance they did not sing the LORD’s song, but a new song; a song of lament that spoke to their reality (They composed a song of lament about not being able to sing!). In this lament the memory of Jerusalem is crucial. The strategic purpose of exile was to destroy the identity of a nation and assimilate it to the ways of the conquering nation. And so it wasn’t just a song, **it was a protest**, whereby they refused to forget their homeland. “If I forget you, O Jerusalem; let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

¹ Richard Nelson, *Interpretation: First and Second Kings*, 5. “The books of Jeremiah, Lamentations and Ezekiel give us insight into the theological of the original audience of Kings. There was a general feeling of depression and disorientation.”

In the midst of remembering, **this song of lament and protest becomes a prayer as well.** The *LORD* is asked to remember *with them* that day of Jerusalem's fall; and daughter Babylon is cursed. It is a prayer-song that ends with mixed tears of hurt and hate that *must* be sung and heard. Silence will not suffice. This song is beautiful and disturbing, and calls to mind (for me) Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, *Sympathy*:

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
 When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
 When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals —
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting —
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, —
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a **prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,**
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
I know why the caged bird sings!

In the last verses of this song, **the psalmist teaches us to be honest in prayer.** What Kathleen O'Connor has said about the Book of Lamentations is true of this psalm: "Without coming to grips with our own despair, losses, and anger, we cannot gain our full humanity, unleash our blocked passions, or live in genuine community with others. [This psalm] untangles complex knots of grief, despair, and violent anger [...This psalm] can melt frozen and numbed spirits" (O'Connor 2002, 131). **There will be no healing if these words cannot be sung and heard.** However angry the petition may be, it is an attempt to reclaim some semblance of order and logic in an otherwise chaotic experience. It is the logic of "an eye for an eye," where the punishment fits the crime. And so, cursing, the psalmist asks that the Babylonians experience the pain of watching *their own* children die at the hands of invaders: "Happy shall they be who pay you back for what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take *your* little ones and dash them against the rock!" (vv. 8-9). At its conclusion, this prayer-song does not call us or anyone to acts of violence. Instead it challenges us to sing and pray to God "from [our] heart's

deep core” in the most difficult of times, when *our* world does not make sense; when reality contradicts our theology (i.e., everything we thought we knew about God).

Sure we sing when birthdays are being celebrated. We sing to the radio in the car. We sing to ourselves in the shower. We sing the National Anthem at sporting events. We sing “fight songs” when “our” team is winning. We sing when we are in love. BUT we also sing when a relationship has ended (the “break-up song” is now its own genre!). We sing at funerals when a loved one has died. We sing under the weight of oppression when we are denied freedoms and rights. We sing when we scarcely have a grain of faith left, and our hearts cry out, “Increase our faith!” We sing when we have every reason to remain silent. [SLOWING]

I believe this kind of singing, which seems to protest even as it prays, is a gift of the Spirit, which “intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26b). ***This kind of singing is most remarkable, and indicative of faith, because it is directed to God when God seems most absent.***

When Jesus was dying on the cross he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46). Of all of the scriptures he could have quoted, he chose the lyrics of Psalm 22. I sometimes wonder if Jesus was singing, even then—lamenting, protesting, praying to God. And I also consider that when Jesus felt most forsaken he recalled a song sung in community, and perhaps then was not so alone. Then I remember that **today’s psalm is a communal event**, for its creation does not answer the question, “How can *I* sing?” but “How can *we* sing?” In the face of exile, estrangement, chaos, despair, violence and hatred this psalm reminds us that ***the community must remember, the community must sing.***

So whenever we gather, church, let us not take for granted the fact that we can sing together. It is a gift of the Spirit not to be squandered. Let us remember that we sing not only for ourselves, but also for one another. Let us sing for those who have been silenced. Let us sing for those who have hung up their harps. Let us sing our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, passions and anger—in prayer, in praise, in protest. (Write a new song if you have to!) And let us sing it all to God:

And let the words of [our mouths] and the
meditation of [our hearts]
be acceptable to you
O LORD, [our] rock and [our] redeemer.
(Psalm 19:14, adapt.)