

Singing God's Song in Exile by Ruth Cooke

Would you pray with me and for me, please...

My commentary on the Psalms by Craig C. Broyles states boldly, "Many psalms are cherished by Christians; this one is not."

If we read the psalm at all, we read the first two stanzas, leaving out the closing curse on Babylon, or we change the words so that the curse is less graphic and cruel.

And yet, this psalm speaks to what is happening in 2020 like no other.

This was written after the Babylonian empire had conquered Judah and all but destroyed Jerusalem. About one quarter of the population had been forced into exile, splitting families, destroying hopes and dreams. But worse than that, the Temple was gone, razed to the ground.

The Temple in Jerusalem is where God lived. Our Christian belief that God is everywhere was foreign to the Israelites. From the beginning, it was important to them that God had a home, and that home was the Temple. And now it was gone.

The Jewish religion had to change. No longer could observant Jews go to the Temple to sacrifice animals and to commune with God. Synagogues replaced Temple worship, prayers replaced sacrifices. Even the Hebrew alphabet changed.

And worse, the Israelites had been split into two groups—the exiles, and those who remained in the land. And the religion of the two groups began to diverge, which caused many, many problems when the two groups were eventually reunited.

But for the author of our psalmist today, the ending of the exile is still a generation or two away, and the memory of Babylonian cruelty is fresh in his mind. How can he sing God's songs for his tormentors, the very people who had made God homeless?

Today, I think many of us, for many different reasons, can at last relate to the psalmist.

We have been for so long, as members of a mainline Christian denomination and of mostly European heritage, recipients of privilege. And here, in this place and time, we face an enemy that does not discriminate or show privilege.

We have been exiled from our church home for many months, and we meet here today knowing that not all of us are present for fear that the enemy may show up. Those of us who are present know also that we may be forced back into exile at any time.

And in order for us to be here, we have had to give up much. We had to line up at the doors. We have to sit where we're told, not in our regular pews. We can't have coffee hour. We can't hug each other or shake hands.

We can't sing.

I know that this last point is a breaking point for many Christians, especially for those of us in the United Church. Singing is part of our heritage. John Wesley's "Directions for Singing" are printed in all of our hymn books, VU 720.

Just before the psalms.

I think that many of us, if not all of us, can relate this morning to the first verse of Psalm 137. We too, weep out of remembrance for what we had that has been lost.

But that isn't the end of the psalm. The psalm continues, and it gets progressively more uncomfortable.

I wasn't originally going to talk about the last verse of the psalm. I wasn't going to mention the developments of this week in the United States. I wasn't going to bring in parts of a Facebook post from my son in response to those events.

That was yesterday.

This morning, before I wrote this sermon, I read the commentary. And Broyles closes by saying, "...we abuse the text by ignoring its context, namely that Psalm 137 is in the mouth of powerless victims, not powerful executioners."

And I realized that by ignoring the events that have transpired over the past few days and the response of the people to those events, I would be silencing the powerless victims.

For those who aren't aware, the President of the United States, long a denier of the seriousness of the pandemic, has been diagnosed with COVID. And the reactions are varied, ranging from "We should pray for his recovery," to "I hope he dies."

Some of what David said in his Facebook sermon has given me a lot to think about. He says:

... my first gut reaction is to say to myself, "No, you're a Christian. You should love your enemies and pray for them, and wish the best for them." (This is not just a Christian sentiment, but also present into nearly every spirituality in the world.)

...

He has hurt a lot of people. He will continue to hurt vulnerable people. Honestly, I find the moral posturing of "we should pray for him and hope that he gets better" sickening, because that kind of "love your enemy" moralizing ALWAYS comes at the expense of marginalized people. Every LGBTQ+ person has had the experience of being told to "be nice," when standing up for ourselves, when the other person is telling us to kill ourselves or calling us less than human. "Love your enemies" is a passage of scripture that seems to only come up in discourse when it's used to shut down people who stand up for themselves, whether it be directed at a gay teen with homophobic bullies or at black people being shot by cops.

Who are you to shut down the very justified anger of those he has hurt, especially if you're not one of them? If your reading of scripture turns you away from justice toward complacency and inaction, re-evaluate how you read scripture.

...

He represents a sickness in humanity that goes deeper than one person. The nascent fascism... is not contained in one person. It is present in the police who are held unaccountable when they murder black people. It is present in the extreme economic inequality where the super-rich make billions during a pandemic while people die because they do not have adequate healthcare. It is present in the continuing inaction on climate change. It was present before and it will be present after. One man's death will not change much other than he, specifically, won't be hurting people anymore or encouraging it. But fascism has a lot of cheerleaders right now.

David said more, but you get the gist.

How do we respond to the news that the President of the United States has come down with COVID, after months of denying that it was serious, after months of spreading false information and rumours, and only days after he not only refused to denounce a white supremacist group, but in my opinion actively encouraged them?

How do we respond to the undeniable fact that a second wave of COVID is starting, and that it is possible we may once again be exiled to our homes?

How do we respond to those whose responses to the events of our day is different from our own?

I believe our first step is to count our own blessings. It's easy to get caught up in our own pain and suffering, and to therefore to forget how much we truly have, and how much others are suffering.

We cannot sing. We cannot have coffee hour. We cannot hug or shake hands. On this Worldwide Communion Sunday, we cannot even take communion.

We can still be here today, to worship God. We can still phone our friends and neighbours and family. We have food to eat and roofs over our heads and beds to sleep on. We do not sleep with a gun under our pillows in fear that our home will be invaded during the night, and we can walk down the streets during the day knowing that we have nothing to fear from those who are sworn to uphold the law.

Millions of people all around the world do not have those privileges. Let us thank God for our blessings.

As Sam Lefkowitz says, "When asked if my cup is half-full or half empty, my only response is that I am thankful I have a cup."

We all have cups. Let us praise God for that one small mercy.

The other thing I think we all need to do is to give up judgement of others. It's very easy for us to say, "You should forgive your enemies," especially when their enemy looks and often acts a lot like us.

We don't see, don't remember, the torment we have heaped upon generations of Indigenous and African and Asian peoples in the form of forced labour, immigration policies that favoured European peoples, especially those from the British Isles, and cultural appropriation. We love dreamcatchers and African tribal music and Asian cuisine, all the while living in a society that perpetuates inequality in the form of racial violence, impure water on reserves, bail systems that discriminate against racialized persons, movies that cast white actors in the roles of racialized persons, and so on and so on and so on...

We don't see those injustices because they're not our lived reality. Let us not judge those for whom discrimination is a lived reality. However you feel about the President's COVID diagnosis and his recovery, understand that those with a different lived experience will feel differently.

And that's okay. Really.

We may recoil at the closing verses of this psalm. The image of the heads of small children being dashed against rocks is against the very core of our religion.

Boyles explains it like this:

"...these expressions referring to the slaughter of children are a way of depicting the end of an oppressive dynasty. By invoking the end of Babylon's succession of power, these texts ensure that Babylonian cruelty is brought to a halt."

As David said, this "sickness in humanity that goes deeper than one person... One man's death will not change much other than he, specifically, won't be hurting people anymore or encouraging it."

The psalmist may or may not have meant the closing lines of his psalm literally. But we can translate them to our own lived experience by understanding that the offspring of colonialism and supremacism need to be destroyed. Hatred, discrimination, violence, withholding of the necessities of life, imprisonment, war, unjust laws and tax systems, the theft of land and the rape of the environment.

All of these expressions of oppression need to die.

Worldwide Communion, at its most basic, isn't about the words or even about the bread and the wine. It's about the person of Jesus Christ, and how we are made One in his Spirit. Being made One does not mean being made the same. There is a place for everyone at the table, whatever your race or gender or sexual orientation or political leaning.

Being made One means that we each understand that every human being is made in the image of God, and that every human emotion is a reflection of the Spirit. Being made One means that we long for justice and a world made new, and that, of course, means the death of the old.

We are living in an exile that none of us could have predicted or expected at this time last year. From that exile, some of us might begin to dimly understand the pain that has been felt through the millennia by those who have suffered true oppression.

Let us use that new understanding to work for true justice and reconciliation, so that all might have an equal share in the bounty of God's creation.

Amen.