

October 6, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

The Covenant Life: Singing God's Song in a Foreign Land

Lamentations 1:1-16 *Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude....
All her people groan as they search for bread.....*

Psalm 137 *By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...*

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

2 Timothy 1:1-14 *...for God did not give us a timid spirit, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

As I have been reflecting on our annual time of recommitment, I see it in a different light this time around. Through the summer, the lectionary has included readings from the Hebrew prophets--Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and, in recent weeks, Jeremiah. These prophets spoke and wrote in the years leading up to the conquest of Israel by Babylon, the fall of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple in 587 BCE. Their messages were clear. They prophets saw these events as the inevitable consequence of Israel's unraveling spiritual and moral fabric. Worship and religion had become detached from daily life and right living. Injustice and lack of compassion toward the poor and those most vulnerable constituted a rejection of God's call to justice, peace, compassion, and equity. Not only were people suffering because of these things, but also the earth itself (Jer. 4:23-28). It all culminated in the fall of Jerusalem and the fifty-year exile of the people and their leaders in Babylon. Our readings for today from Lamentations and the Psalms are the poetical, even musical, expressions of the cavernous sense of loss and grief. There was nothing left but to mourn the great city in her loneliness (Lam. 1:1) and express the acute pain of not being able to sing because your heart and soul have been emptied.

How do we respond when conditions around us have become so bereft of basic

goodness, or compassion, or just and right relationships? In our discussions of the lectionary on Wednesday mornings through the summer, we have found very clear connections between the experience and message of the prophets and our own lives as persons and a community of faith living in a society increasingly violent, addicted to power and wealth, disdainful of those who are poor or otherwise in need of advocacy, and destructive toward human and creational life.

What is our response? It might make sense to withdraw into despair or numbing indifference, or into our own small worlds. Yet, as a faith community, we still feel in our souls that persistent call to live as persons of faith, called to love, to serve, to live in ways contrary to what we see around us in our political, societal, and even religious context. How do we do it? How do we sing God's song in a foreign land, when we feel in exile, living in a human world that seems nearly completely lost in the unrealities of violence, greed, materialism, the exploitation of people and the earth, all engaged in by many who call themselves Christian or otherwise religious? As Anthony De Mello, the Indian Jesuit priest, counselor, and spiritual teacher, wrote, we may need to come to the point of recognizing that we live in an asylum, and the insanity has drawn us in, as well! What is untrue is called true. The bad is called good. The unreal is called the "real world". What is harmful to people and the earth is called progress or prosperity or some such thing.

We respond with the recommitments that we have made today, the vision of life by which our community is called to live. This is the way we sing God's song in a foreign land. It is expressed perfectly in the apostle Paul's second letter to his young co-worker Timothy. Timothy, Paul knows, is facing and will face many challenges as he tries to serve the fledgling little communities of faith. So Paul writes to remind him of the faith he has received through his own family, from his mother and grandmother. And Paul reminds Timothy of the gift of that faith and the call to live out of that faith that Timothy received when Paul laid his hands on him, ordaining him into service. In our community we believe that we have all had hands laid on us. We have all received this gift of faith and the life of faith. It is entrusted to our keeping and to our living.

And each of us is called to live it out through the uniqueness of our own lives, of the things we feel called to do as channels of God's love, and of the particular gifts we have each been given with which to serve life.

In this season of reflection and recommitment, as a community we have been, in Paul's words, rekindling the gift of God that is within us. It is a faith, a way of seeing life, a way of living. It is something we have received, that has been passed on to us, not to hold onto as a personal possession or to enshrine, but to live it out in our own time, in our own lives, in the particular conditions and contexts and needs that are around us today.

These words from Paul seemed particularly to stand out for us today: *For God did not give us a timid spirit, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.* The NRSV translates it a “spirit of cowardice.” That is only one way to translate the word. Another is timidity. The spirit God gives us when we open our lives in faith and to faithful living, is characterized by strength or courage or inner confidence. It is not arrogance or aggressiveness. It is not having all the answers. It is the vision of life that enables us to live with confidence in ways that are life-giving and life-enhancing. We can live within such a world as ours—the human world, that is—without being fooled or overwhelmed by the illusions and delusions that are causing so much suffering. That is not the “real world” but the unreal world that has departed from the ways of life that make for life, the ways we were created to live. Paul wrote at the end of his first letter to Timothy that this spirit of God gives us the confidence and courage to take hold of and live the *life that really is life* (1 Tim. 6:19).

We commit ourselves, as a community and as members, to a life generated and energized by a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline, according to Paul. It is the power that comes from our awareness of and relationship with the sacred dimension of life. It is not the power of coercion or of political, military, or materialistic strength. It is the power of interconnection, of mutuality, of knowing

and living life as a gift from God. It is the love that was embodied in Jesus, a love that serves, that honors oneself, others, and the creation. It is love that does not seek its own way but the way that helps all. It is the love that is not afraid to ask forgiveness or to forgive. It is a love that does not seek to possess or control others, but to nourish life in them. And, as we are acknowledging today, it is a spirit of self-discipline. This word (*sophronismos*) has shades of meaning: self-control, good judgment, moderation, thoughtfulness. It could also mean, in words that have to do with our spiritual practice here, something like contemplative, reflective, or simply awareness—awareness of one's own life, of others, of the world around us, and of God—and living out of that awareness.

In our community, we recognize and join with other spiritual communities through the centuries—Christian and otherwise—in understanding that such a life does not just happen. Living in the world we live in, with the challenges we face around us and in us, we need to give to our lives a structure, a form that sustains us and nurtures growth in love, in joy, in gratitude, and in full and faithful living. The old term for it was “rule”, as in the Rule of St. Francis or St. Benedict or other monastic communities. The English word “rule” comes from the French word *trellis*. A trellis, as you know, is a form that is built to support and guide the growth of a vine, such as a rose or a grape vine. So, by the disciplines or practices to which we commit ourselves, we are providing for our lives not a prison or a fence to hold something in or keep something from growing or getting out. We are providing a form that supports our living in ways that help us grow and deepen in the “life that really is life”. This is how we begin once again to find our voice, to sing the songs of God.

I invite us today, as Covenant and Community Members and as a whole community, to begin this new year of our life in the spirit of singing God's song in a foreign land. We sing it for ourselves. We sing it for one another and all people. And we sing it for this world which is God's good but hurting creation.