

EXILE – HOW CAN WE SING IN A FOREIGN LAND?

Last Sunday's Drive Up Communion was again such a wonderfully upbuilding experience of church family togetherness but done safely.

- As I greeted people, I asked, "How are you doing?" They said, "Fine," but in a making-the-best-of-it way.
- Then I asked, "But is it getting long?" And, the faces grew more somber, some showing the weariness or the sadness they've been feeling with this long pandemic.
- That, too, was important, to share together for a moment the feeling of how hard it's been.

One of the biblical stories that relates deeply to this current time of trial is called the Exile.

- The Exile and Return are the last big things that happen in the Old Testament storyline.
- Babylonians invaded, destroyed Jerusalem, and burned down the temple. It was 586 BC.
- They killed countless people and took the others into exile back to Babylon in servitude.

We call it the Exile because the people were suddenly exiled from everything they knew, from their land, from their people, and from their house of worship.

You can see how this story might speak to us today as this virus has come upon us, deadly to some and sending the rest of us into various degrees of exile from the life we once knew, including from our house of worship.

Does their grief speak to yours when you listen to the broken-hearted lament of these exiles whose lives had been shattered?

- Psalm 137, *"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows there we hung our harps."*
- On hearing that, some of us can't help but think of the haunting song from Godspell – "On the Willows." (Google it later and give it a listen.)

Psalm 137 continues, *"How can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?"*

- They hung up their harps because they no longer had the heart to sing.
- You know it's bad when you've lost your song.

Again, we can relate because of this disturbing scientific finding that singing together in large groups is dangerous now, a "super-spreader" activity during a pandemic.

- I found that really hard to believe at first, because I really, really didn't want to believe it.
- It has to do with how, if a person is infected, the singing vocal cords aerosolize the virus, creating a virus-infecting mist so fine it suspends in the air. (You can Google that too.)
- We, too, have hung up our harps in that even when we as churches can safely gather for worship again, we won't be able to safely sing together at first.
- That crushed my heart when I learned it from our Synod pastors' training on all this.

The Exile didn't last forever. The people were able to return home. We will too.

- But the life they returned to was not the same.
- Everything had changed. New ways of living had to be developed.
- But they struggled forward and found a way!
- They did not get stuck in their grief but found ways to move forward.
- The survivors rebuilt not only their lives and city but also their place of worship.

Yet, even with the reconstructed temple there was lament. The grand reopening of worship turned out not to be so grand after all:

- Ezra 3:12 puts it this way, *"But many of the...old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house."*
- Haggai 2:3 explains why they felt such loss, *"Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?"*

So here, too, don't be surprised if we will again relate to the exile experience, when we finally can reopen worship, if it turns out that with face coverings and distance, with limited numbers and no group singing, that it won't yet be the full return our hearts and spirits are aching for.

- Still, we long for that day anyway, to when we, at reasonable risk, can begin returning to worshipping together.

Take heart in this, even in Exile God never abandoned them. God brought them home again!

While the people were deeply bruised in spirit, they were not entirely defeated in spirit, for God was with them. It was hard, but they did learn new ways to make the best of it.

- The **sustenance** of their spiritual resilience came from how they learned new ways to continue to worship God even though their House of Worship had been taken from them.
- The **enduring strength** of their spiritual resilience came from how they began to study the Scriptures more intently than they ever had before, which deepened their faith like religious ritual alone can never do.
- The **heart** of their spiritual resilience came from how they banded together and faced the hard challenges with one spirit.

They also recovered their song. They took their harps back down from where they had hung them on the willows to once again sing the praises of God, yes, even in a foreign land, as no land is foreign to God.

We, too, shall return to our house of worship. Eventually, we, too, shall sing together again. But you can still sing your praises even now. In your home. In your shower. In your car karaoke.

- Christ is with us, so, yes, we have reason to keep singing even now.
- You know there's still hope when you've recovered your song.

Amen.