

October 25, 2009

Signs of hope

As it became obvious that Jerusalem was about to be destroyed for good by the Babylonians, the prophet Jeremiah went out and bought a piece of property.

Now, do you remember the Mont Serrat volcano that was threatening to explode several years ago? It was obvious that it was about to erupt, and they kept trying to evacuate the island, which was eventually covered with lava. What Jeremiah did was kind of like burying a piece of property half way up the volcano -- if anything was still there when all the smoke had cleared it wasn't going to be much use for a long time.

But for Jeremiah, it was a prophetic act, a clear symbol of his trust that God would bring the exiles home and restore the land to them. Shortly after the purchase Jeremiah was kidnapped and taken to Egypt by a band of Jewish leaders who could see the writing on the wall and who were determined to escape the devastation.

Ezekiel, who had been acting out prophetic messages for some time in what most people would (and did!) consider bizarre ways, was one of those swept off to Babylon. He would have heard the expressions of despair in Psalm 137. When we read this psalm today it is usually in the abbreviated version many of us learned from Don McLean's *American Pie* album. But that sanitizes the depth of the emotion expressed by those who had literally lost everything and were captives in a foreign land. This is the version from the Liturgical Publications New Psalter:

1. By the rivers of Babylon
we sat weeping, remembering Zion.
2. There on the poplars
we hung our harps.
3. Our captors shouted
for happy songs,
for songs of festival..
"Sing!" they cried,
"the songs of Zion."
4. How could we sing
the song of the Lord
in a foreign land?
5. Jerusalem forgotten?
Wither my hand!
6. Jerusalem forgotten?
Silence my voice!
If I do not seek you

as my greatest joy.

+

7. Lord, never forget
that crime of Edom
against your city,
the day they cried,
“Strip! Smash her to the ground!”

8. Doomed Babylon, be cursed!
God for those who deal you evil for evil!
Good for those who destroy you
who smash your children at the walls.

How can we sing the songs of Zion in Babylon? How can we praise the power of our God when, apparently, Marduk is stronger?

People in those days believed that gods were attached to a specific place. You worshipped the gods of Egypt in Egypt and the gods of Canaan in Canaan. That’s one reason there was such a problem with the Hebrews following the gods of their neighbors – those were the gods of the neighborhood. So how can we sing the songs of worship to the God who is worshipped on Mount Zion when we’re working next to the Euphrates?

Ezekiel, who had focused his preaching on God’s righteousness now focused on God’s faithfulness. He urged the Jews to make peace with their circumstances, and to trust God. To pray, not for the destruction of Babylon, but for its prosperity and well-being. Since it was now their home, like it or not, as it prospered, so would they.

Still they wondered – can God hear us so far from home? And among the exiles and the captives a profoundly new understanding of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob developed. It was an understanding that God was powerful not only in the land of Palestine, but indeed over the whole earth, and that they were called to serve this cosmic ruler in a unique way.

The Jewish people moved from monotheism (worshipping only one God, but recognizing others) to what is called “radical monotheism”, the belief that there is only one God, and that all others are idols and without power. We hear this new understanding in the opening chapter of Genesis, in some of the soaring poetry of Second Isaiah (Isaiah of Babylon) and the framework that was put around the book of Job, where the writer takes an ancient story of disaster and reshapes it for the community in captivity. All these folks declared that in spite of all that had happened God was still God and still worthy of praise.

And in Egypt, the Jewish exiles struggled with the question “How do we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”. After the destruction of the shrine at Shiloh, the idea had

been reinforced that you could only worship God properly in the Temple – now what? The Temple was gone.

During the time of the Exile/Captivity, the practice of Judaism took several radical turns. One was the development of the synagogue. The word itself is Greek and means a gathering together. But it was this idea that we can meet together to read scriptures and discuss them and talk about faithfulness and pray together, and offer THAT as a sacrifice to God.

Another idea that developed was that thought the priests couldn't offer sacrifices in the Temple, they might live as though they were preparing to do so, making sure they were ritually clean, fit to stand before the Holy of Holies, since that was what they were doing if, in fact, God was present everywhere. From that the idea developed that even lay people could live this way, as an acknowledgement of God's presence even in Babylon, and eventually this became the branch of Judaism we refer to as the Pharisees.

In response to the question "How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" some raged against those who had turned their world upside down. Some knuckled down and made a home where they were. Some dreamed of, prayed for, worked for a restoration to the Promised Land, a return to the Holy Mountain. Some redefined what worship and sacrifice meant, and how they were accomplished. Some lived each day as an opportunity to stand in God's presence.

For many of us today that question resonates: How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? For it is certainly a different world than where many of us learned to do/be church. When Wednesday nights disappeared from communities as nights dedicated to church activities, and then Sunday evenings fell to the power of a car ride or a football game, and Sunday mornings were eroded by work, soccer, and weekend getaways – not that any of these things are bad in and of themselves – it's the fact that they're good that makes decisions about how we spend our time so important and so difficult.

Do we rage against secular humanism? Do we just keep on keeping on until something happens or we die? Do we take on the style and flavor of a culture of entertainment and hope that we "get it right" before everything changes yet again? Do we redefine worship completely?

We've done it before. The protestant reformation shifted the focus in worship from Christ's sacrifice re-enacted in the Mass to the proclamation of the Word. Early Baptists would read the scripture passages of the day, then close the Bible, lock it and put it away. Hymns were lined out (one line sung by a leader, then sung back by the congregation), and two or three laymen would be invited to come forward and preach on the passage of the day – all without notes. Our Baptist fore-bearers were insistent that the power of the Spirit was more important than the power of the printed Word and wanted nothing to get in the Spirit's way. In fact, Church historian Diana Butler Bass marks five

distinct eras in which the understanding of what constituted Christian faith, devotion, and ethics have been understood in very different ways.

Certainly we are at a turning point where we must examine and (perhaps) redefine “church” – what it is, what it is for, how we *are* church. Lest there be any questions, or misunderstanding, that was what I was trying to say in last week’s sermon. I wasn’t trying to scold you into doing more of the same old thing, but pleading to you to listen to the Spirit of God, stirring, moving in you, to share that vision with us and to follow it in faith.

The most destructive lie, what holds us in deepest captivity to despair, is the lie of our own inadequacy – to look at the world of hurt, pain, need, loneliness and to say to ourselves “I’m only one person.” “We’re so small, we can’t do anything.”

You are the beloved children of the God who created all there is and who gives life to all. You are the brothers and sisters of the Christ who walked among us. You are the bearers of the Holy Spirit, by which you were anointed to be ambassadors of reconciliation to the world. We may be small, but as Paul reminds the Philippians, we can do all things, *all things*, through Christ who gives us strength.

The question is not “How can we restore what we were?” but “What is God calling us to become?” And the challenge is to live into that vision, that hope, that community through the power of Christ working in healing our lives, that we may sing a new song to God for the sake of the world Christ loves.