

“A Living Faith For A New Day”

a sermon by

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Text: “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137.4).

Some years ago I spent a year at the University of Heidelberg as a graduate student in Old Testament Studies. I remember in particular my first day at the University. I was attending a lecture on the Psalms by a well-known German professor, Dr. Claus Westermann. I remember in particular a sense of anxiety I felt. It was my first class where the lecture would be in German. I had attended language school, but I knew this was the test. I remember Professor Westermann entering the classroom. It was a custom in the German Universities that the students did not applaud, but rather they would tap on the desks with their knuckles. As the professor placed his notes on the table and began to lecture, suddenly, a sinking feeling came upon me. I could not understand a word he was saying. It was like all the time, energy, money, and travel had been for naught. I was like a drowning person, watching one’s whole life pass before him. After what seemed like an eternity, though it was only a few seconds, it finally dawned on me what was

happening. The Professor was reading one of the Psalms in Hebrew and the only Hebrew I knew was with a Southern accent.

I.

Anyone who has spent time in another country knows the feeling a person has when he or she is trying to acclimate to a different culture and language. Certainly, that is the case with Psalm 137. It is a Psalm of community lament. In this case the setting of the Psalm is specific. It was written when Israel was in exile in Babylon. When the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar sent his troops crashing into the city of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., destroying the Temple and the city, the Babylonians took with them back to Babylon the leadership of the people of Israel, including the king. One of the terrible ironies of that captivity was that at times the Babylonian captors would taunt the Israelite musicians by forcing them to play on their musical instruments some of the music that had previously been played in the Temple of Solomon. It was a way of reinforcing the great humiliation, shame, and helplessness of the Jewish people. The question raised in the Psalm is a haunting one: "How does a person sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

II.

Now, of course, the land of Babylon represented a new and strange world to those Israelite people who suddenly found themselves on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The City of Babylon was very different from Jerusalem. The Lord's song must have seemed quite strange in that distant country. When any faithful Jew walked to the temple of Marduk and Bel, he would have seen something he had never seen before. If he had the chance to visit the beautiful "Hanging Gardens of Babylon" he would have witnessed one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. If he visited the great wall that surrounded the ancient city, he would have seen a wall so wide that four chariots could ride side by side. If he had the chance to hear one of the Chaldean astrologers lecture on the stars, he would have heard something that was as strange to him as any new language. So how does a person sing the Lord's song in such a place as that?

Now, there are those of us today, who, if pressed, might say that we too find ourselves in a strange land. The world about us has changed.

Our science has changed-- and not just the technology of computers, palm pilots, and cell phones that seem to inhabit every space around us. Our universe has expanded. Even as we gather in this sanctuary, the Rover spacecraft on Mars continues to send amazing photographs of a world that few people ever imagined would be possible to view.

The political world in which we live has changed--particularly in light of the events of September 11, 2001. Thomas Friedman, writing in the *New York Times* this week, argues that the War against Terrorism amounts to World War III. During the Twentieth Century the United States found itself facing two very powerful totalitarian regimes: the Nazi regime with its master race trying to impose its will against the rest of the world and more recently the Soviet Empire trying to impose its Marxists philosophy in a Cold War that brought the entire planet close to

nuclear annihilation. Today, we find ourselves in a struggle with Islamic militant extremists who are willing to fly airplanes into buildings, blow up innocent people, and erode the trust that is essential for a democratic society.

But it isn't just the world of international politics that has changed. Today, we find ourselves in a time of rapid social and moral change. The so-called "culture wars" are in many ways as intense as the war on terrorism. Today, the old mainline churches find themselves torn asunder as debates about the ordination of practicing homosexuals and even the definition of marriage threaten to render the fabric of everything that holds us together. And like ancient Israel, we find ourselves struggling to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land.

III.

So, let's be honest. There are some things that do not change. Sin and its consequences, hunger and thirst after righteousness, love, hate, jealousy, heartbreak, grief and tragedy, hope and joy-- these things do not change. They are found throughout the Old and New Testaments. You will find them in Shakespeare, Homer, Goethe, and in Job.

That is why the Bible occupies a unique place in the Presbyterian Church. It is God's word to us. It teaches us, in the words of the Shorter Catechism, "What we are to believe and what we are to do." To be sure, in recent years there has been new light shed on how the church understands the Bible. It is obvious to most of us that the scientific world's view of the Bible is very different from the scientific worldview of the Twenty-first Century. We understand that the ancient Semitic world of the Old Testament and the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament are very different from the world in which we find ourselves today. But when we want the Spirit of God to lead us back to green pastures and beside still waters, we go back to the cry of the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century--*Sola Scriptura*--Scripture alone!

The reason for that is not only that the Bible is God's word for us; it is also a book that deals as no other book has ever dealt with the great world within, the profound, fundamental, changeless experiences, needs, problems, sins, griefs, hopes, remorse, and redemptions of the human soul. "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God." What have time and change to do with that? God is love and he that abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto him." "Be ye kind to one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, even as God also in Christ has forgiven you." What do time and change have to do with that?

IV.

But while it is true that there are things in life that do not change, it is equally true that there are many things in life that do change. One of the great struggles in the history of the church concerns the relationship between our faith and the culture in which we live. Some years ago Richard Niebuhr published a book, entitled Christ and Culture, in which he dealt with this issue. Niebuhr understood that there are some Christian communities that separate themselves from the culture in which they find themselves. The monastic movement in the early church was an

example of that. Other Christian communities have simply accommodated themselves to the culture. American civil religion is certainly an example of this where God and country become so entwined that people cannot differentiate between what is good for the nation and what is good for the kingdom of God.

But Niebuhr also identified an ethic of “transformation” that he identified with the reformed or Presbyterian tradition. In this ethic the mission of the church is to “transform” the culture in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.

That is what happened in ancient Babylon. Those Jews in Babylon did not just preserve the Lord’s song in that strange land. They enriched everything around them. The great prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of a valley of dead bones being raised to new life. The great prophet of the exile, Isaiah, envisioned a return home.

Throughout the centuries, the church has demonstrated the capacity not simply to acquiesce to the prevailing culture but to transform that culture in the name of Christ. In the field of music the church took the music of Bach, Beethoven, and Handel and claimed it as its own. It took the work of Giotto, Raphael, and Michelangelo and claimed it as its own.

This morning as we prepare to ordain and install those individuals who will serve as Elders and Deacons in this church, I believe that the greatest challenge the church faces today is the challenge of teaching people to sing the Lord’s song in secular, pagan, and pluralistic society so that this city and this society can be transformed in the name of Christ.

Dr. John Leith in his book, *The Reformed Imperative*, makes the point that there is only one thing that the church can do that other institutions cannot do and that is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ with his power for forgiveness and new life.

The greatest question that each person must answer, if he or she is to achieve maturity, is the question, “Why am I here?” The most serious issue in our society is not economic, social or political. It is the question of death and the end of history. Does human life have meaning, or is it simply a senseless, meaningless episode in the history of the universe that will end in ruin without purpose or meaning. The second most important question is the question of guilt and salvation. Is there some power in the world that enables each one of us as a person to overcome the dominance of instinct and impulse and the corruption of instinct and impulse by our own self-interests?

There is nothing more important for us at the beginning of a new year than to learn again to sing the Lord’s song in the land in which we are living, because this strange land desperately needs it. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,” that is one of the Lord’s songs. “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me,” that is one of the Lord’s songs. And there is nothing that this generation needs more than this.

There is no greater challenge today than to learn to sing again the Lord's song in a strange land. And if we care about the world our children are going to inherit, we had better learn to sing it well.

Amen!