

FAITH IN A FOREIGN LAND

(Psalm 137: 1-4)

Come back with me in time; way back to a faraway place, and sit for a moment shoulder-to-shoulder with another people in another place, another time, and another predicament; a people in a predicament of pain nothing like yours or mine, nothing like anything we've experienced or could even imagine. Just quietly sit and feel . . . just let their lives speak to your life, their spirits to your spirit. Just sit where they sit for a moment, and listen very carefully . . .

These are an African people, who for the most part are shepherds. They're a relatively peaceful people; and they are a people who *love music*. Music permeates the fabric of their lives. They sing when a new life is conceived; they sing when a new baby is born; they sing while they work; they sing as they play. They are famous for their rhyming and their rapping; and you ought to see their little girls jump Double-Dutch!

They sing at weddings; they sing at funerals; some of them sing out their sermons; some of them sing out their prayers. They *love* music! Music permeates the fabric of their lives. They go into church saying “*Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before God’s presence with singing!*” (Psalm 100: 1-2).

And drums? You haven’t *heard* drums until you hear THIS people on the drums! Drums help to keep the beat of the rhythm of their daily communal life. They have drums for *church*, drums for *play*, drums for *conversation*, drums for *warnings of danger*. They have *talking* drums, *male and female* drums—and some drums you can hear in the summertime when the weather is warm, sort of beating the beat that makes even the deadbeats want to start moving! *Music permeates every fabric of their lives.*

And dance! You haven’t *seen* dancing until you see THIS people dance! They just make up moves on the spur of the moment, unchoreographed, unrehearsed, right in rhythm.

Music is like the air that surrounds every living thing for them. They are engulfed by music from the cradle to the grave. They make up impromptu songs to celebrate everything and anything—from a victory in battle, to a religious procession, to copulation and child-bearing. These people love music and they love life. They love the deep things of life and the simple things of life, the things that give life meaning and the things that make life beautiful.

These are a *profound* people, a *proud* people, and a *praying* people. It was these people who built the pyramids, which our western minds—for all their sophistication—*still* can't figure out! It was these people who created the first cultures and developed the first civilizations on earth. It was these people, black of skin and wooly of hair, who gave to the world Pythagorean mathematics, Epicurean materialism, Platonic idealism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam! These are a *profound* people, a *proud* people, and a *praying* people.

II.

But something has happened to these proud people. Lean in, and listen... Let's see if we can learn what happened that makes them seem so different now. Shhh! Listen! They're singing . . . but from the song they're singing, it sounds like they're in exile—snatched away from the homes they built, the places where they lived, and the sites that they loved; in exile—pulled away from their places of worship, where they met God and mysteriously felt God's awesome presence; in exile—taken away from the villages and towns where they grew up, fell in love, got married, settled down, started families, and began building on their dreams.

No longer are they in charge of their own lives; no longer are they in control of their daily activities; no longer are they able to sleep as husbands and wives, parents and children. And in most places no longer are they even considered to be human beings. Now they're looked upon as *things, pieces of property*, as "*its*," but never as "*thous*."

They're *toys to be played with*, but never *equals to be talked to*; they're *pieces to lie with*, but never *persons to be reckoned with or reconciled to*; they're *animals, nobodies, nothings, less than fully human, three-fifths of a person*. In exile, they are made fun of and mated like cattle.

The song they sing sounds like a song sung from the bowels of exile.

Listen to its words: *"Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home."*

Singing a song in exile! Listen to the words: *"By the rivers of Babylon we sat down; there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows nearby we hung up our harps. Those who captured us told us to sing; they told us to entertain them. 'Sing us a song about Zion,' they jeered.*

How can we sing a song to the Lord in a foreign land?"

III.

The African-descended Israelites who sat in exile by the rivers of Babylon almost 600 years *before* Jesus was born were in an eerily similar predicament as the African exiles who were brought to North America almost 1600 years *after* Jesus was born—because in some ways, exile is exile. In exile the empire changes your name; strips you of your history and convinces you your history never mattered; makes sure that all you learn—if anything—is the historical narrative of the empire; breaks up your family; and tries to take away your faith by trying to convince you that their gods are more powerful than yours.

When the Babylonian empire did those things and more to the African-descended Israelites in exile in 586 BC, one way the Israelites responded was the writing and singing of *psalms*—like the one that is our sermon text this morning. When the young—but already hypocritical—empire of the United States did those things (and much more!) to the African exiles who started being shipped to their shores

in 1619, one way those Africans responded was the writing and singing of *spirituals*.

The spirituals are the traditional songs of African American religion, and were created by enslaved Africans and their descendants in 19th century America. They are the oldest religious expression in black North American life. The spirituals are the religious form that has most faithfully nourished the link to ancestors and ancestral traditions among African Americans, and they continue to be a source of great cultural and spiritual sustenance for all people who experience them—including, I hope, our own Adult Choir, who have been singing a fair amount of spirituals this past year (much to their credit). And because of that, there are some things that are important to hear and remember about the genre of sacred music called the spirituals.

The spirituals hold generations of *trauma* and *transcendence* in their tones, because they were a vehicle of orientation to a new way of life experienced by enslaved Africans; a traumatic new way of life that

centered around the expectation of being a slave and having no rights.

This expectation—which was violently enforced—was in *unrelenting tension* with the Africans' own sense of who they actually were:

children of the Supreme Creator God! It has been suggested by prominent theologians and scholars of religion, that the meaning of black religion across the Americas emerges from this tension and from the process of “wrestling” with the question of how to stay human in a fundamentally inhumane situation. In other words, there is a recognition that being black in America *was an essentially religious task!* It was all about constantly finding new ways to hold on to God's unchanging hand in the midst of a constantly hostile environment.

Put another way, for people of African descent in the Americas, both during slavery and in its long aftermath, religion becomes the means by which one remembers and cultivates an alternative understanding of one's humanity, in the face of constant affronts and denials of that humanity by the wider society. The spirituals arose out of black

response to enslavement in the United States, not only in terms of subversive and often coded lyrics, but also in the very circumstance of their creation and development. The songs, almost always accompanied by ritual movement, rhythm, and dance, brought together biblical language, African religious values, and New World experiences of struggle.

The spirituals are a transforming and transformational music, because their principal aim has been to invoke the presence of God's spirit in the midst of an unbearable situation; to create the space for the sacred to enter and engage with the people present, so that the spirit is felt, experienced, and relished—even through back-breaking danger, toils and snares. That experience of the spirit is most important, because one of the most powerful uses of the spirituals within the enslaved community was as a balm offered to help assuage one another's pain. Spirituals were songs created as leverage, as salve, as voice, as a bridge

over troubles one could not endure without the flight of song and singing, and God and grace!

The spirituals speak of life and death, suffering and sorrow, love and judgement, grace and hope, justice and mercy. They are the songs of an unhappy people, yet they are some of the most beautiful expressions of human experience ever recorded. Because even in slavery, *music permeated every fabric of African life*. As they interpreted biblical stories through the lens of their own oppression, enslaved people began to form a distinctive understanding of Christianity that emphasized the biblical values of freedom and justice, and Jesus' great compassion and alliance with suffering people. Because they figured out that Jesus knew all about their troubles. The Jesus who was 'buked and scorned; beaten and bruised; tortured and terrified; and nailed to a cross by the sin of the world—the same sin behind the institution of slavery;

Is the same Jesus who was risen from death by a reverse decision from the God of grace and mercy—the same God who says “no” to hate, and torture, and exile, and slavery; and “yes” to life, love, reconciliation, and peace.

So, how do we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

Loudly, faithfully, and with the confidence of the Lord’s presence and power right beside you.

Because no matter your fears and no matter your tears, the presence and power of the Lord are always right beside you—and always ready to have music put to it!

Amen.

I am indebted to The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright and The Rev. Dr. Rachel Harding for materials used in this sermon.