

PSALM 137

A Festival of Hymns

Sunday, September 15, 2019

Rec. Dr. Tim Phillips



PSALM 137

On this Sunday when we are doing a lot of singing, I find myself thinking about that question in Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—

*there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

² *On the willows* there
we hung up our harps.*

³ *For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for their own amusement, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’*

⁴ *How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?*

It’s an ancient question that comes out of a longing for “homecoming” and not being able to get there – being exiled; being obstructed on the journey to come home; being, as Rod Romney says in his hymn about home, “scattered.”

And to make matters worse, the ones doing the exiling and obstructing, want to hear one of those good old songs from the homeland. Walter Brueggemann says that this was ... *a scandalous scene savagely repeated in the death camp of Treblinka, where Jews were forced to sing and dance [the music of their ancestry as] part of the humiliation intending to rob Jews of their identity, their dignity, and their hope.*

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” the ancients say. It’s as much a statement about their capacity as it is a commitment to resist participating in their own oppression. “We have hung up our harps,” they say. No songs for you. No show today. No puppets dancing on your string.

To be clear, the end of Psalm 137 calls for some disturbing vengeance on those oppressors ... Although we might ask ourselves: What vengefulness are we creating by the way we are treating scattered people? What hatred are we distilling by the way we are obstructing – deporting - people looking for home? What violence is being imagined against us because of the way we are robbing people of their hope?

Maybe with all this singing we should take a moment and ask: How can we sing? And how can we expect anyone else to sing.

That's the irony: How can we sing about not singing?

And yet that is the paradox of Psalm 137 – a song about not singing

That's the paradox of the next hymn:

*How can we sing our love for God when God seems far away,
And we are captive to the hate that threatens us today?*

And that is the subversive part of where we started this morning; that we will sing for those who cannot sing.

So, I invite you to turn to page 8 in your bulletin ... and sing.