

Pentecost

Jn 14:23-31

May 31, 2020

What a week! My heart breaks for Minneapolis, where I grew up. And it's been a tumultuous few months.

The benefit of studying history is knowing that our time is not unique, our situation is not unprecedented. Others before us lived through times of great despair.

The Babylonian Captivity was one of those times. The people of Judea, including Jerusalem, were deported to Babylon in 587 BC. Jerusalem had been conquered ten years earlier. Books like Hosea, Amos, and Ezekiel were written during this time. Psalm 137 captures the mood:

- By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, yea, we wept
When we remembered Zion.
- 2 We hung our harps
Upon the willows in the midst of it.
- 3 For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song,
And those who plundered us requested mirth,
Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- 4 How shall we sing the Lord's song
In a foreign land?

Can we sing while in captivity? The Advent hymn *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!* answers that question in the affirmative:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice!

“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” It’s a rhetorical question that seems to expect the answer: “We can’t. We will hang up our harps in the trees. This is no time for singing.” And yet Psalm 137 continues by insisting the song must go on.

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget its skill!
6 If I do not remember you,
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—
If I do not exalt Jerusalem
Above my chief joy.

This is more than a memory of Jerusalem as a favorite city, a place that feels like home. Jerusalem was where the Temple was. There was the Holy of Holies. There was the Ark of the Covenant. There was the altar of God. There, in that specific location, was where God blessed them, shared His peace with them. It’s not the location where your favorite sports team plays. It’s the location of where God meets man. It’s the place where God declared to dying people that they would live again.

The Temple was built on the spot where Abraham brought Isaac to be sacrificed. The hand with the knife was stayed. God Himself would provide the Lamb. The memory of that place was the memory of God’s promises, God’s grace, God’s blessing, God’s life. Though deprived of that now, they trusted God would one day deliver them.

So even in exile, you sing.

What I’m about to say next is *not* a political statement. Some of you have very strong opinions about masks, social distancing, and the government response to COVID-19. That’s fine.

However, there are those in both church and state who say we should stop singing. Germany has banned singing in church. “It’s too dangerous.” Everything is dangerous. In the midst of life we are surrounded by death.

Driving a car, riding a bicycle, crossing the street, swimming – everything is dangerous. The world is cursed. We're going to die.

But we sing. Not because we are thumbing our nose at government regulations. We should honor and respect the authorities. But some things are non-negotiable. Those include singing, and the Lord's Supper.

"Sing to the LORD a new song!" says Ps. 98. "Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises ... For He is coming to judge the earth. With righteousness He shall judge the world."

The church's song, even in exile, even in a time of plague, goes on. Why? Because there is a Redeemer who comes to those in exile, who ransoms captive Israel. There is a Deliverer who is death to death! There is a Prince who is a plague to plagues!

The Church's song will not kill you. The Church's song is our life!

Dr. Luther, who lived through a plague, said this:

The devil, the originator of sorrowful anxieties and restless troubles, flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God....Music is a gift and grace of God, not an invention of men. Thus it drives out the devil and makes people cheerful. Then one forgets all wrath, impurity, and other devices.

When he says that music is not an invention of men, this is evidenced by the structure of the physical universe. A string, such as on a piano or guitar, that vibrates on a particular note will then have a sympathetic vibration an octave above, and then another major fifth, and then the next octave, and then another major third. So if the note is a C, you'll get a vibration the next C above it, then G, then another C, then an E. That's a major chord. If you don't know anything about music, you know what it sounds like. It's a happy sound.

The point is this: God wrote that happy sound, that harmonic structure, into the very fabric of the physical universe. God invented music. And the worship of heaven is a song unto the Lamb. We sing that song: Glory to God in the highest! Holy, holy, holy! Lord God of Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are full of Your glory! Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia, come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful with the fire of Your love!"

Today is Pentecost, where we celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. After the Babylonian exile, the Jews returned to Jerusalem. There, near where Isaac was to be sacrificed, God provided the Lamb. Jesus was crucified. On His holy cross was hung the salvation of the world. By the power of His glorious resurrection, He will transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subdue all things to Himself.

My hometown, Minneapolis, has had a rough week. It used to be known for better things, like the "Minneapolis sound." The Minneapolis Sound was a genre of music pioneered by Prince and included artists like Janet Jackson and producers like Jimmy Jam.

The Holy Spirit came to Jerusalem, and He is the producer of the Jerusalem Sound. It's not a style of music but transcends all our styles. The Jerusalem Sound is the opposite of the world's song.

The world's songs are of ethnic triumphs and laments for the fallen. The world's song glories in foolishness and revels in debauchery. The world's song burns cities to the ground, murders the innocent. Its desperate beat whips the crowd into a frenzy but always ends in Taps. As the mournful trumpet plays the final notes, and earth covers the coffin, the crack of rifles fills the air. The smoke fades and we honor our dead but there is no hope for them. Not in the world's song.

The Holy Spirit gives us a different song to sing. **"We hear them telling in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."** The Spirit is the source of the song; we Christians are both its singers and also the hearers. In times of

joy we sing; and when tears overwhelm us, others sing the song we need to hear.

Still today, through the Spirit-led Church, Jesus sings to us: **“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”**

Through the Church the song goes on. Dear saints, let us never stop singing to the Lamb, for He has redeemed us by His blood.

In the Name of + Jesus

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.