



Sermons from Northwood United Church

'Reconstructing the Song of God in this Strange Land'

Psalm 137:1-6, 1 John 4:7-12

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May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Christianity is in exile and may not realize it. I want to start this morning's reflections with some thoughts about what exile means both biblically and as a real experience in life.

There are two main collective experiences around which the ancient Hebrew community, Jesus' community formed. The first is the experience of slavery in Egypt and the process of liberation and freedom that not only unified them as a community but became a founding experience upon which they based their relationship with God. God is "the one who brought us out of Egypt." The God of Jewish and Christian identity is fundamentally a liberating God, a God who sets us free, literally in the history of our people, and metaphorically in so many ways.

The second main collective experience that shapes the Judeo-Christian relationship with God is the exile. In the 150 years leading up to the 6th century before Jesus' time, the Hebrew nation which had been unified under David was weakening, and the empires around it were growing strong. First the Assyrians claimed the northern portion of the ancient Davidic nation, and then finally the Babylonian empire swept in from the north and destroyed Jerusalem, destroyed most of the temple, and took the leadership into exile in Babylon where they were put to work serving the Babylonian king. This was a devastating experience for them in so many ways, but their religion, their understanding of God, and their understanding of where they fit in the world was completely turned upside down. They had always believed that God had chosen them to live in and around Jerusalem, their life and well-being revolved around the temple where God's name lived, and the covenant was maintained. They were the people of Israel, not Babylon, and they were together as a nation, not scattered in exile. If they were to survive as a people and if indeed their relationship with God was to survive, they would need to totally re-work it. That is where the great exile laments come: "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. They taunt us sarcastically; sing us one of your old folk songs of your folkly old God Yahweh. How can we sing the Lord's song in this strange land?"

Well friends, we have not been literally, physically dislocated from our homeland and relocated to a strange land, but the religious and cultural landscape around us has so thoroughly change in the last century that the church is in theological and cultural exile and the question, "How can we sing the Lord's song in this strange land?" in which traditional religious faith is often seen as quaint at best, laughable at worst is a real question.

Last week I talked about the challenge we have as humans in talking about God at all, given our limited language and the vast and mysterious subject. I made reference to the minister back east, Gretta Vosper, who has taken this question head on, and who has successfully deconstructed theistic conceptions of God, that is, conceptions of God as a person or being. Her claim to fame is that she calls herself an a-theist, which has a little juice in the media if you are a United Church minister. However, her very real question is, "How can you sing the songs of a theistic God, a God understood as a person or being somewhere in a post enlightenment, post-modern world?" Good question and one which I share. I mentioned last week that my trouble with what I hear of Gretta Vosper is that she successfully deconstructs old theistic notions of God, but has yet to reconstruct an alternative that addresses our real spiritual experience, our genuine encounters with the divine. I promised I would take a swing at that.

You see, just because old notions, concepts and images of God have died or become bankrupt or obsolete does not mean God has left. Just because we are in exile, and the old ways of singing, the old images of God in God's heaven and all's right with the world do not speak to the vast majority of the population anymore does not mean either that God is dead, or that our yearning for connection and meaning and purpose rooted in the divine has gone away. In fact, the loss of the old notions, concepts and images of God has made the question even more urgent.

The late Marcus Borg, wonderful educator and writer of books like "Meeting Jesus again for the first time" used to tell the story about his students at Oregon State University and their grappling with this question. Often students would approach Marcus after class and asked to speak to him privately. And invariably their question went something like this: "Prof Borg, you talk about God in class all the time, but I don't believe in God." And Marcus would reply, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." And the students would then proceeded to talk about God in old Sunday school images, thoroughly masculine, and parents and churches who would pray to with a long list of requests that God was supposed to fulfill in a strikingly similar fashion to the letter to Santa Claus they used to write as a child. They would also talk about loved ones who had died and the inadequacy of notions of heaven as a place somewhere where God lived. And Marcus would say, "I don't believe in that God either. Now let's talk about what you do believe, what you can conceive of, images and concepts of God which adequately meet up with your experience of grace, and love and the great mysteries of human life. And the conversation would then take off. This is the constructive conversation we need. Bishop Spong used to say, "The heart cannot worship what the mind rejects." We need to talk our way into expressions of our faith that our contemporary mind can accept and embrace and that our heart can open to.

The critical key for me is metaphor. Attempting to speak of God directly is like summing up love in a mathematical formula. Our language fails us. Direct language, language that attempts to define is the wrong language. Poetic language, image, metaphor, narrative is the only thing that will work: "Bring Many names", "Shadow and Substance."

Secondly, songs that speak to God instead of speaking about God take us past our rational mind and right into our experience: "You, God, Are my Firmament..." "As the Deer..."

Thirdly, God language where God is the verb and not the noun makes way more sense to me. It is not just that God forgives, but that God is forgiveness, God is love, God is grace expressed in life. God is what is happening in the mystical process of letting go and setting free. God is not just alive but is the life unfolding in the world. "God is the resurrection and the life."

Finally, I search for language that locates God in our experience of life, in times when awe overtakes us, in times when love saves us, in experiences of that still place where we are restored, where God is found not only much above us or beyond us (although God is certainly well beyond my capacity to express) but also within us and between us, active and alive not just in human experience but in the life of the universe.

Moses encountered God in a bush that burned but was not consumed. I get it, not because I have seen one too, but because I have felt my heart burning within me with passion and hope that burned but did not consume me. That is God. No one has ever seen God. But we have encounters with awe and wonder that cause our hearts to stir- that's God. We have experiences of the power of forgiveness that may take a lifetime but that create a new future for us and our children- that's God. We have moments in which we stare into another's eyes, and all the pretence, the lies and half-truths we use to prop up our egos crack open and we see each other, a soul encounter- that's God. In this strange land, it is given to us to craft and write and sing of these encounters. Sing of forgiveness that we have known, of justice that burns in our hearts, of love that saves us, of peace that passes our understanding, of stillness that calms the universe and calms the heart. This is the creative work of a church in exile. These are the song of God that the world needs now.