



## ***Questions: How Can We Sing the Lord's Song...?***

*August 2, 2015 | Rev. Taylor Fuerst*

*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 mirth, saying,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

*4 How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?*

*5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!*

*6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.*

*The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Fifteen years ago my brother, Regan, moved away from Texas, and other than one brief year in Dallas, he has remained away for those fifteen years, spending time in Colorado and in Europe and where he lives now, in New York. And no matter where he has lived, he has always maintained one ritual: as soon as he arrives in Texas for a visit, he finds his way immediately to Pappasito's.

He does! To this boy who was raised on chips and salsa, whose growth during his preteen and teenage years was measured by how many enchiladas he could eat, there is nothing like the food of your homeland. Sure, they may try to pull off fajitas or nachos on Long Island, but he doesn't even bother with that. There's no tex in that mex. He knows that what he longs for is still back here.

Now, my brother is not being held captive in New York, and he has not been exiled from Texas, but his stomach and his tastebuds know something of the longing, the homesickness that the Hebrew people felt as they sat and wept at the river, exiled in Babylon, longing for Zion, longing for Jerusalem.

Conquered. Witnessing the atrocities of war, the death of many of their beloved. Torn away from their home as it lay burning. Forced to travel, to walk and ride all that way to Babylon. And then taunted. "Sing us a song! Sing us a song of Zion!" This is not the hopeful, excited voice of a child asking a grandparent to share the stories and songs of their heritage; this is the jeering of soldiers and captors, the taunting of those who are comfortable in Babylon.

How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land, where we are not welcomed but forced? How can we sing the Lord's song when we have been torn away from our heritage and our family and our dignity all at once? How could we sing anything, much less a song of the Lord, who seems to have abandoned us here?

This psalm has given voice to the cries of many oppressed and enslaved over the centuries. It inspired the chorus "Va, Pensiero" from the third act of Verdi's opera, Nabucco, which became an anthem for Italian Revolutionaries in the mid-nineteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century the psalm was claimed by the Irish in their own struggle and famine. It has been put to music some fifteen or twenty times and intoned in literature and speeches again and again.

The psalm had a most profound place in the memory of those whose ancestors endured slavery here in America. When Frederick Douglass was asked to deliver the Fourth of July address to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in 1852, he compared it to the Babylonians taunting "Sing us a song." Reflecting on the anniversary of America's independence, he says, "The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. ...This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, I must mourn. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?"

He goes on to give voice to the mournful wail of millions of slaves, whose chains are rendered even more intolerable by the rest of the nation's loud celebrations of freedom. And he, with the psalmist, promises never to forget them, lest his right hand forget its cunning, and his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth.

Friends, for some of us today, this is not our psalm. This question does not burn within us, because we do not feel the burden of those struggling to sing the Lord's song. If that is the case, then we would do well to ask ourselves if we find ourselves more in the role of the oppressor today. We do well to consider whether we have, even unknowingly, invited others to sing who would really rather just hang up their harps. We must not forget those for whom these words, this question looms large. How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

How can I sing the Lord's song when my life has been taken away from me, by war, or by human trafficking? How can I sing the Lord's song when the demons of mental illness taunt me

and ask me whether God really cares? How can I sing the Lord's song when my daughter is not safe at a pool party? How can we sing the Lord's song in a place where our children's education is less of a priority than somebody else's profit margin? How can we sing the Lord's song when drug cartels and gangs strip our community of life and threaten our children from every angle? How can we sing the Lord's song when the music of our neighborhood is gunshots and crying mothers? How can we sing the Lord's song in this place, this place that is not our home?

Friends, these are the cries of God's people today, many of them not too far from this place, and some of them right here, the cries of our own hearts. How can we sing the Lord's song when we are so homesick, so longing for another world?

Corrie Ten Boom tells of the day in Nazi-occupied Holland when her nephew was arrested by the gestapo for having finished Sunday morning's liturgy on the organ by playing the forbidden National Anthem of Holland. Martin Tel recalls that story and contrasts his own father's congregation in the same country at the same time. He says, "In my father's conservative Calvinist congregation, this was not an issue. They would not think of singing the national anthem in the liturgy. They would not even sing hymns. They stuck to psalms sung to the Genevan tunes that had been handed down by John Calvin. The Nazis [you see], they saw the church's Psalter as innocuous. Harmless. Little did they know."

He goes on to write that they might begin the day by singing strains of Psalm 68, singing "Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him." With the image of God coming in procession and leading the captives to freedom, "the psalm, and many like it, ennobled the church to assert its voice, to nerve a people who were resisting the forces of evil."

The Hebrew people wanted to hang up their harps. To smash their guitars. To bend their flutes, and to quite their voices. But here's the thing: they didn't. The truth is, this psalm exists because, though they asked the question--How can we sing the Lord's song here, and now?--though they asked the question, they were still determined to sing.

They were still determined not to forget. The question itself has become a song, handed to us in a psalm, in a body of psalms and a body of scripture by which we have learned to sing the songs of the Lord, to sing the songs of Zion. Because the people never stopped their singing.

Through those years of captivity, their anthem rang out. Through the years of slavery, an anthem rang out. Through years of Nazi occupation, through years of colonialism, through years of war and violence and abuse, God's people have never stopped singing. God's people have never let the captors win. They have never given in to injustice. They have never given in to those who mock and say God is absent, that God doesn't care. They have let their homesickness burn within them, longing to one day sing the Lord's song with the full choir and full orchestration. Longing to one day have that meal we've been hankering for, the banquet that's being prepared.

Because even the Lord's feast we celebrate here is nothing like it will be at home. It's a little bit like Tex-Mex on Long Island. But we gather round anyway, and we join the song that is

unending--the song of our own homeland, our very own anthem for the kingdom of God, an anthem of praise that is ringing out all over the world, over organ and guitar, harmonica and drum, an anthem whose melodies are varied, but whose words have echoed the same for hundreds of years: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of Power and Might. Heaven and Earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Hosanna in the highest. Hosanna in the highest.

Let the Church say Amen.