

Learning to Sing

Cycle #2 -- Session #2

Learning to Sing

Text: - Psalm 137-138

Gathering

Share with one another one place you saw or experienced God this week and one thing you found easier or more difficult because of the situation in which you found yourself.

Opening Worship

Light a candle as a reminder of God's presence

Song: *Bless Now, O God, the Journey* #489 Chalice Hymnal

Litany (Psalm 130:1-6, NIV, NRSV)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;

O Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

If you, O LORD kept a record of sins, who could stand

But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are revered.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits

More than those who watch for the morning,

More than those who watch for the morning.

Welcome One Another. Share with one another one place you saw or experienced God this week and one thing you found easier or more difficult because of the situation in which you found yourself.

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Scripture

Psalm 137

¹By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

²On the willows* there we hung up our harps. ³For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ ⁴How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? ⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! ⁶Let 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.

⁷Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!’ ⁸O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! ⁹Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; ²I bow down towards your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. ³On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. ⁴All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth.

⁵They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD. ⁶For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.

⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.

⁸The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures for ever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Dwelling in Scripture

Begin by reading Psalm 137 – What draws your attention?

Then read Psalm 138 – Listen to both Psalms carefully. With which is it easier to identify?

Behind the Text

Many of the Psalms could have come from any time and have an agelessness about them which makes them accessible to people in many different times, places and circumstances. Psalm 8 and Psalm 23 are two that come to mind. You can probably think of others without much difficulty. While many of them were addressing the community of Israel, they are adaptable for the use of individuals. Psalm 137 is different. It points to a particular time, place, and historical events. It appears to have been written either during the time of the Babylonian Exile (587-539 B.C.E.) or possibly just after the exile while the deep pain of the exile was still fresh. Sometimes it is easier and perhaps safer to look back at painful events after they are over, than it is during the events themselves. At the very least this is a psalm with the raw, human emotions of anger, helplessness, and longing for revenge.

The switch from Psalm 137 to 138, is a huge jump from “We could not sing” to “I give thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise.” While the date of this Psalm is unknown, I suspect its placement, is no accident. After deliverance from pain of exile, thanksgiving seems an appropriate response. At first it appears this is the song of an individual and it can certainly be used that way. In the second stanza of the psalm as the singer turns to a wider picture of who is to offer praise, it might just as easily be a song of the community. It concludes with an assurance of God’s presence even in the dark times of trial and an awareness that in all things God’s love is steadfast. Then there’s another switch in which the singer entreats God not to forget the creation, the work of God’s hands.

I chose these two psalms in part because they appear side by side, but also because it seemed to me they are two sides of a coin. In times of great difficulty questioning God seems natural. When the Israelites found themselves in Exile they must have wondered about God.

- ~ Was God really a God of power, if God had allowed them to be defeated and taken away from their homeland?
- ~ How could they sing with their enemies taunting them?
- ~ Was God a local God or God of all that is?

It is only in looking back we can see that God was with us and that God is more powerful than the painful circumstances we’ve experienced.

In painful times, I suspect our questions are not all that different from those of the exiles, although we may be a little more careful in how we express our anger and frustration. I’ve not heard many people wanting to see children destroyed even if they are children of those we call enemy. As we look at the church near the beginning of this 21st century, we aren’t dealing with an enemy which has taken us into exile, but in some ways I suspect many of our churches experience being in a “foreign land,” raising

questions about just how powerful God is. It may be we are indeed finding ourselves living in a “foreign land.”

Observation

Begin with Psalm 137. The commentator in the NIB suggests that the structure of this Psalm is more visible if you read the first four verses together, then the next two, and finally the last three. When read in this way we hear first the pain of the psalmist over the lost homeland and the inability to sing in this new place. ‘Singing’ and ‘song’ which are used 5 times in those first 4 verses, seems to be at the heart of expressing the devastation the people have experienced in the exile.

Consider

Many church people will say the reason they don’t sing in church is they really can’t. Not everyone has the ability or has learned to sing. So don’t get too weighed down by your ability, look at it as a metaphor, a way of expressing events so distressing that the spirit and ability to rejoice has been at least temporarily suppressed. I once knew a man in that situation who said as we looked on an amazing scene of mountains and ocean, *“How does this look to you? I never see colors as bright and clear. Everything is muted and cloudy.”* I suspect his is not an unusual experience. Think about your own life, and your church. Have you ever been in such a desolate situation or place you felt like the weight of the world sat on your shoulders. How did you react? How about your church? Are there events that have caused such distress there was little joy and people were not sure God was even there?

Observation

Then we hear the power of the remembering of the homeland and finally a request to God to hear not only hear their sufferings, but to share their pain. For those of us living here and now understanding this psalm may not be very easy. We have a very different view of the world and of God. This Psalm reflects a time when Jerusalem is God’s place. Jerusalem is sometimes personified and the temple almost embodies God, Jerusalem has been seen as the center of the universe and up until this point it is there that the Psalms of Zion can be sung. The key to their transition and to a new understanding of God as God of all that is and in every place seems to lie in their being able to remember who they are and who God is.

In looking at our own time perhaps we get a little flavor of that as the church in this new century is faced with finding God outside the church. We’d probably never say it that way, but there was a time which some may remember when the church was at the heart of the community. Sunday was a holy day. Stores were not open. Sports events weren’t scheduled. And Wednesday night was for prayer meetings and choir practice. Social activities revolved around the church. Now if God is the center of life, it is because we choose to make it so. We are having to learn how to live in this strange new land and discover how we sing in this place.

Consider

What do you need to remember in order to move into this new time and place, recognizing God is wherever you are in whatever circumstance you find yourself? Where do you find the freedom to “sing” God’s song? How do you shape your life around your faith in God and the world in which we live?

Observation

Psalms 138 has an entirely different point of view. In this song the psalmist knows who God is and is able to worship, give thanks and recognize that God is a God whose love is steadfast and recognizes by faith God is “above all, in all, over all.” *God is over all the earth and even the kingdoms will turn to the LORD.* God is not distant from the lowliest. The proud have a problem because they are unable to draw close to God. God is creator, protector, and lover of the whole creation. The psalmist ends with the phrase, *“Do not forsake the work of your hand.”*

Consider

The contrast between these two Psalms is amazing. In the first there is despair, in the second hope. In the first distance from God, in the second, awareness of God’s presence. In the first, a struggle to remember and to hang on to that remembering. In the second, it is God who is asked to remember and not to forsake the creation, the people, and the nation which he has brought into being. What are some of the other contrasts you see? Where do you find yourself, closer to either, somewhere between, or somewhere else entirely? What might this say to the church in this time of change and transformation?

Activity (Optional)

Make a memory collage. This might be with pictures or words, but what are the important words, events, places for you as you look at your faith, your church?

Practicing the Presence

- 1) This week as a part of your daily prayer, continue putting together your memory collage. If you choose you may want to choose pictures of persons who’ve been an important part of your journey or you may want to include symbols that remind you of particular events in your faith journey and which offer encouragement when you need it.
- 2) Continue the practice of using the text as the source of prayer. The focus of the next study will be – Isaiah 40:21-31

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship Prayer for the Journey

Read the two psalms we have been studying as a parallel reading so that you hear both the voices of despair and the praise, the doubt about God’s strength and the assurance that God holds the world in her/his care. It may serve as a reminder that in our own experience these two things may coexist and God loves us anyway.

Notice who is on your right and your left. These will be your prayer partners for the coming week. If there are particular joys or concerns, share them with one another so that you may hold them in your prayers.

(Unison) Deliver the oppressed, pity the unnoticed. Raise the fallen, show yourself to the needy. Heal the sick, bring back those who have strayed. Feed the hungry, lift up the weak. Remove the prisoners’ chains. May the people come to know that you are God. That Jesus Christ is your Child, that we are your people.

(Clement of Rome @ CE 200)

Blessing (Unison)

**God of power
May the boldness of your spirit transform us,
may the gentleness of your Spirit lead us,
may the gifts of your Spirit equip us to serve and worship you
now and always. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

*In Spirit and in truth, A Worship Book
World Council of Churches, 7th Assembly, 1991
Canberra, Australia.*

Song: *Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal*