

“How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?”
Psalm 37:1-13; Romans 15:7-13;
John 5:30-44

November 15, 2015
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When I titled this sermon—“How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?”—I did it way back in August. It was a question that comes out of the Northumbria Community, one of those places I visited last summer. It’s one of the questions they ask themselves. When I came to realize that I was preaching on that today, following the events of this week, I realized how apropos the question is and how suddenly it really felt real to me. How do I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? In so many ways I feel like the world we live in today is such a strange land. It doesn’t feel like the world I wanted to grow up into, a world in which peace reigned.

The events of Friday night in France really struck me, partly because that neighborhood where all that took place was the very neighborhood where we stayed for a couple of days last summer. It is in this world in which so much of this incredibly senseless violence is occurring, it feels like such a strange land. Why does someone go into a classroom in Oregon and open fire? Why did people decide that this was an appropriate way to do things in Paris? It feels like we live in such a strange land. How do we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

It was not the trajectory I thought I would take on this sermon today when I first put this together. Wondering about what it means to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land back in August was not quite the same as the way it has struck me this week. And yet, it feels so real. So again, as I was reading through that convoluted passage in John, there are things there that began to just be so noticeable. Jesus was saying these things because he wants us to be saved. It is in the midst of feeling like I live in this strange land I really experience a desire for Jesus to save us. What does that mean?

Certainly we have this long theological tradition of what it means for Jesus to save us over the long run and to lead us into the kingdom of God eternal. But sometimes I want to be saved right now, and what does that mean? It’s interesting that the word “saved” can also be translated “to be set free” or “to be healed.” There is a sense that what he’s saying is that as we listen to him, as we see his works, there’s an invitation to come to allow the love of the Lord to be in our hearts. Talking to the people who were there, he said, “The love of the Lord is not in your hearts, so you’re not going to understand me.” It’s an invitation to us, I think, to allow that love to be in our hearts, to open up to that love, so that we can understand what he is saying and hear his invitation to be saved, healed, set free.

Indeed, a little further on he says if you would really listen, you would “come to me that you may have life.” That’s what it’s about—how we live this life in this strange land that we live in. So it reminds me again that it is by coming to him through the love of God that he brings to us that we can have life. He invites us to come.

There’s another passage that we used yesterday at the Oasis Retreat that reminds us that Jesus invites us to come to him, for his yoke is easy. He says, “Take my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart.” (Matt 11:29)

So as I'm reminded by these verses that it is about coming to Jesus and looking to how he will set us free, and that it is then about following him, looking at how he leads us and even emulating him. He is our model. He is the one we are to look to, and he invites us to come and recognize that the work he has for us, the yoke, the learning we can do seems to begin with thinking about him as being gentle and humble of heart.

Now the thing that strikes me about that is how incredibly different that is from the world, this strange land we seem to live in. So much of the response of our world right now seems to be about anger and violence. The Psalmist warns us about that. The more we worry and fret, the more we let that anger take over. What does it say in the Psalm? It says to be careful of that anger because it will lead you to evil. (Psalm 37:8) It reminds me again to look to Jesus, the one who is gentle and humble of heart. That's not my first reaction to some of this stuff.

If we look at the passage from Romans, where Paul is describing what Jesus does, he says, "He's a servant to the Jews and he's hope for the Gentiles." His response to a world of violence was to be a servant and to bring hope. That kind of leaves me speechless because it's not always clear how to do that, and yet, that's what he does. He comes as a servant to show the love and grace of God into people's lives through healing, through guidance, through encouragement, through forgiveness, and then gives us hope of a God that will always be with us and prepares a place for us. Serving and hope.

Paul says when we look at what Jesus has done, being a servant and one who brings hope, there is something we can do. At the beginning of this passage, it seems like he's saying, "Look at what Jesus did. The least we can do is try to accept one another." In the midst of living in a strange world, in a strange land, how do we accept one another? How do we see others as children of God in the midst of strife and violence? I think it's by God's grace because I don't think I can do it on my own. It's by recognizing that he has come as a servant and as one bringing hope that encourages me to think how I can be one who accepts.

We started off this service in such a beautiful way, thinking about children and the joy of childhood, the songs we could sing and the opportunity to baptize Isaac and to think about bringing children in to the new covenant that we have with Christ. Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me." This phrase took me back a little bit this week because it suggested that we have to let children come, and can all children be children? Are we letting children come? How can a child come if they're not feeling the joy of childhood, if they're hungry, mistreated, distraught? As we begin to think about how we follow Jesus, and we look at who he is, we see a servant that brings hope, one that invites us to be set free in him to do good. The Psalm says to trust in the Lord and do good. Accept one another. "Let the children come to me," Jesus says.

Perhaps it is as we go to Jesus and follow him that we recognize his encouragement to accept one another, to show his love, to see that the children can come to him, that we will discover how to sing the Lord's song in this strange land.

So let me conclude as Paul did: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. And let me add: that we might sing the Lord's song in a strange land.