



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 2, 2016

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost—The Feast of St. Francis Observed

Based on Psalm 137:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Saying out loud that we are in a time of great change and transition in both church and society is like the old adage—"You're preaching to the choir."

But from time to time there are changes and transitions that literally threaten to overwhelm us. There are major shifts in life's patterns, the kind of life-altering dislocations that are akin to the biblical times of Isaiah, the prophet of the Exile, and of the Psalmist who wrote the hymn before us this morning—when he talked about the "foundations of the earth shaking."

And following the Exile, these societal changes continued to be the norm for God's people. For Christians it begins with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, which literally split history in two, and the disciples of Jesus who were called to carry out the mission of the Gospel. It happened in the context of Nero's persecution; within Constantine's post-conversion empire; within the fall of Rome and the entry into the Dark Ages; within the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution; and within the birth of the atomic and technological ages.

The people of the Exile summed up this dislocation, the disorientation, the anxiety of people caught in foundational shifts in the poetry of Psalm 137:

"By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered you, O Zion. As for our harps, we hung them up on the trees in the midst of that land. For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called for mirth: 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.' How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

And that, indeed, is a primary question on the minds of many this October morning in 2016: How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

I'm not sure how long we have been in this present strange land. Historians of another century will have to pinpoint the date we began our journey. Two of the primary dates I would set would be December 7, 1941—the bombing of Pearl Harbor—and the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1945, with the explosion of the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima. For those living since those events, the foundations have been shaken, and nothing has remained very constant. Here are some of the aftershocks that have shifted us since then:

The cold war, with the threat of nuclear annihilation;
Brown v. the Board of Education, 1954
The Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Rosa Parks;
The "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963;
The assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy;
The war in Viet Nam;

Space exploration;
The sexual revolution;
Human rights movements;
The end of the cold war;
The end of Apartheid;
The introduction of cyberspace;
Continuing instability in the Middle East, including wars and immigration explosions;
9/11;
A financial and economic meltdown;
Marriage equality;
Ongoing racial and ethnic tension... to name a few. Whew, I'm tired!

Let me remind you of some of the things that consistently happen in every single instance when the foundations of society shift:

- + One is that people begin to grumble and to become dissatisfied. They have big fights over little things. The people, like the Israelites in Exodus, begin to murmur and gnash their teeth.
- + A second thing that happens is that the community becomes fragmented, and people become very angry at each other. They choose up sides and divide into partisan issue groups. They are not angry, interestingly enough, because they feel attacked so much as because they are afraid. And that fear-driven anger often results in people becoming very dispirited toward each other. A gruesome example is contained later in. Shortly after asking, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?", the Psalmist, purportedly a religious person, cries out: "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction. Happy is the one who pays you back for what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock."
... So much for family values! This fear-generated anger lies in our inability to deal with the unknown, our discomfort with ambiguity, our insistence on having all black and white answers. The ancient cartographers, when they got to the limits of their geographic knowledge, would put at the boundaries of their maps a warning that read, "Danger. Beyond here dragons may lurk."
- + Also, invariably the people tend to blame the leaders for these seismic shifts in cultural and geo-political terrain. Admittedly, sometimes the leaders do indeed make mistakes. However, the fact that the sea is stormy is not something that the sailors can lay at the feet of the captain. Just like the children of Israel blamed Moses when things got tough in the wilderness, we tend to do that with our leaders. It must be the President's fault, or the Bishop's fault, or the Mayor's fault, or the Rector's fault.
- + Another constant in times of upheaval is that people become depressed and dispirited. A grand malaise seems to fall over the community—just as it did for the exiles by the waters of Babylon; just as it did for the disciples on the night before Jesus' crucifixion.
- + Another trait of people caught in major transition is that they always want to go back to the "good old days." They want to go back to the leeks and cucumbers of Egypt, or we want to go back to the 1950s or 70s or 90s. Really?
- + And finally these seismic shifts almost always take a generation or more to work out. That means some of us, like Moses, may not find out what the end result is; we may not see the promised land.

So what are we learning as the church in this landscape? In particular, what have we been learning at St. Bart's Church about responding well to these seismic changes ... In short, are we learning to sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

To answer these questions, listen again to St. Paul's encouragement to young Timothy in this week's epistle text: "I remind you to rekindle the gifts of God that are within you ... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline ... Hold to sound teaching in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus ... Guard the good treasure entrusted to you."

Paul is talking about a gutsy and lavish sharing of God's mercy and grace. He's talking about the living center of Christ who is loving, forgiving and sacrificial, who gives himself totally for others. To enter the vineyard of gospel love in a strange land, one must stoop through the gate of humility. This posture is not self-abasement but self-effacement. And we must rekindle that faith that is within us.

What then will the church and the world need in the decade ahead? We need people who can proclaim and live an inclusive gospel in the midst of ongoing prejudice, profiling, and disregard. God's church needs people who are willing to stand in the gap, bridging the divides between people. We need people who, in the fog of the mountain of unknowing, can bring a measure of non-anxious presence in the midst of complexity and confusion. We need people who humbly seek the truth, realizing that we do not know enough about God and each other. We need people who can stand up to the powers and principalities of domination and stand with those who are last, and lost, and least. We need people who can see a double rainbow in the Adirondacks or gaze at and exquisite piece of art in the Met and realize that they have seen God. We need people to reassure the frightened and to comfort the sick and forlorn.

Jesus never promised that we would not enter strange lands. What he did promise is that he will be with us in the strange lands. And in that context we can learn to sing God's song in that place ... but it doesn't happen over night.

Robert Frost was in the midst of writing what he hoped would be the poem by which he would be remembered. He thought he was creating his epic work, but as he struggled over his longer creation, he took a brief break and scribbled these lines that, at the time, he thought were mere throw-away notes: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep." Perhaps our most memorable work will come during a struggle, a time, when seemingly we jot down "throw-aways," and it becomes that which makes the most difference... in the midst of woods dark and deep.

So, my friends, draw close to God, practice the deepest possible hospitality and generosity. Be of the City of New York, not just in it, be theologically, biblically and culturally literate, bear witness to a gospel that is transformative and hopeful, take risks, live with hope and abundance, and have a sense of humor; don't be afraid to fail, live on the edge of adventure, rely on faith, and laugh often. Explore, experiment, imagine and dream about God's presence and purpose and say "yes" until you have to say "no." Live with joy and promise. Life is a gift. It issues forth in gratitude and generosity. Help the church to sing a new song in a strange ... and often complex ... and sometimes beautiful...land.

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