

Opening Worship | Sermon by Bishop David Bard
Strange things happen every day
Psalm 137
June 3, 2021

Friends I greet you in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and peace and power of the Holy Spirit. In my second annual conference as your bishop, I began the opening sermon with “You came back!” Now in the fifth year of my four-year assignment as your bishop I simply want to say, “I long to be back together.” Next year. Next year.

For this year, we are still holding annual conference in this strange way. This is the third session of the Michigan Annual Conference, and we will now have had more sessions for this newly created annual conference virtually than in person. Strange. But what a long, strange year it’s been. In March of 2020 we closed our buildings as the coronavirus pandemic was emerging in the United States. We’ve been navigating these waters for over a year now and are not yet done. Vaccinations have increased dramatically, and they are an essential part of returning to greater social interaction. Yet we are not done with the strangeness of masks and caution when we are together. Masks may become part of our regular behavior during cold and flu season.

Weeks before last year’s annual conference we witnessed the horrific killing of George Floyd. This spring the trial for the officer who had his knee on George Floyd’s neck for nearly nine minutes took place in Minneapolis, reviving the brutal and terrible images from last year. The tension felt in Minneapolis during this trial was also a reminder that in some instances protests for racial justice arising out of the death of George Floyd and others were occasions for destructive riots, though 96% of the protests involved no violence or destruction of property. Tensions were heightened during the trial even more when twenty-year-old Daunte Wright was killed by police in a Minneapolis suburb.

The turning of our calendars from 2020 to 2021 did not usher in a year filled only with bright horizons and sunny skies. Just days into 2021 we witnessed an unprecedented attack on the capital building of our country. Among the most disturbing scenes of many disturbing scenes of that day was a person who had made his way into the Senate chamber and shouted out “We invoke your name Jesus Christ.” Within a single week in March, Atlanta and Boulder became sites of mass shootings, an American pandemic for which there is no vaccination. Not long after, Indianapolis was added to the list of sites of mass shootings. And in the COVID-19 pandemic, while vaccinations were being administered at remarkable rates, we also mourned that over half a million of our fellow Americans have died.

In The United Methodist Church, General Conference has been postponed for yet another year, heightening anxiety and heating rhetoric. The Global Methodist Church has announced it is ready to launch. In the absence of General and Jurisdictional Conferences, there have needed to be changes in episcopal responsibilities, and I am now serving as the bishop for the Minnesota Conference in addition to my responsibilities here.

As churches we will continue to emerge from this pandemic, trying to take with us what we have learned to forge new futures in ministry. We should not think of this as a simple return to what has been, but as an opportunity for rebirth. The image that keeps coming to me again and again when I think about churches emerging from the pandemic is an image from the movie Apollo 13. After having to spend four days in the lunar module, which had to be dramatically modified, the three astronauts returned to a frozen command module to power it up for re-entry. Coming back into that frozen space, they needed to take great care in powering up things in the right way, but they brought with them all they had learned about creativity and innovation from their time in the lunar module.

Strange times. “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” as the question is asked in Psalm 137:4 in the King James Version. The Message is quite dramatic. “Oh, how could we ever sing God’s song in this wasteland?” Wasteland, echoes of the post-World War I T. S. Eliot poem: “for you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief / And the dry stone no sound of water.”

How shall we sing God’s song? Maybe one of God’s songs right now is the John Lennon song, “Nobody Told Me” - - - “nobody told me there’d be days like these, nobody told me there’d be days like these... strange days indeed!”

How shall we sing the Lord’s song in these strange days? Psalm 137 is an exilic psalm, a writing reflecting the exile of the Israelites in Babylon. They were literally in a “strange land,” a foreign land, as most more recent translations render the passage. The Babylonian Empire into which the people were exiled was not a material wasteland, but it was a wasteland of the soul, only broken images, dead trees giving no shelter, dry stones offering no sound of water. The people found themselves in this strange land unwillingly. They were quite literally taken away. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in such a strange place, in such a strange time? How shall we sing God’s song when the songs that we knew, songs about a land given by God, songs about being a chosen people, don’t quite seem to capture our complex reality here in Babylon? We have only broken images, dry stones offering no sound of water.

Strange times, strange land, strange days indeed. In a sense every time and every land are strange in some way for followers of Jesus. One day, Jesus got into a boat with his disciples. It was a day like many others and traversing this lake would have been common practice. So typical was this, that Jesus even falls asleep. Then a wind arises, a windstorm threatens to capsize their boat. Fear and terror grip the disciples and they figure they better wake Jesus. Jesus rebukes the wind, and the waves and calm arrives. The disciples were amazed, astonished, and a little afraid of this strange thing that had happened. Because we follow Jesus, we will know strangeness.

To follow Jesus is also to know that, in the words of the song by the gospel singer, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, there are strange things happening every day. This too, is one of the Lord’s songs for strange times, “Strange Things Happening Every Day.”

We are never completely at home in any time or any place. It is easy to see some of the strangeness of our time that grates against us – pandemic and violence and racism. These clearly

stand against what we know as God's desire for the human community, God's kingdom or kingdom. There are subtler ways in which the normalcy of our culture stands against what God desires. We have grown comfortable with intolerable levels of inequality and with a system that has made it more difficult to rise out of poverty. We have grown too comfortable with people who confuse love of God and love of country. We love our country because we love God, but we have not strongly enough distinguished this from loving country as a god. While we decry violence, we are too comfortable with a culture that continues to do too little to actually stem it. We are too comfortable with a culture that places great value on those who have, that prizes acquisition more than generosity.

While there is much to be celebrated in our culture, no culture perfectly captures God's hopes for the human community, and we often become too comfortable with parts of our culture that don't reflect God's purposes. We should feel a certain strangeness. The theologian Karl Barth once wrote a powerful essay, "The Strange New World Within the Bible." "What sort of house is it to which the Bible is the door?" Barth asked, and answered, "within the Bible there is a strange new world, the world of God." (The Word of God and the Word of Man, p. 28, 33).

God is at work, always at work, to transform human lives – to heal, mend, forgive, renew. God's Spirit is always at work within us, our hearts, minds, souls, but this inner work, in Barth's words, "must break forth from quiet hearts into the world outside" (49). God is at work, always at work, to create a new world - a world centered in justice, peace, reconciliation, compassion, gentleness, kindness and love. To the extent the world in which we live is not this new world, well, the world will feel a little strange to us, should feel a little strange to us.

But it may also be just as true to say that we are always at home any place in the world. We are to be different from the world, but not alienated from it. We are to feel a little strange in the world, but not estranged from it. Because it is in this world that God is doing God's work. It is in this world that Jesus became incarnate. It is of this world that the Bible says, "For God so loved the world." It is out of the materials of this world that God will work to create that newer world. The theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff once wrote these marvelous lines: "in the eschatological image of the city [think "new Jerusalem"] we have the assurance that our efforts to make these present cities of ours humane places in which to live... will, by the way of the mysterious patterns of history, eventually provide tiles and timbers for a city of delight" (Until Justice and Peace Embrace, 140). No matter how strange this world may be, God is always at work for its redemption, and as followers of Jesus we are invited to be part of that work. We are invited to make this world more humane thus providing tiles and timbers for a city of delight, a city of joy, a Beloved Community.

Every place is a little strange to us and every place is home. I cannot help but think about the fact that the Talmud, that wonderful compendium of Jewish teaching, took its most authoritative form in Babylon, that place to which the Jews were exiled. Through the years they found a way to sing the Lord's song in that strange land, in strange times and places. We live in that tension between every place being a little strange and every place being home. And we live in

extraordinarily strange times now. In this time, in this place, we are to follow Jesus in ways that amaze and astonish, that lead people to new shores and help calm the seas along the way. If I were to answer the question of how we sing God's song in this time, in this place, in these strange days, I would say that we should sing songs that are strangely beautiful, songs celebrating that with God there are strange things happening every day, strangely beautiful things, even in strange times.

Singing God's song in our time may be like an opera, or a song cycle, or a concept album – jazz, rock, country, hip hop, soul – there are different movements that come together, different songs that make up the whole. We would want our favorite hymns or sacred songs to be sure, but I've already suggested a couple of songs for this idea of the Lord's song as strangely beautiful. We acknowledge that we live in strange and difficult times – nobody told me there'd be days like these, strange days indeed. I did not even mention the continuing decline in religious affiliation which is part of these strange days. Gallup released poll results recently which indicates that for the first time in the history of that poll membership in religious communities in the United States was less than 50% of the population. The self-identified conservative columnist Russ Douthat writes: "our churches are fractured, scandal-ridden and declining" ([New York Times](#), March 30, 2021). We also affirm that God is always up to something, always at work transforming lives and building a newer world, setting sail across the lake and calming the storms. That work can seem strange, counter cultural. To affirm God's work is to affirm that there are strange things happening every day. Let me suggest three other movements to this song cycle or opera or concept album "strangely beautiful."

The first is this. To sing the Lord's song in this strange time is to be able to be made uncomfortable. I could not think of a popular song on which to hang this idea, so I will suggest its opposite. To sing the Lord's song in this strange time is to resist becoming comfortably numb. For those of you keeping track, "Comfortably Numb" is a Pink Floyd song. Discomfort, not the most inviting idea by which to attract people into the journey with Jesus. Come and be uncomfortable. Jesus tells his disciples that they are going to the other side of the lake, then there is a storm and a great deal of discomfort. There is often discomfort in getting from where we are to where we need to be, but if that new place is a place of healing, repair, reconciliation, justice, new life, peacefulness, kindness, generosity, gentleness, joy and love, the discomfort is worth it. If we are content to be comfortably numb, we will not arrive at that newer place.

Sometimes our personal lives are a mess, or we are in distress. Change is needed, but change will be uncomfortable. Some have acquired bad habits in this pandemic. Many of us need to find ways to touch our grief. God's grace is found in increasing our capacity for discomfort.

Sometimes our churches need to change their way of being in ministry. Coming out of this pandemic we realize the power of virtual connection. We cannot just go back to gathering on Sunday at 10:30 and if you can't be there, too bad. Ministry, to remain vital and vibrant will need to keep changing, and change is uncomfortable. God's grace is found in increasing our capacity for discomfort.

We have already recited a litany of ways the world is not what we would have it be, but change will be uncomfortable. For we who are white, to look at the history of bias and racism in this country is uncomfortable. Some may say, "My community is not diverse" but have you ever asked why your community might not be diverse? The writer James Baldwin, who wrote with power and poignancy about what it meant to be Black in America once said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." The strength of our witness to the power of God's love in Jesus Christ to heal and free and overcome barriers is greatly diminished if we cannot engage in honest conversation and constructive work around race. This will be uncomfortable, and God's grace is found in increasing our capacity for discomfort. Strangely beautiful this grace of God.

To sing God's strangely beautiful song in these strange days is to be willing to be seen in some ways as a beautiful loser. The reference is to a Bob Seger song. We live in an age marked by cynicism, and our society provides plenty of reasons for it. In our political system it can seem as if the goal of many elected officials is to keep power rather than to use power for the public good. We seem all too willing to tolerate a level of gun violence in this country unknown in other economically developed nations, without even having serious conversations about what might reasonably help. We look at the statistics around religious affiliation and the significant decline in church participation and plan mostly for continued decline, prudent planning shading into complacency.

Cynicism. Nothing really will change. No important difference can be made. It is the wisdom of this age. Years ago, the theologian Dorothee Soelle wrote that "faith is the struggle against objective and subjective cynicism" (Choosing Life, 15). As people of faith, we are not cynical people. We are those who trust in the power of kindness, compassion, gentleness, joy, and love and who work for justice, righteousness, peace, and reconciliation. We really do believe that God's grace is a power to transform human lives, so we reach out to share that grace. We really do believe that years of hurt, misunderstanding and oppression do not preclude building community based on an honest recognition of the past and a shared commitment to a new future. We really do believe that despite how we often get in our own way, in spite even of our upcoming division, God is still able to work through the church. To some we may seem only beautiful losers, starry-eyed dreamers, and idealists. But by the grace of God and in the power of God's Spirit we let our ideal and dreams guide us to engage in the muck and mire of life to make a difference. We find ways to write the Talmud even in Babylon. We continue to sing God's song, strangely beautiful and in singing that strangely beautiful song we discover the power of God's foolishness.

To sing God's strangely beautiful song in these strange days is to be assured that we can do this hard thing, the reference is to a song by Carrie Newcomer, a song to which I was introduced by Dwayne Bagley. "Here we stand breathless and pressed in hard times. Hearts hung like laundry on backyard clothes lines. Impossible takes just a little more time.... You can do this hard thing. You can do this hard thing. It's not easy I know, but I believe that it's so. You can do this hard thing."

It's not easy to be made uncomfortable, even on the way to healing, even on the way to the other side. With God's grace, we can do this hard thing. It's not easy to stake our lives on values that seem so out of step with the surrounding culture – kindness, graciousness, generosity, gentleness, justice, love. It's not easy to feel like a beautiful loser. With God's grace, we can do this hard thing. It's not easy to continue to work to transform the church when so many would rather give up, walk away, this institution which has often let us down, this institution which even now is splitting apart. It's not easy to believe that God still works through this community called the church. With God's grace, we can do this hard thing.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in this strange land, in this strange time? Sing strangely beautiful songs. Be strangely beautiful people. When we are strangely beautiful, we find that strange things happen every day – things about compassion, things about kindness, things about justice, things about generosity, things about reconciliation, things about peace, things about gentleness, things about joy, things about love, God things. When we dare to be strangely beautiful, sing God's strangely beautiful songs, we can make our way to the other shore even if there are storms that need calming. When we dare to be strangely beautiful, sing God's strangely beautiful songs, we can leave the world amazed and astonished. Look at how they love one another. How is it that they talk across barriers and break down dividing walls of hostility? When we are God's strangely beautiful people broken lives are healed and beloved community is built and other strange things happen every day.

Friends, nobody told me there'd be days like these, strange days indeed. Yet there is no place where we cannot sing the songs of God, strangely beautiful songs, songs that heal and free and serve justice and generate joy. And when we sing such strangely beautiful songs, when we dare to be God's strangely beautiful people, well, other kinds of strange things happen, things that provide tiles and timbers for a city of delight, a city of joy, God's very kingdom. May it be so. May it be so. Let's sing God's strangely beautiful songs. Let's be God's strangely beautiful people by the power of God's Spirit and in the strength of God's grace. Amen.