

## Friday morning worship | Sermon by Jonathan Mays June 4, 2021

**SCRIPTURE READINGS:** Lamentations 1:1-6 and Lamentations 3:19-26 or Psalm 137;  
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 and Psalm 37:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10.

If you've ever lost everything – everything – you probably have a good idea what the singer of Psalm 137 was feeling in their body when they wrote this song of lament. The writer of Lamentations knew the feeling,

“The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.”

If you've been there, you almost certainly know how much it hurts – or how sometimes you just have to stop feeling anything – when you're trying to sing your pain and someone insists that you get past all the wormwood and gall and move on to all the wonderful and good in the next few verses of Lamentations 3,

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, [God's] mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

If those demanding that you sing happy songs also happen to be the source of your pain, what in the world do you do with that? You need to lament. You *have* to lament before new life can happen. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus said, “it remains just a single grain.”

In the presence of the unholy trinity of Covid-19, virulent other-ism, and pernicious climate change, how do we live in the presence of the Holy Trinity? How shall we sing the Lord's song?

Psalm 137 (NIV)

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

2 There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,

3 for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord  
while in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand forget its skill.

6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not consider Jerusalem

my highest joy.

- 7 Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did  
on the day Jerusalem fell.  
“Tear it down,” they cried,  
“tear it down to its foundations!”
- 8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who repays you  
according to what you have done to us.
- 9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks.

The Word of God for the People of God. It really is. In all of its terrible prophetic poetry, it really is.

It’s so uncomfortable to hear this much pain and anger, it’s really tempting – especially if you have the power – to not only insist the singer sing a more pleasant song, but to pressure the singer to comfort you! Just like the captors did to the exiles in the Psalm. It’s what we do if we refuse to listen long enough to realize that this Psalm wasn’t only sung in 587 BCE when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians.

This song was sung in 1492. As author Mark Charles said, “You cannot discover lands already inhabited.” This song was sung in 1565 and 1619 and every other time that power systems used black bodies for economic gain. It was sung in 1830 when Congress passed the Indian Removal Act that led to the Trail of Tears and again in 1890 and 1973 at Wounded Knee. This song was sung in 1692 in Salem and at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Woody Guthrie sang it in 1948 and the Rev. Paul Perez sang it on the U.S. - Mexico border in 2018 (thought Paul will try to tell you that he can’t sing). It was sung in 1969 at the Stonewall Inn and in 2021 at two different hotels in Charlotte, North Carolina.

This song has been sung since Cain other-ized Abel and before we can sing the Lord’s song, we have to listen. Really listen.

Psalm 137 is like the parables of Jesus and really good comedy. We’re listening to an interesting story or a funny joke and all of a sudden we realize, “Wait! I’m the bad guy in this story. The jokes on me.” In Psalm 137, the oppressor demanded a song and got more than they bargained for. Notes in The New Interpreter’s Study Bible offer rich insight:

The [singer] is probably a Levite musician charged to lead the community in worship at a gathering place beside one of the canals that brought water from the Euphrates through the city of Babylon and back into the river below the city.

Hebrew people in the Middle East, black and brown people from all four directions, and Anishinaabek people here in Northern Michigan share the experience of all oppressed people. Sooner or later, the same systems that tried to destroy your culture try to use your culture for their own entertainment.

Some version of, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion,” happened when slave owners demanded happy songs from slaves or when wealthy white people rode the train to resort communities in northern Michigan to watch indigenous people put on an “Indian” show that might have looked more like the cultural caricature of The Lone Ranger than the art and culture of real humans. New Interpreter notes continue,

The community may well have sung, but their song, like many an African-American spiritual, contains a word of warning against the enemy, rendered in lyrical and unforgettable beauty.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia A. Wilson has much to teach us about spirituals as lament, as protest, and as education. If we listen, we’ll hear similar Psalm 137 expressions in contemporary songs like “Glory,” as performed by Common and John Legend, from the film *Selma*.

We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through  
Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany  
Now we right the wrongs in history  
No one can win the war individually  
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people’s energy  
Welcome to the story we call victory  
The comin’ of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory

And the strings swell and the choir sings and, if we’re not careful, we’ll just be entertained by a powerful song and completely miss the power of the lament.

In the introduction to their book, “Unsettling Truths,” authors, Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, write,

Lament serves as a crucial expression of worship because it is truth telling before God... Without lament, human effort and human success emerge as the driving force in the activity of the church. The message of a messiah who suffered and died for humanity is lost in the avalanche of triumphalism. The practice of lament is a necessary truth telling.

The authors invite us into their book as “a lament over dysfunctional theology and a broken history.” If we listen, especially to the most uncomfortable forms of expression, listen without judgment to styles and words that challenge us, our dysfunctional theology and broken history can begin to heal.

If we have ears to hear and eyes to see, these truth telling laments are all around us, in every form of art and on the street. The recent film “Harriet,” portrays a Civil War era version of the last few “can hardly believe it’s in the Bible” verses of Psalm 137. The Edomites in the Psalm did to Israelite escapees what a few freed slaves did to runaways in the film (and in actual U.S. history). They profited by capturing and returning to captivity people desperate enough to risk everything for a chance to be free. In that context, the most brutal words and sentiments in the Psalm can be heard as prayer. Prayer that the Creator hears and cares about.

Before we can sing the Lord's song, we must listen to the songs of the Lord's people. All the people. In his song, "Know Better Do Better," Native American Hip Hop artist, Supaman, laments,

who's been through the worse/surviving genocide/fighting for a better life/they try to set aside/the true history/and keep us mystical/ they say they founded this country on biblical principals?/ It's so cynical/but I'm an analyst/ it's murderous/they refer to us as merciless/ indian savages/ now that's written in the declaration of independence, that's no kidding/hey/open up your heart and let love lead the way/light your path with the words that I speak today/let the lessons flow/arrive and bless ya soul/systemic racism/alive, intentional/ know better do better is the motto/ it's that good medicine, a hard pill to swallow

It is a hard pill to swallow. Decolonized truth is hard for those of us raised in the colonized Eurocentric church. But it's not as hard for some of us to swallow as the lament of Kimberly Latrice Jones. Like the Psalmist, she's reached a point where what she needs to say is more important than being polite about how she says it. If you don't know what I'm talking about, Google Kimberly Latrice Jones and see if you can open your heart to her Summer of 2020 version of Psalm 137. Here's a sample from a transcript on Rev.com. of a video that they report went viral "after it was shown to close out the June 7 Last Week Tonight with John Oliver."

We're in church, so I'm leaving out her most raw comments. Maybe I shouldn't. Until we can hear these contemporary laments as just as holy as Psalm 137, until we can really listen, I don't think we can answer the question, how shall we sing the Lord's song. Like myriads of broken treaties between white power systems and indigenous people, Jones laments,

You broke the contract when you killed us in the streets... You broke the contract when for 400 years, we played your game and built your wealth. You broke the contract when we built our wealth again on our own by our bootstraps in Tulsa and you dropped bombs on us, when we built it in Rosewood and you came in and you slaughtered us. You broke the contract.

Then in appropriately graphic language, she laments the consequences of those broken contracts and concludes, "And they are lucky that what black people are looking for is equality and not revenge." That's a hard pill. I thought long and hard about taking on Psalm 137 in all of its expressions during Annual Conference worship. And I really hope you listen to the actual music of John Legend and Common, of Supaman, and the spoken word of Kimberly Latrice Jones, instead of my sermon summary of their art. The thing is. We need this good medicine, Church!

In a wonderful interview that I shared in our Greensky Hill Indian United Methodist Church Facebook group back in April, reporter David Ono talked with Supaman about his music and mission. Supaman said,

That's my prayer, you know, that people will be inspired to make change wherever they are, you know, that they would change the systems that we live in and, most of all,

change their own hearts, their own ways of thinking, you know. It could be good. It could be good.

It is a legitimate and important part of this process to get to Lamentations 3:22 & 23,

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, [God’s] mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

Have mercy, Loving God, and teach us to lament with our most vulnerable kin, in their language, so that we might truly, madly, deeply understand the steadfast love of your kingdom.

How shall we sing the Lord’s song? By first listening, really listening, to the Lord’s song in everyone else. By hearing and recognizing the voice of Christ in every song. Every human. Every people. Every song.

It could be good.