

When We Don't Feel Like Singing
Psalm 137
May 6, 2007, "Psalm Sunday"
First Federated Church
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Over the years I have struggled with the Psalms. In my youth I always thought that they were supposed to be beautiful poems of inspiration, songs of glory. I expected all of them to be like the 23rd Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters; He restoreth my soul.

But then I set upon a spiritual journey. For five years I religiously followed (no pun intended) a spiritual discipline called "The Daily Office." The version that I used invited the participant "live with" a particular Psalm for a week at a time. In other words, I read the same Psalm every day for a week. After doing this for a couple of years I realized that in the cycle of The Daily Office not every Psalm was read. So, I varied my approach and "lived with" each Psalm for a week; all 150 of them. In doing this I discovered two things; we are selective in the Psalms that we read. Sometimes we leave out or skip over certain verses. Secondly, they are often emotionally raw. This is especially true in today's Psalm.

By way of background, today's Psalm, the 137th, was written sometime after Judah's Exile to Babylon. The holy city of Jerusalem and its Temple, the physical center of Judah's faith, had been destroyed. So thoroughly did Babylon destroy the city and the Temple that not one stone was left on another. As a final act of humiliation, the land may have been salted so that nothing would be able to grow in its soil for nearly a generation or more. The people were enslaved and carried off to a foreign land. And in this land, they were denigrated. In response to this situation the Psalmist wrote the 137th Psalm. You can follow along in your pew Bibles if you wish by turning to page 551.

*By the waters (or streams) of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying
"Sing us one of those songs of Zion!"*

*How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!*

*Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, "Raze it, raze it! Down to the foundations!"
O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
Happy will be he who requites you with what you have done to us!*

Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

Wow! Raw emotion, such brutal savage anger; it's not the kind of thing that any of us would expect finding in the Bible, is it? And, the truth be told, we are selective in many of the Psalms that we read.

At the same time, if we are totally honest, all of us must admit that such anger is both understandable and all too familiar to many, if not all of us, even if it is only fleetingly.

It is the kind of raw emotion that parents feel when their child has been kidnapped, brutalized and killed. It is the kind of rawness that we feel when a loved one is killed by a drunk driver. It is the hatred that motivates a suicide bomber to strap on a suicide belt and kill and maim the innocent around them.

Such emotion, such passion is poison to our soul. Unchecked it will spiritually destroy us. Though the question with which the Psalm begins sprouts from the soil of bitterness and nourished by poisonous waters, it does ask one of Life's most important questions.

How can I sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? How can I possibly sing when I am overcome with despair, when I am so angry that I cannot even spit, when I am so hurt that I do not even have the energy to lift my arms?

I would take a lesson from *Zorba the Greek*. I don't know how well you know the story of Zorba, but it is about a man whose morals may have been questionable—wine, women and song—but when things would go wrong he had a special way of responding. In the story Zorba teams up with an uptight Englishman. They became business partners in an entrepreneurial venture to bring logs from the mountainside down to the sea through a system of platforms, cables and pulleys. As they attached their first load of logs the two thought that they were going to be rich, but it was not to be. As the logs swung on the cable the supports began to vibrate and then shake before collapsing. The logs careened wildly down the mountain and ended on the beach as a jumble of wreckage and broken dreams.

As the two looked put the brokenness of their dream, Zorba did something totally unexpected. He began to dance. Slowly at first, but as his dance gained vitality he began to put his head and his hands heavenward and before long, a song began to cascade from his lips.

How can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? We can't do it just when we feel like it. We can't wait that long. We have to do it even when we don't feel like it. It is a matter of the will.

Don't forget that the Psalms—all of them, even the 137th—is a song; a song born of a faith in God, faith in God incarnated in Jesus Christ, faith in a God who loves us “this much,” faith in a God whose love will never ever let us go.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
Amen.*