

Isaiah 42:10-16

Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants. Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the tops of the mountains. Let them give glory to the LORD, and declare his praise in the coastlands.

The LORD goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes. For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant. I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their herbage; I will turn the rivers into islands, and dry up the pools. I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them.

May God Bless to our understanding the words that we hear today.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts and mind be acceptable in your sight O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

We are a people in exile. It's not a term we usually apply to ourselves. Aren't exiles people who have been captured and carried off to a foreign land against their will? Aren't people in exile refugees?

Exile means physical dislocation and isn't that what has happened to us? Look at where you are today. "Captured" if you will by your pastor, "forced" out of your safe, comfortable church, brought together in a strange, perhaps even "hostile" and noisy, environment certainly a foreign space for worship and for what purpose?

Out of our element, out of the places and spaces that are familiar to us, we are in exile. As we sit here we need to be aware that being in exile is not just about our geographic location. Exile is a cultural, liturgical and spiritual condition. It is an awareness that we are in a hostile, alien environment where it is very tempting to give in and conform to the values that we see around us. When we are taken away from the things that we know, the things that we love the things that we think are important we feel hopeless and helpless.

The church today is in exile, we are in exile from what we once were, busy congregations with full pews on Sunday's, a wide age range of folks from babies in the nursery to, mature, seasoned members. Our youth groups were active and vital, we were the hub of family activity, and we were financially strong. We had it all, and now we struggle, we lament the way things once were and have a hard time accepting that things have changed. We want to go back and sing the hymns and the songs of the past instead of learning the words to some dangerous new songs of the future.

That's what's happening in the passage from Isaiah that we read together today. Remember, that when the nation of Israel went into exile in Babylon they were a nation that identified themselves as God's people, but they were not what you would call religious people. The majority of them did not worship God as the one true God, looking instead to the gods of the peoples and cultures around them. They worshiped God, but they also worship Baal and Dagon and Marduk. It was only when they were exiled; when they faced the threat of assimilation that they begin to understand and celebrate their heritage and their relationship with God. You could say that in Babylon, the Israelites finally found religion. And in doing so, they started to sing the words of a dangerous and wonderful new song. They sang what could not be printed or officially announced.

Listen to the joy and the strength of the opening words Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! It's a song that everyone sings; the people, the sea, the coastland, the desert, the cities, the villages. They all sing a song of a new reality. And this is what they sing about: God is on the move! God has been silent for a long time but is now active. God has been absent and is now powerfully present.

“The LORD goes forth like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes.”

The LORD comes and everything is changed but in our exile I don't think that today we see that. The LORD comes and we want everything to remain the same. I agree with theologian Walter Brueggemann when he says that the songs of the church in America have grown timid and feeble. We are more likely to sing the 80's anthem of “Don't rock the boat baby” instead of the gritty 60's “War, (Good God y'all) what is it good for?” (the answer to that by the way is absolutely nothin!) We are content to accept the status quo, we are content to let others speak for us, we are content to say that God is still speaking but what we don't add is that we have stopped listening

I would like to put forward to you that we are not singing a dangerous new song because we have not accepted that we are in exile. But dear friends, the mainline Christian church is in exile, we are not the forward thinkers anymore, we are not the decision makers, we are not the insiders, we are on the outside looking in, and we are assimilating into a culture that does not put a priority on attending church or worshiping God.

As a church in exile, we can do two things. We can slowly die and let the prevailing culture over take us, or we can, like the exiles of old renew our faith in God. We can redefine how we worship, just not WHO we worship.

So how do we sing a dangerous new song? Honestly, that is the easiest part, I go back to Walter Brueggemann who reminds us that “we have the models of songs of transformation and healing, forgiveness and emancipation and resurrection: we have songs of Easter that assert the newness of Jesus in the face of death, songs of Christmas that assert the new messiah in the midst of a cosmic chaos, songs that devastate and energize, songs that dispatch to nullity and that evoke to possibility!”

What do we sing as a church in exile? We sing about the triumphs of the LORD, we sing about God the Creator, God the protector, God the Father, God the Mother. We sing about Christ born in a small village among peasants. We sing about Christ healing and preaching and teaching. We sing about Christ crucified and we sing about Christ risen. You see, the dangerous new song is actually made up of the “old, old story...the ones we long to hear.” The words, the story hasn’t changed, we have. It’s as if we no longer trust the words because we have fallen to the assimilation of this society, instead of singing the words of our faith proudly, we complain about them because they aren’t the words we remember, we are embarrassed by them, instead of rejoicing in the words, we give ourselves over to patriotic slogans and television jingles as if our politics and the trappings of modern society determine our faith.

As a nation in exile, Israel learned to sing a new song in a foreign land, and they discovered in their singing that the land was not so foreign after all. Even in a strange land and a strange place they were able to claim God as their God and to reassert themselves as God people. And so we gather today in a place that is foreign to us, we don’t have our sanctuary or our pews; we don’t have our coffee

pots and fellowship hall. But we do have our voices and we have the beautiful words, the wonderful words, the words that can lift us up out of exile if we are ready and willing to sing a dangerous new song. And dangerous new songs can make a difference; think about the songs of the Civil Rights movement in the 50's and 60's, think about the anti-war songs of the 60's and 70's, think about the fact that just a few years ago in South Africa Christmas carols were banned because they evoked revolutionary energy and danger. There is a lot to be said for that kind of dangerous music. There is even more to be said for the revolutionaries like us who dare to sing that which is prohibited and outrageous and subversive.

We are a church in exile, and in our exile we would do well to study our failed, feeble singing, we need to notice our fatigue and then we need to go back to our old songs and read them again with new eyes, and sing them again with new voices. Let us sing the old songs that are full of invitations and possibilities, let us sing with brave hearts and free voices a dangerous new song that reminds us that God is our God and that we are the people of God. Let us use our dangerous new song to assert who we are as people of faith, let people hear our dangerous new song and let that song lift us; lift the church out of exile. Hallelujah Amen