

## Worship at home

Series: "Gratitude: More than an Attitude"

September 13, 2020

**Call to worship:** Psalm 124:8

### **Prayers of Adoration, Confession, and Supplication:**

"Lord God,  
early in the morning,  
when the world was young,  
you made life in all its beauty and terror,  
you gave birth to all that we know.

*Hallowed be your name.*

Early in the morning,  
when the world least expected it,  
a newborn child crying in a cradle  
announced that you had come among us,  
that you were one of us.

*Hallowed be your name.*

Early in the morning,  
surrounded by respectable liars,  
religious leaders, anxious statesmen,  
and silent friends,  
you accepted the penalty for being God:  
you shouldered and suffered the cross.

*Hallowed be your name.*

Early in the morning  
a voice in a guarded graveyard  
and footsteps in the dew  
proved that you had risen,  
that you came back  
to those and for those  
who had forgotten, denied, and destroyed you.

*Hallowed be your name.*

Early in the morning  
in the many-faced company of your Church on earth and in heaven  
we celebrate your creation, your life, your death and resurrection,  
your interest in us;  
so, to you we pray:

Lord, bring new life  
where we are worn and tired,

new love  
    where we have turned hard-hearted,  
forgiveness  
    where we feel hurt and where we have wounded,  
and the joy and freedom of your Holy Spirit  
    where we are the prisoners of ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

**Assurance of pardon:**

The proof of God's amazing love is this: while we were sinners, Christ died for us. Know that, when you turn to Jesus in faith and repentance you are forgiven by his grace and be at peace. Amen.

**Hymn #135** “Christians, awake”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fL-7g7QeFb0&t=29s>

**Sermon:**

Singing the Lord’s Song

Over the past number of weeks, I’ve listened to multiple people describing their concerns about resuming public worship in indoor sanctuaries. Apart from the fear of catalyzing another epidemic, one of the most common laments is that we won’t be able to socialize. That is not an insignificant concern. The connections, support, and news-sharing that are found and sought-out during coffee hour or in the mingling before the formal worship begins are profoundly important for our own sense of well-being and for the strength of God’s holy community. The second most voiced lament is that we won’t be able to sing. It is probable that for some worshippers this is not actually a lament (some people may even be secretly relieved!), nevertheless, singing is such an important expression of devotion that, for some Christians, it is hardly possible to imagine worship without singing.

Which put me in mind of Psalm 137. We studied this psalm in its entirety a few weeks ago. Today, I want to consider the first six verses as the introduction to our new series of sermons.

READ PSALM 137:1-6.

---

<sup>1</sup> *A Wee Worship Book*, Wild Goose Worship Group, 26.

1. This psalm would either have been composed during the Israelites' time of exile or afterwards as they reflected on their experiences. It is a lament. They had boasted that their God was their shield and refuge; their anchor and protector. Their God would not allow harm to befall them. Yet, here they are. The holy line of the Davidic kings has been violently broken, the temple has been destroyed, and the land which God had given to them as a sign of his favour was gone. Now they are living in a foreign land. They are surrounded by foreign customs, foreign gods, and foreign religions. Israel is a defeated nation. And their captors won't let them forget it.

Mockingly, their captors asked them to display the joy that they once boasted comes from living in fellowship with Yahweh. They demanded a concert of the songs they would sing in the temple.

The psalm oozes despair: When our experiences displayed the weaknesses in our theology, when we were separated from temple and community, when we were living among those who mocked our God; it seemed like it was time to hang up our harps. How could we sing the LORD's song in this foreign land?

The challenge of the exile, and the call of the prophets was for Israel to learn to do just that.

2. Related to the laments over socializing and singing, there is another theme I've heard expressed over the past number of weeks. I've heard it from people with little or no connection to the church. I've heard it from long-time, faithful members of the Body of Christ. I've heard it from myself.

Despair.

Such despair is often expressed as a question: "When will life get back to normal?" or, "Will life ever get back to normal?" There is a longing to return to how life was only a handful of months ago. Such questions suggest that what we are living with now is not normal.

Masks; thinking twice before visiting friends or family; avoiding crowded parks and grocery stores; choosing to join or remain separated from worshipping communities; even if congregated worship resumes, and even if you choose to attend, it won't be the same as it once was. These are some of the features of the foreign land in which have been living for some time and likely will be for some time to come.

Life under the cloud of pandemic is now normal.

And such realization can lead to despair, to a sense that it's time to hang up our harps.

And fear. Fear of another epidemic. Fear of what will happen when COVID collides with the flu. Fear that schools will be closed again. Fear of the long-term consequences of COVID protection measures on the mental and emotional health of our children. Fear that businesses will go bankrupt if we are forced into another shut-down.

The concerns are real. The financial repercussions are serious. The emotional effects can be crippling.

As if we didn't have enough with which to be concerned before, the pandemic has thrown us into a strange landscape which threatens, if we allow it, to leave us in despair.

Which prompts the question: "Is it even possible to sing the Lord's song in this foreign land?"

**3.** As disciples of Jesus have done in every generation before us, we look to Jesus for answers. No one has sung the Lord's song more fully and more faithfully than he. And no one has experienced the strangeness of a foreign land more than he.

READ LUKE 2:1, 4-7.

Jesus exiled himself from the heavenly realms. The child born in Bethlehem, was God living in a human land.

Jesus left the glory of heaven so that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

Jesus taught a way of life that takes seriously the fragility of our human existence: the onslaught of illness; the effects of sin on our bodies, our minds, our souls, and our communities; the temptations embedded in power and politics; the need for food, for purposeful work, and for rest. And yet Jesus taught a way of life that also transcends that fragility through faith in the presence and ability of the Living God who creates, redeems, and provides for life itself.

Whether we gather in pews on Sunday morning or tune in to hear God's Word read and taught online, or in print, or on t.v.; whether we sing in chorus or privately at home, we are the Body of Christ. Through the Body of Christ, by the Holy Spirit speaking to our souls through the Word of God, our Lord is working out his good purpose in the world.

Disciples of Jesus therefore have a profound gift to offer our neighbours. A gift of hope and a gift of assurance. That even with masks and keeping distance, life is worth the living

because Jesus forgave sin on the cross and transcends our fragility in his resurrection. And by his ascension, he continues to intercede on our behalf.

So, yes. By God's grace it is possible to sing the Lord's song in this foreign land.

**4.** If we accept that proclamation of faith, the next question to ask is: *How* can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

One way, as we saw last Sunday, is to recognize that God, now perhaps more than ever in recent memory, has entrusted the wealth (or, talents) of his Kingdom to us. His creation, His Word, His grace, His people. You can sing the Lord's song by discerning which talents God's entrusted to you and using your abilities to promote those talents, to build up the church, and to provide testimony for others.

Another way is by changing the tune.

Scripture never ignores or belittles suffering. The prayers of lament teach us to be honest when things aren't the way God intends them to be. At the same time, laments never forget or mock the hope of faith.

It is good to lament, provided that in the process we remember the promises of Jesus and begin to change the tune with thanksgiving. The lament of Psalm 137 is sandwiched between two such prayers of thanksgiving. Some scholars argue that the only sacrifice from the Old Testament that wasn't rendered obsolete with the coming of the Messiah is the sacrifice of Thanksgiving. The central Christian religious act, alongside baptism, is the sacrament sometimes called Holy Communion, but properly called the Eucharist which means "Thanksgiving." There are few, if any, New Testament letters that don't begin with a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

Giving thanks to the Lord is the tune by which we sing the Lord's song in spite of our present circumstances.

For the next four weeks that will be our song.

We'll look at the sacrificial aspects of giving thanks. The specificity needed to give thanks with integrity and in a way that transforms our souls. We'll consider the benefits of giving thanks for our own souls and for the good of the community. We'll look at liturgical acts of thanks such as prayer and the sacraments. And we'll sing the 'amen' on October 11<sup>th</sup> with a celebration of Harvest Thanksgiving.

Giving thanks to the Lord helps us remember that even in the darkest of valleys, our shepherd is with us, comforting, correcting, and guiding us with his rod and staff.

Giving thanks to the Lord fuels the light that burns in our souls revealing for others that there is a living God and a way of living that transcends our momentary struggles.

And, if that's not reason enough, psychologists have found correlations between the act of giving thanks and stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure, more effective sleep, less intense loneliness, and more gracious communities.<sup>2</sup>

As we embark into the foreign land that awaits us this fall, let us "give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever."

Amen.

### **Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession:**

Let us pray.

Lord God, we give you thanks that you give light and hope.

We pray for those who face lives filled with darkness:

those who suffer in body, mind, and spirit;

those bent under burdens of sorrow;

those who cannot see the way ahead.

We pray for those who accompany others in dark times and places;

For those who comfort the grieving, and work for healing and new possibilities.

May all these find their darkness transformed by your presence.

Lord in your mercy,

**Hear our Prayer**

Lord God, we give you thanks that you bring liberation and justice.

We pray for those who suffer abuse, violence, or injustice

at the hands of powerful people or forces in their lives,

and for those who have been betrayed by people entrusted with their care.

Stir in all people a deep respect for life.

Encourage those who struggle for freedom,

and work for truth to be heard and reconciliation achieved.

Lord in your mercy,

**Hear our Prayer**

Lord God, we give you thanks that in you we know peace and promise.

We pray for those who work for peace in the world,

for leaders and decision makers,

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Eammons, "Why gratitude is good", [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_gratitude\\_is\\_good](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good)

for those who hold power and can make a difference in their communities,  
and for those who make, interpret, and enforce laws.  
Awaken a respect for the needs of the most vulnerable, including the earth and its fragile balances.  
Lord in your mercy,

**Hear our Prayer**

Lord God, we give you thanks that through your Spirit and your Word  
you give wisdom and understanding.

We pray for those who misunderstand the words and actions of others,  
and for those who are misunderstood.

We pray for those who teach, and those who learn,  
especially those who struggle and are afraid to ask for help.

In this challenging school year,  
guide teachers and students in new patterns of learning  
and keep each one safe and healthy.

Lord in your mercy,

**Hear our Prayer**

Lord God, we give you thanks for your steadfast love;  
by which you came to us to die for us,  
by which you died for us to rise for us,  
by which you rose for us to give forgiveness and reconciliation.

We pray for those we have hurt or offended  
and for those to whom we have been unkind.

We pray for those who have hurt us, or been careless with our feelings.

Work in our lives to redeem broken relationships.

Shape us into gracious and forgiving people.

Lord in your mercy,

**Hear our Prayer**

In silence we name before you other concerns on our minds today...  
(*Keep silence for at least 10 seconds*)”<sup>3</sup>

**Hymn #422** “Sing a new song unto the Lord”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZH7t9\\_mXuh4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZH7t9_mXuh4)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmW9t6d62q0> (reed organ and soloist)

**Blessing:**

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and the love  
of the Father in heaven be with you throughout this day and into all the days that follow.

Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from worship resource for September 13, 2020 from <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>