

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, June 8, 2008  
Rev. John Tapscott

"SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND"

Psalm 137:4

Psalm 137 gives us a memorable, if rather sad picture of the Hebrew people. They had been taken from their homeland and were now living as exiles in Babylon surrounded by false gods and pagan values. Their captors demanded that they sing the songs of Zion, mocking them as if to say "What good is your faith?" "Where is your God now?" But the Hebrews were just too sad to sing songs of faith. They sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept as they remembered Zion. They asked "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 137:4)

Now we are not captives in a foreign land; in fact we Christians might be too comfortable, too much at home in this blessed land of ours. But in many ways, this has become a strange land spiritually. This is very noticeable for those of us who have been around for a few decades. According to the recent census, 75% of Canadians still claim to be Christian, though you would never know that from weekly church attendance. The fastest growing category of religious faith is no faith at all. We now have neighbours and friends of many religious faiths and traditions. The Lord's Prayer and Scripture readings are long gone from schools. And even if the Lord's Prayer continues to be said in the Ontario Legislature, it will survive as one of many prayers from various traditions. Thankfully, one thing that is found in all religions, even though their belief systems are so different, is the Golden Rule. Now there's more to faith than the Golden Rule, but in God's providence we all have that, so that we have a basis for living together in some kind of harmony. But Canada is much different, spiritually speaking, than even a few decades ago. So Israel's ancient question is very relevant for us today.

Now in a sense God's people have always had to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. We are pilgrims on earth who are looking forward to the eternal city God has prepared. In fact, "Citizen of Heaven" is already stamped on our spiritual passport, written in the blood of Christ. So as long as we are here on earth we will ask, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Or to put it another way, "How can we live and express the Christian faith in this diverse land of ours?"

Now if we look back at the Hebrews in Babylon, we discover that they overcame their sadness. They found a way to keep their faith alive and pass it along. And with God's help we can do it, too. So how do Christians sing the Lord's song today in a strange land?

*First, by knowing the basics of Christian faith.*

There's a tendency today to take a bit of Christianity and a dash of another faith and a pinch of a third and mix them all together under the guise of spirituality. Now there is some fluidity and room for discussion and even disagreement in the Christian faith. The church welcomes the honest seeker. But there is a central core to the Christian faith that must not be tampered with, if it's still going to be called Christian. This core is summed up in the Apostles' Creed which we recite every Communion Sunday. The Creed is basic Christian faith that we should know and hold close to our hearts and even memorize if we can.

Now we may think we can cope with this strange world by saying that all religions believe the same thing. They most emphatically do not. Muslims and Hindus and Jews and Christians all believe different things. That doesn't mean that we can't get along with our neighbours of other faiths. "Love your neighbour whatever faith he or she holds." But Christians have some specific beliefs that cannot be reconciled with the specific teachings of other faiths. For example, Christianity grew out of rich Jewish soil. But Christians differ from Jews from on a fundamental issue. We believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, who has come and will come again. Jews do not believe that about Jesus. They are still looking for another.

The Christian faith is all about God's unique and final revelation of himself in Jesus Christ and His action in Christ to redeem the world. Christianity centres on Jesus, his incarnate life, his atoning death, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension to heaven, and his coming again as judge and Lord of all.

Know the basics of Christian faith. Know what it proclaims. That's one way we can sing the Lord's song in a strange land.

*Another way is to tell others who we are.*

We Christians are not like some people whose very clothing may reveal their spiritual identity. Now I have taken to wearing a small cross on the lapel of my jacket. My only concern about that is that my words and actions will bring honour to the One who bore the Cross for me. Thank God I can count on his

mercy and forgiveness.

But here's the thing. We often assume that people know that we are Christians because of the lives we lead or the works we do. But people of other faiths and even no faith also do good works. So our lives may or may not give witness to our Christian faith. Now if your car leaves your home at 9:30 every Sunday morning and arrives home at noon, your neighbour may figure out your spiritual identity. But today so many people have had exposure to church and they may think you spend every Sunday morning at Tim Horton's.

Truthfully, there are very few of us whose lives are so consistently Christ-like that they give witness to our spiritual identity. Certainly mine doesn't and probably yours doesn't either. So we must speak of who we are. Now we are not all gifted at sharing our faith, though as Peter tells us, "Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you." But let me ask you - when was the last time you told someone, "I'm a Christian?" That is what Christians need to do more these days - speak of who we are, speak the Name of the One to whom we belong. Pick out someone with whom you cross paths regularly, and when the time is right, simply tell them you're a Christian. You don't need to give an explanation of the Gospel. Just tell them that you're a follower of Jesus. That will plant a seed in them, and it will strengthen your own faith and sense of Christian identity. It's a way of singing the Lord's song in a strange land.

*A third thing we can do to sing the Lord's song in a strange land is to practise our spiritual disciplines.*

One key way the Hebrews kept their faith alive in the strange land was by their observance of the Sabbath, by keeping the high and holy days of their faith, and by their rigour in prayer. In Babylon these practices gave witness to the God in whom they believed; the God whose Spirit had accompanied them even into exile. It also helped to strengthen their relationship with God.

The main reason for practising spiritual disciplines like worship, prayer and Bible reading, is to strengthen our faith and our relationship with God, and to enter more deeply into the Lord's promises and commandments. It's true with faith as with anything else. The more we put into it the more we get out of it. And doing these things also gives witness to our faith in this secular land. I think practising spiritual disciplines in front of our children and with them is very important - praying with and for your children, worshipping and reading the Bible with them, serving the church. This is how faith gets passed on from one generation to the next.

Now we Christians are unlike people of other faiths who believe that they

will be saved by the quality and the frequency of their spiritual disciplines. Christians believe on the basis of Scripture that we are saved not by what we do, but by what God has done for us in Christ. Our assurance comes from believing in Christ alone for our salvation unto eternal life. I heard someone once put it like this. "We are not saved by reading the Bible, but it's good to read the Bible often; we are not saved by how often we pray, but it's good to pray often; we are not saved by our service, but it's good to serve; we are not saved by how often we come to church, but it's good to come to worship." I would add that these spiritual disciplines are not only a way of expressing gratitude to God for our salvation by grace; they are good ways of singing the Lord's song in a strange land.

Here's the last thing, and it's related to spiritual the spiritual disciplines. *We sing the Lord's song in a strange land by constantly letting the house of God influence us on our earthly journey.*

In Babylon the Hebrews vowed never to forget Jerusalem. And it was the remembrance of the Temple, it's glory and its promise which helped them keep faith alive in the strange land.

In the story of Abraham which we read this morning, God told Abraham to leave his home and go to the land that God would give to his offspring. It was the land of the Canaanites, a strange land with a different faith and different values. But Genesis 12:8 tells us that Abraham pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. He built an altar to the Lord and called upon the Name of the Lord.

Abraham lived in the tension between Bethel, which means house of God, and Ai, the Canaanite city. He refused to be drawn completely into the orbit of Ai or be seduced by its values and beliefs. He always had a reference point, the altar at Bethel, where he worshipped and called on the Name of the Lord.

We too live in the tension between the secular city and the house of God. And the way to sing the Lord's song in this strange land is to let ourselves be influenced by Bethel, the house of God. A big temptation in today's Christianity is to veer dangerously close to Ai, and to easily accept its values. For constantly the secular world, the pagan world, Ai, is preaching at us, and if we neglect Bethel, we will soon forget the songs of the Lord. We will become like Ai. So we need this house of God, and the influence of its worship constantly. For this is where we remember who God is, this is where we are reminded who we are. This is where we hear God's great promises; this is where we are reminded of the values that are eternal, Kingdom values. Here is where we are influenced by God's truths so that we can go out and influence the world for God's sake.

Here we are renewed and comforted and encouraged and forgiven and strengthened for the journey towards the promised land, the eternal city. Here is where we meet the living Christ and call upon his Name. Here is our altar. Here is our Bethel. And the influence of God's House keeps us singing the Lord's song, even in a strange land.