

The Lord's Song in a Strange Land

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Church of the Resurrection, Wheaton, Illinois
Men's Ministry Gathering — October 11, 2003

Jeremiah 35 RSV

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: "Go to the house of the Rechabites, and speak with them, and bring them to the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers; then offer them wine to drink."

So I took Jaazaniah the son of Jeremiah, son of Habazziniah, and his brothers, and all his sons, and the whole house of the Rechabites. I brought them to the house of the Lord into the chamber of the sons of Hanan the son of Igdaliah, the man of God, which was near the chamber of the princes, above the chamber of Maaseiah the son of Shallum, keeper of the threshold. Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine, and cups; and I said to them, "Drink wine."

But they answered, "We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, 'You shall not drink wine, neither you nor your sons for ever; you shall not build a house; you shall not sow seed; you shall not plant or have a vineyard; but you shall live in tents all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.' We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us, to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, or our daughters, and not to build houses to dwell in. We have no vineyard or field or seed; but we have lived in tents, and have obeyed and done all that Jonadab our father commanded us. But when Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon came up against the land, we said, 'Come, and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans and the army of the Syrians.' So we are living in Jerusalem."

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Go and say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Will you not receive instruction and listen to my words? says the Lord. The command which Jonadab the son of Rechab gave to his sons, to drink no wine, has been kept; and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their father's command. I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me. I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, 'Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your doings, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to you and your fathers.' But you did not incline your ear or listen to me. The sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have kept the command which their father gave them, but this people has not obeyed me."

Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing on Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the evil that I have pronounced against them; because I have spoken to them and they have not listened, I have called to them and they have not answered."

But to the house of the Rechabites Jeremiah said, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father, and kept all his precepts, and done all that he commanded you, therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Jonadab the son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before me."

Psalms 137 RSV

By the waters 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 the 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, "Rase it, rase it! Down to its foundations!"

O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall he be 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!

1 Corinthians 12:27—13:3 RSV

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Matthew 9:35—10:3 RSV

And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

The Gospel lesson reminds me of a Sunday, several years ago, when I was visiting an Episcopal church in Florida. The priest was of the old school — the type who would give out his text at the beginning of the sermon, in his stained-glass voice. The Gospel was the same as our reading today, and the priest took the last verse as his text. I was amazed — and amused — to hear him begin like this: "The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

We don't always hear *ourselves*, do we? Sometimes we put words together in strange ways that don't go together, like the restaurant that advertises "jumbo shrimp." (How can you have *jumbo shrimp*?) Or the auto store that announced a "Spectacular Tire Blowout!" Or that old hymn with the verse that begins, "My sin — O the bliss of that glorious thought . . ." We might need to pay closer attention to how we put words together.

Maybe you *were* paying attention a few moments ago when we said, "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit . . ." You may have been struck by the odd juxtaposition of phrases, as in that priest's sermon text. The words just don't seem to go together.

Sort of like the set of readings the lectionary assigns for this morning.

Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine, and cups; and I said to them, 'Drink wine.'
But they answered, "We will drink no wine . . ."

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And he called to him his twelve disciples . . .

Now it would be easy to say, "Well, that's the Old Testament versus the New. The New Testament moves beyond the picky and vindictive stuff we find in the Old. So the New Testament readings are a

corrective to the Old, which reflect an imperfect understanding of the Lord and his ways.” I grant you there’s an unfolding of God’s purpose in Scripture, reaching its fulness in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it’s too simplistic to just write off the “difficult” parts of the Old Testament as a primitive phase we’ve gone beyond. If God is One, so is his Word, and all of it speaks to us in some significant way.

Let’s look briefly at each of these readings, starting with Jeremiah 35. Here the Lord tells the prophet to bring the Rechabites to the house of the Lord (what we call the Temple) and command them to drink wine. Now the Rechabites were a peculiar and old-fashioned sect within Judah, sort of the Amish of the Old Testament. They were staying in the city temporarily because of the Babylonian invasion. But when Jeremiah took them to the Temple and set cups of wine before them, they wouldn’t drink.

This sounds like a great proof text for the temperance movement. Perhaps the consumption of beverage alcohol isn’t really a good idea, and many Christians avoid it. But that isn’t the point. The Rechabites had some other “odd” practices, and they all went together. They didn’t live in houses, but in tents. They didn’t plant crops. And they didn’t drink wine, because it takes a while to develop a vineyard, and they didn’t stay in one place long enough for that. Houses and fields and vineyards are the features of a settled people, but the Rechabites were always “on the move.” They were wanderers, sojourners. And why? Because their founder, Jonadab ben Rechab, and told them to live that way. And why did he do that? Because he didn’t want them to get too comfortable in the land of Canaan. He realized that if they settled into that turf they would pick up its culture, as the rest of the Israelites were doing, and would start to worship the Ba’als of the Canaanites in place of Yahweh. So the life of the Rechabites was a picture of Israel in the wilderness before they settled into the land of Canaan.

The first Psalm begins, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord.” If you start walking according to the life style of a perverse culture, eventually you slow to a stand mired in sin, and you wind up sitting down right there and saying, “God doesn’t count.” The Rechabites didn’t want to make that mistake. They kept walking.

Notice that Jeremiah brought them to the Temple to tempt them with wine. Why the Temple? Perhaps because the ceremonial use of wine was part of the rituals that had developed there, as it is in Judaism to this day. But also because the house of the Lord was *not* a tent, like Israel’s first sanctuary in the wilderness. It was a permanent building of stone and wood, and moreover it was designed by a craftsman from Tyre, a pagan city, so it was modeled on sanctuaries from another culture. So the Rechabites couldn’t have a Temple either, and I presume they couldn’t offer sacrifices. That, too, was a feature of Israel’s early days, when the people were still walking in their “first love” after God gave them his laws. The prophet Amos had asked, in the Lord’s name, “Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?” (5:25). No, to offer those sacrifices you have to have the whole massive infrastructure of livestock production that requires settling into a permanent location. So the Temple and its altar symbolized, for the Rechabites, a departure from the life they had been called to lead — a life that modeled Israel’s time when its love for the Lord was fresh and pure and vibrant.

Brought into the Temple by Jeremiah, the Rechabites nevertheless held fast to their principles. They would not violate their commitment to the way outlined for them by their founder Jonadab. And, of course, Jeremiah knew all along that they would act this way, and that’s why he brought them to the religious leaders of his people. In the Lord’s name, he was making a point: “I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, ‘Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your doings, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to you and your fathers.’ But you did not incline your ear or listen to me. The sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have kept the command which their father gave them, but this people has not obeyed me” (Jeremiah 35:15-16). In other words, the Rechabites had been faithful, but the people of Judah had not. Consequently, their community was about to be destroyed and their leaders taken into exile in Babylon.

And that brings us to the Psalm for the day, Psalm 137: “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” The worship of the Lord, which the Judeans had taken for granted, and had allowed to be corrupted by paganism, had now become precious to them *because they*

couldn't have it any more. They realized what they had lost. So their cry went out, "Our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" What a contrast! Before the fall of Jerusalem the people had been, as it were, singing Ba'al's song in Yahweh's land. As a result they found themselves exiled in a false god's land and unable to sing Yahweh's song! Or, when they did sing it, it was merely as folk entertainment for the amusement of their host culture.

We can identify with this Psalmist. We, too, might cry out, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a culture that opposes the principles of God's Word and suppresses every mention of it in the public forum?" Like the Rechabites in Judah, and like the Judeans in Babylon, we find ourselves estranged from the life styles and values reflected in the dominating powers of our environment: the government, the courts, the media, the educational system, even the religious infrastructure. If we don't feel like aliens, maybe we need to look into the Word and see if we really believe it and take it seriously. Is our delight really "in the law of the Lord," or in some other criterion of worth and success?

The apostle Paul certainly had to deal with that ambivalence in the congregations under his care. The Corinthian Christians had their problems with maintaining a consistent Biblical life style. At one point Paul had to say, "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? . . . Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord . . ." (2 Corinthians 6:14, 17). There isn't time to go into that, but it looks like these inconsistencies were even creeping into their worship practices. Individuals seemed to be calling attention to themselves, jostling for recognition of their gift — whatever it was — as the most important. And Paul is having to say, "Remember that you're only one part of the body. Remember your bond with other believers and your responsibility to them." So he launches into that famous "love" chapter, establishing a criterion by which we are to measure ourselves in the exercise of any gift. "Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease . . ." (1 Corinthians 13:8).

There's more here than meets the eye. I suggest that today we can't really use the English word "love" in any meaningful sense to express a Christian value. I know that sounds crazy, but hear me out. The term has been so overused and misused, acquiring all sorts of un-Christian undertones and overtones, that I doubt its value as a translation of the Greek word *agape*. Instead, we need to cut through to the root of its biblical meaning. I suggest that *agape* is a direct equivalent of the important Old Testament word *hesed*, usually translated as "lovingkindness" or "steadfast love," or sometimes simply as "love." But this word really refers to the Lord's faithfulness to his people, based on a relationship that has been established. God loves us not because he finds us attractive or will get a good feeling out of cuddling up to us, but because he *made a commitment* to us and is honoring that commitment because that's just the sort of God he is. Biblical love is *faithfulness to a commitment*, and as John says, we make that commitment to God because he first made that commitment to us, even to the point of giving the life of his own Son. And that commitment to God includes a commitment to others who serve the same God, which is what makes us a body, a family, a church. So (and this will sound like heresy) there's no such thing as *unconditional love* in the Bible. Biblical love always has a condition, and that condition is to acknowledge the Lord as our God and stick with him. Outside of that commitment there's no way to know his love. Just read Romans 1 if you don't believe me.

The Rechabites held to that commitment when other Israelites let it slip. The writer of Psalm 137 was grieved because it was difficult to live out that commitment in a hostile environment. Paul brings the church again and again back to that commitment. And it was because his people needed to be renewed in that commitment that Jesus did what he did in our Gospel lesson. Looking at those who came to hear his message, he saw that "they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). The people were losing out because, in the hands of well-intentioned but misguided teachers, the ways of God had become a burden instead of a benefit to them. So he called twelve disciples, and sent them out with the message that God is faithful and committed to his people, and is coming to meet them with healing and deliverance.

I think we're seeing the common thread here in these Scripture readings. That common thread is the Lord's *faithfulness* to his people, and our response of *commitment* to him. The Bible has another word for this; it's called the *covenant*, that bond that makes us members of God's family and ties us one to

another as fellow servants of the Great King. And I'll let you in on a hermeneutical secret: *Any* passage of Scripture can be related to any other by looking for its angle on the covenant. The covenant is what the Bible is all about. That's why it's called the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

Okay, then what about Psalm 137:9: "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" This must be one of those Psalms that John Wesley said wasn't fit to be found on the lips of Christian congregations, because of its vindictive language. Where does that fit in the covenant?

There are people active in our world today who are in some ways much like this Psalmist. They find themselves alienated from a pervasive and perverse Western culture. They feel oppressed, under the thumb of a global power hostile to their religious values. So they want to strike out in whatever way they can. They may not be dashing babies against our pavement, but they're crashing airliners into our tallest buildings with the same effect.

As much as we abhor the actions of these terrorists, we as Christians — of all people — ought to understand them. For they are committed. They have taken a pledge to their god. They are zealous for their faith. From our perspective it's a zeal not according to knowledge, but it's a zeal nonetheless — a zeal that seems to be lacking in the Western world and even in ostensibly Christian circles.

Would you and I serve *our* God with the same level of commitment? What would we be willing to do to strike back at those forces of our culture that want to neutralize and negate the gospel of Christ? How far would we go to oppose those who would shove the Christian faith, and the principles of Scripture, onto the sidelines or off the playing field altogether? As one who wants to honor our covenant with God, as one who wants to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, would you gladly say, "Happy is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" and then add, "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit"? If not — what will you put in its place?

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