

Singing the Spirit's Song in a Strange Land
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United Church of Strafford, Vermont
June 30, 2024, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 137:1-4; verses from I Corinthians 12-14

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Sixth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

Some shared experiences can make strangers feel like a loving community. If you have ever been half way across the world in a strange land and met a stranger from the Upper Valley who could talk with you about familiar people and places, you have felt how quickly strangers can become family.

Today we find ourselves in a strange world, but in this sanctuary we meet people who feel as homesick as we do. We may use different words to talk about the Spirit, we may be of different backgrounds, but there are no strangers here. Please linger after worship and extend your care and support especially to those who are close friends of yours that you have not yet discovered.

Call to Worship Today's service is an extended reflection on the question, "How can we sing the Spirit's song in a strange land?" It is a rhetorical question in the Psalms. The people had seen loved ones killed and their homes and entire nation reduced to rubble. Suddenly they were exiles and captives in Babylon. They asked, how can we possibly sing in the midst of this rage and grief?

And yet the Psalm that asks that question is itself a song, and the singing of it was both an act of defiance against what threatened to utterly destroy them and an act of affirmation of the home in their hearts that no oppressor or circumstances could ever take away.

"How can we sing the Spirit's song in a strange land?" is a real and crucially important

question for us, because we can become exiles without moving, as the ground shifts under our feet. Aging can do it, sickness can do it, climate disruption can do it, a national crisis can exile us from a familiar world and make our own homeland a strange land.

In such times we need the comfort, guidance and resilient, creative powers of a higher power more than ever, just when it feels more remote than ever.

The good news is that spiritual practice can lead us home no matter where we find ourselves. I have a friend who meditates in a little clothes closet, and another who has a secret special place in the woods where she sits. Viktor Frankl found a path of love to the spiritual home in his heart while in a Nazi death camp. Thomas Keating opened the door to his home in crowded airports by practicing Centering Prayer. Today, in the midst of a strange world, we will seek to experience home within the spiritual words, silence and beloved community here, and of course, through song. Let us worship together...

Singing the Spirit's Song in a Strange Land

Twenty-five hundred years ago Psalm 137 asked, “How can we sing the Spirit’s song in a strange land?”

Do you feel that we are living in a strange land today? Do you feel we need the gifts of a higher power, like comfort, guidance and strength? If so, the question is how. “How can we sing the Spirit’s song in a strange land?”

The significance of song is made poignantly clear by the times when we cannot sing. My daughter Cary woke up singing literally every day when she was a girl, like a spring bird, so when she did not sing, we knew she was sick. It was more reliable than a thermometer.

The Psalm’s implied answer to the question of how can we sing the Spirit’s song in a strange land is that we can’t, not until we have taken the first step of grieving the loss of what we have loved, not until we have acknowledged that we feel sick and begun the journey toward healing.

Part of my training and experience is as an interim minister, helping guide congregations in transition when they have left an old familiar way of being and entered a wilderness that they have to cross in order to reach the promised land of a new way of being.

The wisdom of those who study transitions is that change happens on two levels. There is the logistical change, the physical move to a strange new place, and that is relatively straightforward to accomplish.

But then there is the emotional, psychological and spiritual change, moving through trauma or disorientation, the impact of losing things that were comfortable or beloved, and arriving in a place that is not yet known, where love has not had a chance yet to take root and grow.

The wisdom of transitions is that an outer change cannot be successfully completed until the inner work has been done, and the inner work begins with grief even in a positive move. We have to acknowledge that we are lost, that we are on an unknown path toward an end we cannot predict with certainty. The success of a wilderness journey depends both on facing the truth of our homeless condition and on remembering and intentionally seeking true home, like true north, with our spiritual compass, and letting that longing guide our feet, and fill our song.

That is the beautiful gift that the Apostle Paul gave to the church in Corinth. Corinth was a strange land in the Roman Empire, it was like a town in the wild west of 18th Century America. Picture saloons and brothels.

Corinth was a crossroads of many cultures and the early church there was pulled in many directions in continual chaos when Paul wrote to it. No one was really at home in it, so Paul gave it the compass we still follow through a strange land.

Paul's insight is that we all share as our source the one Spirit of life and its gift of love. It is the true home of all people, of all creatures, of all the earth, of all the universe. It unites our diversity as one. There are no strangers, no outsiders there.

How can we sing the Spirit's song in a strange land? By finding a way within the strangeness to unclench our fearful, hurting or grieving heart and open to the flow of the Spirit's comfort and healing, its wisdom and power, its love and light, its inspiration and creative expression. We can sing the Spirit's song in a strange land by doing whatever it takes to allow the Spirit to sing through us.

This takes spiritual practice, which is why keeping spiritual traditions alive is of paramount importance, and why those traditions need to change from complacency and superficiality and self-centered focus on individual, exclusive salvation into unified, all-inclusive, crisis-response

teams, with all traditions sharing their wisdom and techniques with one another to meet the spiritual emergency of our time.

So please use whatever spiritual practice works for you to clear your mind and heart of the swirling chaos of the strange land around you, and find the Spirit and its defiant love in the deepest place within you, and find a spiritual community to be your home.

And make sure music is one of its spiritual practices.

It is tragic when schools today decide they have to cut their music budget, and a church is as surely sick as my daughter was when cutting costs means cutting singing.

The stranger the world gets, the more we will need a spiritual institution in our town to help us remember that we still are truly home, to help us feel that we are united with the Spirit and one another in love. Singing is one of the most effective ways to experience that.

A woman who is a choir member in another town told me that she felt called to respond somehow to the strange, hard things going on in our world, but had not seen what she could do. Then she realized her gift is to give comfort and courage to others by singing.

A professional musician said to me recently, “I feel blessed to have a life full of music, and with it comes a responsibility and opportunity to serve and pass on all I have learned from my teachers.” That seems like a mission statement for us all in a strange land.

First, we need a life full of music, which means freeing ourselves from what oppresses us and blocks the music’s flow, and then we need to recognize that with fullness comes a responsibility and opportunity to serve others with the Spirit’s gift, and pass on all we have received from our teachers, whether they be artists or wise elders or everyday saints or our dogs or cats or gardens or woods. The world needs us to sing what it teaches us to sing.

Two things are certain about our lives today. First, we will never again live anywhere but in a strange land, and second, if we learn how to move through the fear and grief of that fact, we will be able to open to the Spirit and be at home in whatever strangeness comes. We will be able to sing, and the singing will comfort and guide us and make us strong, and bring others love and light. Let us pray together in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz

Lunch on the porch.
A chipmunk on the steps.
A hummingbird overhead.