



**Sermons from St. Marks  
United Church of Christ  
New Albany, Indiana**



**Singing God's Song in a Foreign Land**

**Text: Psalm 137**

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Singing God's song.

It sounds great to sing God's song. This year, however, some of the singers have been a little scary.

Some of the singers who ought to have been singing God's song this year have been, to be kind, a bit off key. Both John McCain and Barack Obama have had to disavow comments from clergy members who supported them. And, they really did need to disavow those comments because so many of the things that have been said were dreadful.

Singing God's song in a foreign land.

Today we gather and continue to reflect upon one of the Psalms. Psalm 137 is a Psalm with a question: How can we sing God's song in a foreign land?

The author John Steinbeck wrote a book once, entitled, *Traveling with Charlie*.

He wrote about packing up and touring the country. Each Sunday, in a different place, he went to church. One Sunday he went to a church in New England. It was a small church and the preacher was a pretty grim guy. He preached a sermon that really laid out, in a blunt matter, challenged the people in the church.

Steinbeck reflected, as he listened to sermons across the country, that this was the only preacher who loved his congregation enough to talk to them without sugar coating the Gospel.

Hold this thought for a moment as we look at the text.

Psalm 137 is a Psalm about being led into exile. The Jewish people had been conquered and were being led to Babylon, which in our day and age is Iraq. As they made their trip they played their instruments and sang the songs of Zion. Their captors had listened from afar.

When they reached Babylon they knew that they were now in their prison. They were

filled with despair. They threw their harps onto the trees and sat brooding. Their captors taunted them—sing us one of the songs of Zion...but the people mused, "How can we sing God's song in a foreign land?"

The Psalm is a bitter Psalm. It has a magnificent sense of beauty and its words were used in the play Godspell in the school, On the Willows. But then you come to the end and their anger and hatred is so intense that they long for the day when they can brutally murder the children of their captors.

They are in a foreign land. They are mocked for their beliefs, yet their captors want them to sing God's song.

How can we sing God's song in a foreign land?

In reading this Psalm and reflecting on it a bit, it dawned on me that we live in a foreign land. We too can ask the question, "How can we sing God's song in a foreign land?"

I say this because, as we look upon our culture of 2008 we live in something of a foreign land. We're in a strange place these days.

In American history each time period has had some sort of person or icon to describe the era or the culture. Be it the Pilgrim, the Minute Man, the Confederate, the flapper, the suffragettes, the GI's, the hippies, yuppies, or whatever, each era has had something of a cultural icon.

I tried to think about what a good cultural icon was for our time and it dawned on me, there really isn't one. Then it dawned on me. There is a symbol for our culture. The symbol is trash. We live in a trash culture.

A trash culture is a culture where we expect to be awarded for bad behavior.

A trash culture is a culture that is in your face, if you don't like it I'll shoot you, I can do anything I want. There are no consequences.

Our culture is like the terrible twos which never ends.

Our culture is where it is better to fight than it is to reason.

Our culture is a culture where it's easier to kill than to heal.

Our culture is like one long, never ending temper tantrum.

We're given up being charitable cold turkey.

One would think that the Christian church could have a lot to say to a culture which has

gone down the tubes, but we really haven't.

Practically every denomination that exists right now is in the middle of a fight.

I remember once that I was told that you never talked about sex, politics, or religion in polite conversation. Except in the church. It seems to me, however, that in the church we talk more about sex and politics than we do about God.

We are a people with a marvelous opportunity to confront the culture in which we live in. No one else has the opportunity to speak to society like the Christian church can.

The news media won't—they live on the trash of our culture.

Our elected officials won't—they live as the trash in our culture. If you don't believe me, watch the news. So often, in our nation's capital, the work of the day isn't about doing something good and worthwhile, but it's about making your opponents look bad.

They aren't going to confront the culture. They're part of the problem.

I love what St. Paul writes in Ephesians 6—he tells us what to do. Go out and confront the culture. Go out and confront it and fight it.

And if we don't, no one else will.

Secondly, we need to provide for people a time of comfort.

We carry a message of comfort and hope that no one else can bring.

People remind us of this once in a while. People remind us where the need to turn to hope once in a while.

Lots of people put their hope in lots of things these days.

Therapy is good, but people need something beyond therapy.

Money is good, but people need something beyond money.

Technology is a good thing, but people need something beyond technology.

Sports are great, but people need something beyond sports.

Remember when the bomb went off in Oklahoma City?

When people sought comfort they didn't play a ball game, they didn't look to talk radio to give them a pep talk, the Bill Gates wasn't there to tell them about how wonderful Windows

XP was.

The people went to a church service, prayed, listened to scripture, sang hymns, and listened to Billy Graham give a sermon.

And people were comforted.

One 911 took place, people flocked to churches. They wanted God to help them through their pain.

People turned to the church to provide comfort.

It is a comfort that only God can really provide.

But, finally, there's a funny conclusion to this.

After Oklahoma City people flocked to church----but they soon ceased.

After 911 people flocked to church----but they soon ceased.

They flocked to church because they wanted God to make them feel better; and many felt better, and then stopped.

William Willimon is one of the nation's leading preachers, authors, and he's currently a Bishop in the United Methodist Church. He made an observation as to why people didn't maintain going to church after the tragedies. The problem he said was God.

God, for so many of us, so much of the time, is there to provide a comfort. And God does provide a great comfort. But God also seems to have expectations in response. God doesn't allow us to remain comfortable. God is always forcing us out of comfort zones.

A few years ago during Vacation Bible School, in the Chapel, there was a jeep with the words:

God is wild!

We can say a lot. God is wild about us. We should be wild about God. All that.

But, God is wild. God is wild because we cannot tame God to be what we want God to be like, and God exists for more than keeping us comfortable. God so often strives to disquiet us to make us uncomfortable.

No one has ever grown spiritually by being comfortable. If you are uncomfortable spiritually, consider this to be wonderful news. You are in a growth process.

The people Israel sang a song and asked the question:

How can we sing God's song in a foreign land?

The answer is this:

Sing God's song by confronting the culture. Be different from the culture which surrounds us. Rise out of the trash.

Secondly, look to God for comfort. There are so many things and opportunities which claim to offer comfort---but only God can provide true comfort.

And finally, don't look to remain comfortable. Recognize that God comforts, but God will also challenge us---and when we are challenged, we grow, and when we grow, we truly sing God's song in a foreign land.