

**GRASPING FOR MUCH-NEEDED GRACE:
20 Days of Nonpartisan Prayer in a Polarized Political Season
Vermont Conference (UCC) prayer initiative
Fall 2020**

Day 4 (Sunday, October 18) “*Worshipping in a Foreign Land*” Rev. Mark Mendes

Lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem Psalm 137:1-4

**By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’**

How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?

Reflection: Those of us who came to our faith in the 1960’s remember this biblical quote set to music in such a poignant way in the musical *Godspell*. There was a somber beauty to the tune that spoke to that generation of past injustice and future vision. As a child, one could easily understand the vision of what our country could become, but I did not sense our country being foreign.

The Hebrew deportees in Babylon and earlier those deported to Assyria were actually living in a foreign land. Everything about their lives changed not only on a day to day basis, but spiritually and religiously; how and where they worshipped, the structure and administration of religious institutions, how they understood God and the theological underpinnings....all changed as they struggled to deal with deportation, oppression and mockery. Instead of the temple, they went to the river to worship. In their struggle with the evil perpetrated upon them, they began to develop a more dualistic understanding of God, like the Babylonians. They lived among a foreign people where purity laws were less important and intermarriage more common, especially in Assyria.

Living through this coronavirus pandemic, I sometimes feel as if I am living in a foreign land, singing songs for the way things use to be. How we engage the world, commune with our families or even eat our food has changed drastically as well as how and where we worship, our understanding of God and the administration and structure of our churches. Like the Israelites by the river in Babylon who alternated between being reminiscent of life in Jerusalem or full of

revenge for those responsible for their deportation; we too reminisce of pre-pandemic life or anger at anyone who disagrees with us about anything. We can all identify the groups in our own culture who gravitate to one of these extremes.

When Persia, in their enlightened, pluralistic outlook allowed the Israelites to return home, their leaders responded in different ways. Ironically, Ezra and Nehemiah both opted for xenophobic nationalism in light of the Persian enlightenment, while other leaders followed the Persian example and used the correctives of Jonah, Ruth and Isaiah's vision of a Holy Mountain to inspire the people to a more inclusive and loving community.

Stressful times amplify our differences and what was true on the banks of the river in Babylon and during Jesus' ministry remain true today. Jesus, Paul and the apostles follow choose the path where love and not fear leads the way. For me, I believe the correctives to Nehemiah and Ezra came from God and demand that we choose the side of inclusion; by following Jesus [David's mudblood lineage], it seems that we have already declared our intention to do so. It seems to me that reminiscing leads to complacency and anger leads to xenophobic attitudes and nationalism, but we are called to journey home to create a new society where God is worshipped and all God's children are welcome. That's the song I'm waiting for these days.

Prayer: Most merciful God, help us not to get caught up in past visions of perfection, which never were or battles of division which never yielded true peace. Give us eyes of discernment that we might follow your leading to the love we find in our neighbors, enemies and friends. Empower us to live into your grace as we all seek to be a part of your movement of justice in the world. We pray all these things and so much more in the name of the Babe of Bethlehem. Amen.

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