

“How Can We Sing in a Foreign Land?”

Psalm 137:1-6 | Luke 17:5-10

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*On the willows there
We hung up our lyres
For our captors there
Required
Of us songs
And our tormenters
Mirth
Saying, “sing us one
Of the songs of Zion
Sing us one
Of the songs of Zion”
But how can we sing
Sing the Lord’s song
In a foreign land?*

“On the Willows” is the second-to-last song of *Godspell*, the 1970 musical by lyricist and composer Stephen Schwartz and writer John-Michael Tebelak. The name “Godspell” comes from an Old English variation of “gospel,” meaning good news. Fittingly enough, *Godspell* (the musical) reinvisions the Gospel of Matthew, which one of my undergrad mentors, Dr. Karl Plank, colloquially referred to as “the most Jewish of all of the gospels.” (That’s true, and it’s also a whole other sermon.) So, it’s not wholly surprising that quite a bit of its music draws from the language of the Hebrew Bible, given how the Gospel of Matthew overtly describes Jesus as a Jew. “On the Willows” is a perfect example. The lyrics from this song come directly from the first four verses of Psalm 137, one of today’s lectionary readings. If you were to give this Psalm a title, it would be “Lament over the Destruction of Babylon.” Robert Alter, a giant in the field of Hebrew and Biblical studies whose life work has been to translate and contextualize the Hebrew Bible, writes of Psalm 137: “This psalm was almost certainly composed shortly after the deportation of the Judahites by the Babylonians in 586 [CE]” (*The Hebrew Bible, Vol 3: The Writings*, 312-313). Psalm 137 is unequivocally a lyrical expression of grief. Babylon has

captured and displaced God's people from Jerusalem. They can no longer reach Zion, the holy mountain where God dwells. The Babylonians, these oppressors in power, now reside where God's people once were. Babylon—one of the largest empires in history—revels in the fall of Jerusalem. Babylon—an empire of gold, greed, and false gods—delights in the pain and suffering of the exiles. Babylon—an empire destined to fall fifty years after Jerusalem's capture—marvels at what they can now control, dispose of, and manipulate for their own purposes: land and human beings.

In a Lenten service from March 2025, Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, renowned Womanist scholar at the intersection of Scripture and Black Women's lived experiences, speaks on Psalm 137. In her sermon titled "Prophets in Babylon," preached at Calvary Episcopal Church Memphis, Rev. Dr. Gafney powerfully states,

Babylon took captive those for whom they had use and those they didn't trust to be out of their sight and sent them into exile. There was no one so rich, so cultured, so qualified, so important that they could negotiate survival with the empire on their own terms. They were all carried away into exile whether they secretly admired the tyrant taking them or despised the despot dispossessing them....There is a lesson here for those who would choose the glittering gods of colonizing empires; they will not protect you; they have no interest in your well-being; you are just another log for the fire.

I believe Rev. Dr. Gafney to be correct, as a fellow clergyperson, a follower of God and God's Word, and as a person of today. History shows us, *our Scripture shows us time and time again*, that empires do not care about their land or their people—they only crush whomever and whatever stands between them and amassing more power, wealth, and status. Empire, we are told in Scripture, is extraction. Empire is controlled scapegoating. Empire is the haughty, bejeweled, well-dressed machine of death.

"On the Willows," Psalm 137 as song, plays just before the finale of *Godspell*. As it plays, Jesus goes to each of his disciples to say goodbye. He embraces them and kisses them. Jesus's apostles feel there will be a great change, a great loss, though they can't quite believe it to be true. You can tell this by the look of characters' faces after each embrace with Jesus: a

once-innocent joy replaced by distant disbelief and sadness. Jesus, knowing he will soon meet death, asks them to remain with him as he prays and stay awake with him. The apostles are, well, the apostles. They only follow the first-half of the instructions, and they quickly fall asleep once Jesus has his back turned to them. Isn't it so human, so imperfect, of them? To disappoint, to let down the person they love, to avoid the truth because it's too painful?

Even if they had stayed awake with Jesus, they could not have stopped the churning machine of Rome. For, who condemned Jesus to die? Who lifted up his body and nailed him to the cross? Empire. Even if the apostles abandoned, betrayed, and denied him – even if the Pharisees and religious leaders disagreed with his actions and feared his prophetic popularity – even if the crowds that once praised him turned against him, mocked him, and jeered at him – it was the Roman Empire, the representation of power concentrated in the hands of the few, who scapegoated, alienated, abused, and permanently cast Jesus out of society – not the common people.

For millennia before and after the crucifixion of the Messiah, rulers of empire have lived by these four rules to keep themselves as one of the greats and to keep themselves on top: scapegoat, alienate, abuse, cast out. Together, I want to invite us to think about, just for a moment, where we have seen scapegoating, alienation, abuse, and casting-out in our world. National or global news may come to mind. You may recall stories from history. Other passages from Scripture may be relevant. Or, perhaps, you can even think of instances in your own life where you have experienced or witnessed these four rules of empire. Personally, I think of the Supreme Court's decision on *Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo* from September.

If you're not familiar with this case, I'll give you a brief overview. ICE, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, had increased its presence in Los Angeles over the summer. Allegedly masked and carrying guns, ICE agents began profiling folks in Southern California counties, including Los Angeles, based on any combination of these four factors: 1) "apparent race or ethnicity," 2) "speaking in Spanish or accented English," 3) "presence at a location where

undocumented immigrants ‘are known to gather,’” and 4) “working at specific jobs,” such as landscaping or construction (SCOTUS Blog 2025). If yes to one, two, three, or all of these factors, then ICE has the grounds to stop the individual and demand papers and proof of citizenship—which, of course, we all carry with us at all times, right? If the ICE agents do not find their encounter sufficient, they then also have the grounds to apprehend them and forcibly detain them. So, this is exactly what ICE was doing in Los Angeles—targeting, laying hands on individuals, and locking them away. In their efforts to find anyone who matched one of these four factors, ICE agents actually apprehended and detained United States citizens. These citizens sued ICE, alleging unjust and illegal apprehension, imprisonment, and physical maltreatment by the hands of the agents. Their suit made it all the way to the Supreme Court, who ruled in the favor of ICE. Our highest court in our national judicial system, in a vote of 6-3, believes that it is constitutionally legal for Immigration and Customs Enforcement to profile, discriminate, and criminalize based on skin color, spoken language, and, really, existing in public. Never mind the fourth or fourteenth amendments of the Constitution, which protect citizens from unlawful searches and guarantee equal protection and due process, respectively.

Wherever you align on the political spectrum, whatever you believe about immigration or law enforcement, however you vote: I invite you to read the Supreme Court’s ruling of *Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo* through the lens of empire presented in our Scriptures. Scapegoat, alienate, abuse, cast out: do any of these rules apply to this case? Is it plausible that our own society uses the tale-as-old-of-time power dynamics of empire to define who is in, who is out, who belongs, who should be thrown away or left behind? If so, where can we find hope? Can overcome the human desire to be on top, to have the most status, wealth, and power? Can resist the addiction of coming out on top, being the most powerful, being one of the greats?

Let’s return to Scripture, grounding ourselves in the words of Jesus. In one of our lectionary readings today, an apostle demands, “Teacher, Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5) Jesus responds, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be

uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you” (Luke 17:6). *“If you [just] had faith the size of a mustard seed” (Luke 17:6).* Jesus does not tell us to be arrogant, to decide who is in and who is out, to create a social hierarchy. Jesus does not tell us to do whatever it takes to be one of the greats—to kill, to deceive, to place our own wants before the needs of others. Jesus does not say that having faith means inheriting all of the gold and all of the prestige or that we will be invincible and the world will bow down to us. He compares our faith, our lifelong goal of attaining true faith, to the size of a mustard seed—a tiny, fragile, common thing meant to be invisible when buried under the earth. Jesus does not tell us to bring suffering to others or to conquer them. He does not tell us to be like Babylon, to inflict the devastation recounted in “On the Willows.” He does not tell us to side with and become like the Roman Empire, the machine of death that nailed his hands and feet. He simply asks us to follow his steps of humility, simplicity, hospitality, interconnection, peace, mercy, and justice—these are the components of his ministry. These are the components that start as a tiny seed and, with practice and tending, will become powerful enough inside of us to move the world.

Beloved church, may we go forward in the peace of Christ. May we remember the lament of God’s people following the destruction of Jerusalem. May we remember the love Jesus gave to his apostles as he prepared to say goodbye. May we listen to the call of the Judahites who cried, “How can we sing the song of God in a foreign land?” May we remember Empire’s role in Jesus’s death. May we be strong enough to see and resist the rules of empire that tell us it is good, right, and natural to scapegoat, alienate, abuse, and cast out. May we be humble and faithful enough to resist the temptation of participating in the oppression of others and of striving to become like “one of the greats.” May we delight in our faith the size of a mustard seed, remembering that, in this seed, there lies God. Amen.