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Isaiah 65:17-25

LISTENING FOR THE MELODY

The writer of Psalm 98 beckons us to “sing a new song” to the Lord. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth,” says the psalmist, “break forth into joyous song and sing praises.”

But what if we cannot sing the song because we cannot even hear the melody? What if we are so overwhelmed by life’s hardships, with the ugliness we read about in the news, with the dire situations around the globe, with the impending ecological disaster, with our personal heartaches and struggles that we cannot hear the sweet melody of joy and hope?

I think that is what the prophet Isaiah was trying to do for his people. He was trying to help them hear the melody of God’s goodness in the midst of their despair. The passage we read from Isaiah today is spoken to a people who were dealing with personal and collective trauma. A generation earlier, the Jewish people had been conquered by the Babylonians. The city and their cherished Temple had been destroyed, and half of the population had been taken prisoner by their enemies and marched off to live in exile in Babylon. So some of the Jewish people were living in exile while the rest of them were left to live in the ruins of their homeland, under the occupation of their enemy.

A generation passes and now the Babylonians are themselves conquered by the Persians. And the Persians permit those Jewish people in exile to return home. The passage from Isaiah today is from the time when the Jewish exiles have come home and must strive to resume life again. But it is not easy. Their homeland is in rubble. And there is conflict with the Jewish remnant who were left behind during the exile. They too suffered under the occupation. Each

side suffered trauma but in different ways. As many of us know, trauma is not easy to recover from. So what we have at the time of our passage today are deeply wounded people who have endured great pain and whose present situation doesn't seem a lot brighter either.

And Isaiah brings them a message from God. It is really a kind of song of hope that Isaiah sings to his people. Isaiah sings a new song to his people—a song of hope, a song about God's healing activity in their lives, a song about God's reshaping of the world into a place of justice and prosperity. God proclaims to these wounded people, "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."

It is clear when we look at this song that Isaiah is not offering his people some kind of saccharinely sweet hope that is divorced from the realities of their hardships. We can hear the trauma of their lives in the background of this song. When God declares, "No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days," we can hear behind these words the pain and grief of mothers and fathers who lost their babies. When God proclaims, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat," we can hear the injustice the people endured when enemies took away their houses and farmlands.

This song of hope holds in tension the grief and hardship and despair of the people along with the promise that God is rebuilding their lives, that God is creating something new. And it is an invitation to look squarely at their reality and to sing a new song, the one given by God. God is in their midst. God's goodness is at work.

Can *we* do that? Life is not as we wish it would be. There are grave injustices in our world. We have personal traumas of our own. Things often look terribly bleak. Can we look reality in the face and still at the same time listen for the melody of hope?

Some days it is certainly easier to believe in goodness and kindness and have hope. Other days, we may not be able to hear even a hint of the melody. It will seem to have completely vanished.

But as people of faith, we keep listening, even sometimes straining to hear the song of hope. We gather with one another so we can sing the song, however feebly, so we can help each other listen for the tune. Hope. God is creating something new. Hope. God is raising us and this world to new life. Hope. God's goodness will overcome. Hope. God is reshaping me and you and healing us from our brokenness. Hope.

Writer Thom Shuman offers a prayer about the song God gives us to sing with our lives. He prays to God, "The old, old song is made new in our hearts: Christ is Risen! Sing Alleluia! You invite us to sing to a world deafened by despair and haunted by the tunes of fear . . . Believing we cannot carry a tune, we hesitate to join in the chorus of praise sung by all creation. So, you softly and gently hum the melody in our hearts."

I like that image of God humming the melody in our hearts. What if Jesus is God's way of humming the melody to us. In Jesus God hums the melody of extravagant love. In Jesus God hums the melody of empathy and compassion. In Jesus God hums the melody of justice and peace. Through Jesus, God teaches us the tune. And then God invites us to sing along, to "sing to a world deafened by despair and haunted by the tunes of fear."

"O sing to the Lord a new song," the psalmist writes. The world needs to hear a new song. And you and I are the ones to sing it.