

Parallel Timelines

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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There are some things that we have become used to seeing and being part of around this time of year. Some of us make vacation plans, to visit people or places that are special for us. Some of us simply look to spend more time outdoors, in the public areas that are usually accessible across Windsor-Essex, including events and festivals that are part of the yearly spring and summer cycle where we live. Some of the younger folks in our lives, may have looked forward to graduation ceremonies, or graduation celebrations, like prom. There may have been summer jobs in the works, or new school settings to explore, some of which may now be in question, or will likely look different than what was expected.

As we go on our current lives – the *real* ones that we wake up to in the spring and summer of 2020 – those other lives that we thought were going to happen may also be living alongside us, in a kind of parallel timeline, that nags at us... “around this time, we would have... done such and such.”

We’ve all reached different levels of acceptance to these discrepancies in our realities, but it is likely that these parallel lives are there, somewhere, in the back of our minds.

There is a strong biblical tradition of dealing with discrepancies in our reality. These are often found in the book of Psalms, and in other portions that are categorized as Lamentation.

The hymn *Rivers of Babylon*, by the reggae group The Melodians (and later popularized by the group Boney M), draws from two psalms – 137 and 19.

If you ever sing the hymn, which in our hymnal uses the original lyrics by The Melodians, you may have wondered who “King Alfa” is in the lyric *how can we sing King Alfa’s song*, since the original biblical text uses the words *how can we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land*. But The Melodians wrote the song as a Rastafarian hymn, where King Alfa stands in for Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian emperor who is seen as a messianic figure in Rastafarian tradition. With that imagery, Babylon can be used as a stand-in for any oppressive force. And Zion is a symbol of a long-lost home.

Let’s talk a bit more about Psalm 137. It has the distinction of being perhaps one of the easiest psalms that we can date. Because it refers specifically to the Jewish exile to Babylon, or Mesopotamia, in modern-day Iraq, we know that it was written after the year 537 BCE. From this history of exile and captivity, we hear it as a song of lament.

Its verses speak of a longing for a long-lost home. It gives witness to the oppression of an enslaved people, whose traditions and songs were mocked.

It also speaks with a surprising frankness about how the people feel about that oppression...

Among the verses from Psalm 137 that are *not* included in the sung versions in hymns and The Melodians’ song, is the anger and desire for vengeance upon their oppressors. If you’re curious, I invite you to read Psalm 137 – it isn’t very long – and the last few verses may be

shockingly violent... which probably explains why they aren't included in the most popular musical adaptations that you might hear.

And that's the thing about psalms. They are frank. They speak of things lost, or things longed for. They speak of injustice, and they speak of deep anger. Tellingly, they are characterized by describing life as it is, with all its imperfections, and sometimes, its horrors.

Lamentation is an entire genre in the collection of biblical texts. And there is so much of it, not just in the Psalms, but in other biblical books, because it serves an important purpose.

The art of lamentation has many layers, but it can probably be summed up as the ability to unapologetically recognize, and name, the fact that things can “suck”. Sometimes we can phrase this politely as “things aren't how we'd like them to be”, or “it could be better”. But the frankness in the tradition of the psalms also invites us to more... direct language.

My friends, over the past three months, I've been expressing many of the affirming aspects of our response to the pandemic. The fact that our church can continue to exist, survive, and even thrive, while outside of our building... in an exile of sorts. The fact that many of us have found ways to maintain our community, and even strengthen it. These are things worth celebrating, and it is important to make space for that – we've been doing that, and will continue to do that.

It is also important to allow space for lamentation. To recognize that things can also suck.

It sucks that we haven't been able to share the same physical space together, and that we feel compelled to keep that practice for some time still. It sucks that we are required to forego, or sometimes reimagine, many of the parts of our church life, including the ways in which we can be involved in each other's lives.

Many of you will also note – and lament – unwelcome changes in your lives. It sucks that you cannot meet with, or hug, your grown children or grandchildren. It sucks that summer plans have had to change, or have even evaporated.

Members in your family may have voiced similar sentiments. In many cases, you may have heard children voice an unexpected longing for school. Maybe they simply miss their friends, often enough they miss a special teacher, or the structured learning, or the sense of community among their peers, or the rituals of end of year, like graduation, or signing yearbooks, or even the feeling of the last day of school. And children and teens will, quite unequivocally and without euphemism, tell you that “this sucks”.

In the wider world, you will have seen people commenting – or you may have commented yourselves – about those things that suck in society – we’ve been talking about racism, we’ve talked about economic inequality, and inadequacies about how people’s work is valued, and sometimes unappreciated.

It is important to be able to name these things, and recognize that they have an effect on us. To recognize that we can get grumpy, angry, or sad, about the chasm that exists between the parallel timelines of different realities.

But – and there is often a “but” in the tradition of psalms – there is also opportunity to participate, or even create, a new direction in the parallel timelines ahead of us.

In the biblical text, there is often a turning point after the lamentation portion – what my Old Testament professor, academically referred to as “the *but* clause” – that moment when we have recognized the parts of our lives that don’t conform with our expectations of how our life or the world should be, *and* then search for those things that support us, naming our longings and a new resolve to see them through.

We often do both of these in our ritual of Joys & Sorrows. And when we do that, we name our laments, as well as recognize those who are around us, and those things that inspire us to be in a new relationship with life. Be that the stars, the flowers, the people we rely on, or our breath – the spirit of life that allows us to get up in the morning.

My friends, we do not need to shy away from the gaps in our lives that leave us wanting more. But, it is helpful to name them, sit with their reality, and then search for the resources that will allow us to create something different and inspiring.

May we make it so,
In Solidarity,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

#279 By the Waters of Babylon

Words: Psalm 137

Music: Anon.

UNKNOWN Irregular

Meditation Hymn #1042 Rivers of Babylon

Words & Music: Trevor McNaughton, George Reyam, Frank Farian, and Brent Dowe,

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Warner Bros. Publications US Inc., Miami, FL 33014, arr. Matt Jenson, 1964-

#377 & 379 (Old Hundredth)

Music: Genevan psalter, 1551

OLD HUNDREDTH L.M.