

“Llorando, Llorando”
Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 137:1-9, March 12, 2017
Pinehurst Congregational Church
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Llorando, llorando, what does it mean? Crying, crying. When you were fourteen, what was your life like? What were your responsibilities; what were your worries? These are not simply rhetorical questions, they are actual questions. What was life like when you were fourteen years old? When I was fourteen I was in junior high, wishing I was in high school and not just a “kid.” My responsibilities were to be well-behaved, that is, keep out of trouble, and to do well in school. My primary worry was to get good grades.

Recently I befriended a fourteen-year-old, young boy I’ll call “Luis.” As regards to doing well in school, Luis and I have the same attitude, however, our motivations are different. I studied hard out of societal expectation – following twelve years of public school I **was to go to college**. On the other hand, for Luis studying hard is the perceived difference between remaining in the United States or being deported back by to Mexico. His mother tells him repeatedly, “Do well in school so when *they* come to deport us *they* will see how well you do in school and *they* might let us stay.” The “us” are his parents, his aging grandmother and grandfather, and a beautiful, little four-year-old sister. Luis, the only one in his household with adequate English, carries the full weight of his entire family’s fears of

deportation. Education, they believe, is the key to remaining in America where for years they have built a life. Compounded by this burden of being the family’s chosen savior is the fact that his little sister, cries, llorando, every night ever fearful that *they* are coming to take her daddy and mommy away, far away. Looking deep into my eyes and searching mightily for the right English terms, Luis’ dad tells me that at night his little girl wraps her arms around him crying out, “Daddy I love you! Are *they* going to take you away? I don’t want *them* to take you away from me!” How does he respond for he himself doesn’t know the answer? He repeats his reply “Baby I love you. I don’t want *them* to take us away.” With hand gestures, he then runs the family’s solution by me saying, “if Luis put in classroom with advanced students maybe *they* see he good student.” At the same time, Luis’ father is thinking ahead. Between his broken English and my broken Spanish, he tells me that if a separation takes place, he is less worried about his son, “he’s grown boy, he knows how to work hard, but my little girl?” his voice trails off. He follows with a resigned shrug of his shoulders a clear expression of the powerlessness he feels. Imaging myself in his position, possibly being forced to leave my children behind, I harbor my disbelief and grief. Were that I could say with absolute certainty, “It won’t happen...” *By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion*. A river of tears is what I imagine his little girl sheds

over the homeland she hasn't yet left but about which she remembers already...

The 137th psalm begins with a cry from the depths. The depths are the depths of personal agony and the pain of physical separation. The history behind the psalm is the invasion of Judea by the Babylonian Empire in 597 BC that lay destruction and desecration across Jerusalem. It resulted in the deportation of many Hebrew citizens; they were exiled to the distant land of Babylonia, today's southern Iraq. The deportees recall Zion, another name for Jerusalem, with a desirous longing for its cherished landscape. Lyres and harps were the prized possessions which the Hebrews took with them so that they could continue singing their religious songs...or so they thought. In symbolic representation of their broken hearts and their disgust and refusal to be commanded by their captors to sing joyous songs of their homeland, the Hebrew people mourn: *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?*

Parallels exist as do sharp contrasts. Historically, those deportees were being exiled from their homeland of Jerusalem by an invading, foreign nation; today these deportees are being exiled from what they call their "adopted homeland" by the invading tormentors

from within the homeland. "Living, surviving, providing for our families, that's all we are trying to do." The arguments are now added to by the voice of a close, personal friend I'll call Manuel. To an American who is willing to listen they all plead their common cause, "We did not come to America to cause trouble. We didn't come to take nothing from no one. We came to find work so we could eat and educate our children. We could not do this in Mexico. It is hard to get food and work in Mexico. We are really hard workers because we want to stay." Luis worries that if he's sent back he will not be able to complete his education. The college fund he has worked hard to build up over his summers will lose its purpose and goal.

In my opinion we let them come, we let them toil and labor to clean our yards, bathrooms, horse stalls; to build and paint our homes and hotels; to pick produce in wide-open fields and vineyards under intense sun. We let them establish homes. We knew they were illegals but we employed them anyways. They gave us cheap labor and goods. Thinking they were at least tolerated if not welcomed, these Mexicans are now told that they have become a drain on our public institutions; they are troublemakers; they no longer welcome and so we, the Americans, are going to betray them.

Mexicans, mostly Catholics, when reaching for their Spanish bibles, might turn to Lamentations and pray: *Tú has visto el mal*

hecho a mí, oh Señor; juez de mi causa. Tú has visto toda su malicia, todas sus conspiraciones contra mí. Ustedes han oído sus burlas, oh Jehová, todas sus conspiraciones contra mí. Los susurros y murmullos de mis agresores son contra mí a lo largo de todo el día. Si se sientan o aumento--ver, Yo soy el objeto de su burla-canciones. Translated: *You have seen the wrong done to me, O Lord; judge my cause. You have seen all their malice, all their plots against me. You have heard their taunts, O Lord, all their plots against me. The whispers and murmurs of my assailants are against me all day long. Whether they sit or rise--see, I am the object of their taunt-songs* (Lamentations 3:56-63). And who are we? According to this biblical passage, we are the assailants.

Now it is I who, llorando, llorando. But Miquel, chuckles at me. In spite of his growing frustration, he says to me, “Marta no crying.” As a single, industrious Mexican immigrant, he assures me he will find work. I’ve no doubt he will. I know what a good worker he is. He has papers. He can go to Canada if he wishes. But for now, he will wait to see if all this “craziness” as he puts it subsides because he would prefer to stay in the United States.

To close, do the Old Testament texts, the root of our Christianity, still have any meaning or are they just that, “Old?” “Outdated?” After all these texts were written before the establishment of national borders and boundaries. *“When an alien*

resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt... Leviticus 19:33-34 (NRSV). *An alien who lives with you, or who takes up permanent residence among you, and wishes to offer an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord, shall do as you do. As for the assembly, there shall be for both you and the resident alien a single statute, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you and the alien shall be alike before the Lord. You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance.* Numbers 15:14-16 (NRSV). It’s ironic really. These passages were written as laws to be adhered to by all people, regardless of their place of origin, who choose to emigrate to live in the Promised Land. I had once thought of America as a promised land. I’ve cherished that designation since well before I was a fourteen-year-old with the only responsibilities to be good and do well in school. Amen.