



Psalm 137:4 *How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*

Christmas Message to the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin

In 1926, my maternal grandmother left Germany and immigrated to the United States. One of my earliest memories is singing *Silent Night (Stille Nacht)* in German by the Christmas tree in her small house in Jackson, MN. I wonder what it was like for her to move to a foreign land not speaking the language. I wonder how difficult it must have been for her to sing her song in a foreign land.

Last Christmas most of us couldn't gather inside our church buildings to sing *Silent Night* on Christmas Eve. Some of us sang to our computer screens, some sang in their cars in the parking lot, some sang with masks. We were all trying to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land, the land of COVID. It has been difficult. Our song has been muted.

Psalm 137 is a lament Psalm. The writer of Psalm 137 is describing the pain of the people who were forced to live in a foreign land after witnessing the destruction of their homeland and their temple. They are grieving the losses, lamenting, crying, and finding it impossible to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land."

My heart goes out to the Afghan Refugees¹ who are experiencing their first winter at Fort McCoy. I wonder how difficult it will be for them to sing their songs of faith in a foreign land. Many know that they will never go home again.

In Luke 1 Mary sings her song in unknown territory. She has received the message from Gabriel that she will bear God's son and his name is to be Jesus, and he will reign as king forever. This incomprehensible message is confirmed by her relative Elizabeth and changes Mary's life's circumstances. Mary is asked to do what no one has ever done before. This is uncharted and foreign territory for a young girl. She sings her song in a foreign land like her sisters before her Miriam, Ruth, and Hannah. She sings a song of courage, faith, hope, and love.

Luke 1:46-49 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

This Advent/Christmas/Epiphany season I invite you to reflect on Mary's song as an old song sung in new circumstances. Many of us and our churches find ourselves dealing with circumstances we might not have chosen for ourselves and wish were different, circumstances that might cause us to lament and grieve. We are here now. Sing. Join Mary and the faithful of every time and place, that great cloud of witnesses, and sing of courage, faith, hope, and love. Sing. Sing an old song of trust in unfamiliar territory, and sing a new song of hope in a new land. We are here now.

May the Hope of Advent, Joy of Christmas and Light of Epiphany bring you Peace. Bishop Laurie

¹ For more information about helping Afghan refugees
Volunteering at Fort McCoy contact Wisconsin Council of Churches volunteer@wichurches.org.
Resettling families contact LSSWI [Refugee Resettlement - Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan \(Isswis.org\)](http://RefugeeResettlement-LutheranSocialServicesofWisconsinandUpperMichigan(Isswis.org)). Sarah Halstad
Donations contact Catholic Charities in La Crosse <https://cclse.org/afghanistan-refugee-assistance/>