

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST  
OCTOBER 13, 1985  
MARK 14:22-26

THEN CAME WAR

They were women. Some were of the gentry. They were wives of wealthy planters, businessmen, government officials and military personnel. Some were nurses from Australia. Some were Roman Catholic nuns. Some were Protestant missionaries. Some were Dutch, living in the Dutch East Indies. Some were English, living in Singapore and Malaya.

Suddenly, their comfortable lives were changed, never to be the same again. They lost their servants. They were separated from their husbands and uprooted from their homes. Most of them had only the clothing they wore. Once they were coddled, now they fought for their lives. Some had come to serve, teach, heal. Now their concern was survival.

Their lives were drastically changed when war came. Most of them didn't take the war seriously; after all, they were citizens of the British Empire or the Netherlands. But, the Japanese army spread throughout what is now called Indonesia like a fire out of control. Though smaller in numbers, the Japanese army easily subdued the larger armies.

Families attempted to evacuate. They fled to Singapore, believing it to be a safe refuge, but Singapore fell easily in the wave of the Japanese onslaught. In Singapore women and children boarded several ships and attempted to flee. But, they were bombed and captured by the Japanese. Some tried to escape in lifeboats, but to no avail. Those who survived the shipwrecks ended up on the island of Sumatra, and there the English women and children were imprisoned with Dutch and Australians.

In the prison camp they were women with no home, no furniture, no clothes, no utensils, no cosmetics, and no men. All were frightened. Some were angry. Some were bitter. Some were depressed. All worried.

And then they sang...

LIFE IN THE CAMP

Throughout the three and one-half years of internment, the women and children stayed in four camps. In the beginning there were 600 of them. Up to 30 were packed in small houses. They slept close together on the floor on cut-up mattresses, gunny sacks and dried grass. Some were fortunate to have mosquito netting; most had a piece of netting, only large enough to cover their heads which didn't provide much protection from the malaria-bearing mosquitoes.

There was never enough food. Breakfast consisted of a few tablespoons of watery rice porridge. Lunch and dinner were minute portions of boiled rice and vegetable stalks which were usually rotten. The rice usually looked as if it had been swept up off the streets. It was full of glass, stones, dirt,

fat, maggots and weevils. One gift from God was the coconut. The milk was refreshing. The pulp added flavor to unappetizing meals. The oil put life back into their hair. The husks were used to clean pans. The fronds tied together made elegant brooms, and the shells were transformed into feeding bowls.

Everyone worked. They chopped trees, found bricks to build fireplaces for cooking, dug drains, planted vegetables after clearing the soil, cooked their meals, hauled water from the wells, fanned the smoking fires, distributed the food, and emptied the latrines by scooping the material into buckets which were then carried on a pole by two women.

Who of us can imagine what it was like to live with insects, mosquitoes, and rats! One diary reads, "Rats, rats, rats." The rats were bold. They ate food and clothing, walked over food, clothing and beds while the women watched in horror. One prisoner restuffed her mattress with straw only to discover when she lay on it that she had sewn two baby rats inside.

Twice a day every woman and child had to be counted. The guard blew a whistle. Even though they were weak, ill, and infested, the women would have to run outside, line up and bow to the Emperor who seemed to be omnipresent. When the lines were crooked or the women didn't bow low enough, the guard would prod them with his bayonet, kick them, slap them, or make them stand at attention in the blazing sun.

There were no radios, no news, no letters, and no communication with the men's camps which were nearby. There were few books, no music books, no musical instruments. Life in the camp was hard. And then they sang...

#### AND THEN THEY SANG...

A wonderful thing happened. Some of the women organized a vocal orchestra. Margaret Dryburgh was the camp chaplain. She conducted the Sunday worship services, evening prayers, and the funerals which rapidly increased in number. Margaret Dryburgh was a Presbyterian missionary from Scotland whose faith was so strong, it reached out and inspired others. She was a remarkable person, leader, musician and poet. One of her poems describes the daily worship service.

Within the camp's confined domain  
No great Cathedral reared its walls,  
No pointing spire tried Heaven to gain,  
No church bell sounded welcome calls,  
Not e'en the smallest meeting place  
Did offer us the means of grace.

A little company did dwell  
Within a garage, scarce supplied  
With furnishings of prison cell  
So bare it was! Each eventide  
They met for simple family prayers  
To God commended their affairs.

Margaret Dryburgh was also a musician with a phenomenal memory. From



memory, she wrote down pages and pages of music from symphonies and piano pieces. Norah Chambers, a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music in London, helped arranged the music for four-part singing in women's voices. Norah copied the music for the singers and chose the syllables to be used. Without words, both the Dutch and the English women could participate. Norah became the director. One of the original vocal orchestra members, Antoinette Colijin Mayer, donated her fading and worn manuscripts to the music library at Stanford University. In 1981 the Peninsula Women's Chorus began practicing the music. Patty Hennings, the director, telephoned Norah Chambers in Great Britain and learned what syllables to use. Since that time the Peninsula Women's Chorus has given several concerts of "The Song of Survival."

About thirty women formed the vocal orchestra. They rehearsed in a small shed behind the kitchen. They had fun. Survivors still remember the time one singer came in too soon. They all burst out laughing and the poor soul never lived it down. Even after the war, she wrote, "I'm sure I didn't do it; it must have been someone else." There in that dirty, dark shed the women learned about the gift of music. When they sang, they were lifted out of the camp. They were free. Their spirits soared far beyond prison, confinement, sores, hunger and death.

Their first concert was presented to the camp on December 27, 1943. The prisoners crowded around an open-air pavilion. Excitement was in the air even though few knew what the program would be. The vocal orchestra filed in carrying stools upon which to sit, for they were too weak to stand throughout the concert. Just as Norah Chambers lifted her hands to conduct the first piece, a guard came running, waving his bayonet and shouting for there was a regulation against large gatherings. But, Norah Chambers ignored him, gave the downbeat, the choir started singing, and the guard, overcome with emotion along with the prisoners, quietly sat and listened. As "Largo" from Dvorak's New World Symphony filled the air, tears ran down the faces of the listeners. Such beauty in the midst of wretchedness, disease, bedbugs, filth, rats and death was not thought possible.

The vocal orchestra gave concerts throughout 1944 and early 1945. Margaret Dryburgh, Norah Chambers and the orchestra had 30 musical numbers in their repertoire. When 19 of the singers died, including Margaret Dryburgh, the concerts ceased, but the singing continues...

#### SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Few of us here this morning have experienced or can understand what survival looks like in prison camps. Yet, we all are engaged in survival to varying degrees. Some here today are concerned about the survival of their marriages, or surviving in the fast-paced, pressurized world of work here in Silicon Valley. Some here today are harrassed by neighbors when they go outside their doors. Some are ridiculed and even beaten. Some are handicapped and, wherever they go, they are apprehensive about the reception they will receive, or wonder if there are rest rooms capable of accommodating them. All of us to a degree are concerned with survival.

The gospel lesson this morning described some of the darkest hours for Jesus. It turned out to be his last evening on this earth as well as his last supper with his friends. He knew he was to be betrayed. What a weight of

sorrow that must have been on his heart. He had a very good idea that he was facing his death. He shared the experience with his friends--the sharing has now become a sacrament in the church--by breaking bread and pouring wine. He told them his body was to be broken and his life spirit poured out like wine. What an emotional evening that must have been for Jesus and his friends. Before they left the supper, the last act they shared together as a group was: "And then they sang a hymn." Before he went to the garden to pray, they sang.

What is there about singing that helps one survive? Music is an experience not just of the mind and not just of the emotions, but it is an experience of the soul. Music essentially is an expression of hope. The women in the prison camp took their powerlessness and set it to music. Their bodies might be imprisoned, but no one could imprison their spirits. To sing was to experience hope.

No doubt they remembered their past lives with nostalgia, but it was not the remembering of their lives before the war that helped them survive. It was the hope for the future--hope for the ending of the war, hope for the reuniting of their families, hope for the end of the prison camp experience--that sustained them. The memory of their lives before the war gave content to hope. When you are depressed, confused, frightened, anxious about the future, remember a past happy time as content for a future hope, and sing. Our ultimate hope is in the triumph of the kingdom of God. Set hope to music. In the darkest hours of history, people sang. The slaves sang, "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home." Those who are trapped in the poverty of Appalachia sing of their hope, "In the sweet by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore." Hope in eternal life, hope in the kingdom of God gives us strength to wait and hope for victory. We are in the hands of God, and God will triumph in this world or in the next.

Take your life as it is given and sing. That's the message that comes to us from the prison camps of Sumatra. Take your life as it is given, offer it to God, commend your life to God, put yourself in God's hands, and fight for the future. To them who conquer, says Paul, shall be given the crown of life in heaven.

And then, oh, such singing!