

HEAD LINES

A monthly message from Chip Denton, Head of School
November 2020



*By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.*

—Psalm 137

Dear Trinity Community,

On a Saturday in October, the masked board of Trinity School gathered in a large conference room of UNC’s Rizzo Center to be present together, safely, for our fall retreat. We usually meet like this twice a year, focusing on strategic and generative questions that transcend the urgent business we enact at our stated meetings during the school year. We missed last spring’s retreat, and it was a joy to be back together in person for the first time since late February. Our topic for the day: ***What are we learning about Trinity and its mission through this pandemic?*** Many thanks to Dave Hofmann, a Trinity alumni parent and senior associate dean at UNC’s Kenan-Flagler Business School, for skillfully guiding us through that day.



We had read an article by Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard in *The Praxis Journal* called “Leading Beyond the Blizzard,” and each of us brought one observation from this provocative piece to discuss. Using the blizzard-winter-ice age analogy of infectious disease doctor Michael Osterholm, the authors suggest that this pandemic is not just one occurrence to be managed, but “a continuous period in which human activity must adapt to bitterly inhospitable conditions.” This observation has proved to be prescient, and it is a good thing for any institution to ask not only how it will survive the storm, and persevere through the long winter (figurative and literal), but also adapt when the “little ice age” of this pandemic is in some significant way past us. ***What will have changed forever?***

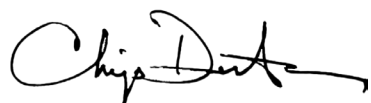
I found Andy Crouch’s accompanying podcast on *The Redemptive Edge* particularly helpful. He points back to Psalm 137, which is a COVID song if there ever was one. The Jewish exile who wrote it had lost much, and at its heart is a driving question that goes unanswered. This lament moves from deep sadness to an anger that may be unparalleled in the Scriptures. It is at once one of the most beautiful poems in the psalter and one of the most horrific. For all of us who have suffered deep loss during this pandemic—loved ones who died alone, without a proper funeral; threats to our health; businesses that have shut down or are crippled beyond recovery; family who have been isolated for months; jobs lost; housing and food insecurity; community eroded, at churches and in our own school; sports seasons and signature performances gone forever; work-life balance disrupted; burnout and stress that show no sign of abating—for all of us, this is the song to sing. I think that this is one of the hardest struggles that our faculty is enduring just now: To be sure, there is the fatigue of extra work and the anxiety and fear of the virus and its effects; but there is also a deep sense of loss, that the Trinity we all knew and loved is gone and has not yet come back. ***Will we ever be able to sing the old classical Christian, rich and unhurried song of the Trinity School community again?***

Our psalmist was sure that he would never be able to sing the songs of the Lord in that foreign land of Babylon. But God could see further than this Hebrew poet, and he can see further than we can, too. The Israelites did learn to sing the song of the Lord in powerful new ways. The exile transformed Judaism: the centrality of synagogue worship would not have emerged without this crucible of exile. And most scholars think that a good portion of what we know as the Old Testament was written down by the Jews in exile, so that when the Jews returned to Jerusalem, they were a People of the Book.

There was another transposition of Israel's song, which is (from where I sit) more important still. The Israelites had from the beginning been called to be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:2), a nation of priests who would mediate God's salvation to all the peoples (Exodus 19:6). That universal vocation was more aspirational than real in the life of the Jewish people before the exile. And it would remain so for centuries, until a certain Jew, born into a people whose disempowered status could be traced back to Babylon, stepped into a synagogue in his hometown (Luke 4), opened up the Isaiah scroll, and declared that the good news of God's salvation was for the people far beyond the borders of Israel and for the most unlikely. So it was that Israel, in the person of Jesus, learned to sing the songs of the Lord—and not only the old song, but a new song, a remix of the original tune that God sang to Abraham back in Genesis.

There are powerful Trinity parallels here. Trinity School has a wonderful story of a mission made real through its first 25 years, but if we are honest there are parts of our mission that are still more aspirational than real. Our commitment to being an unhurried school is a deep and longstanding vision, but it has been hard to translate into reality sometimes. This pandemic has changed radically some of the ways we order our time. What might God be doing among us to make us more unhurried? What changes that have been forced upon us might we choose to retain to live into our identity? Likewise, there are students and families who have, for all their love of our school, found Trinity to be a place where it has been harder to thrive than any of us would want. Students with certain learning challenges, families whose social circles and churches lie outside the networks that many of us enjoy, and families that are more vulnerable, whether to the demands of a school like Trinity or the disproportionate impacts of the COVID virus—there are those among us who navigate Trinity with caution, with anxiety, and without the confidence that comes from knowing that they belong.

How can we sing the song of the Lord when we know this? These are the kind of thoughts that keep leaders up at night, and the pandemic has been a stress test on our institutions to show us truths that lead us into the kind of existential crisis that gave birth to Psalm 137. Still, we on the Board are hopeful. We believe that God is at work in our trials, not just to get us through, but even more to teach us to sing the mission of Trinity in a new key, so that important things that seemed impossible would come to be. ***What if this pandemic were the occasion of Trinity School becoming more of who we are?*** May God show us that way. May God make it so. Non nobis.



Chip Denton
Head of School