

Psalm 137:1-9

Psa. 137:1 By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

2 On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

3 For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

Psa. 137:4 How could we sing the LORD’S song
in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Psa. 137:7 Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!”

8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!

9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

A HARD LESSON

Most of us have our own version of the Bible. We read those verses that we understand and like, and we conveniently leave out those verses and stories that we don’t like.

But sometimes I have found that difficult passages of Scripture can be helpful precisely because they speak honestly about the dark side of life. That’s true of our lesson for today.

Many of us have had to deal with feelings of rage. Many of us have had a desire for vengeance over some great injustice that has come into our life. Many of us have felt like we were living in exile. Joy suddenly left our life, and there was no longer any reason to sing.

And so the question that the Psalmist asked long ago is just as relevant today. How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? How can we be faithful to God when it seems like the world around us is going to hell in a hand basket?

The message of the Bible is good news, but it is also realistic news. The Bible helps understand the darker emotions that sometimes cloud our life.

NO MORE MUSIC

The Babylonians wanted to tell God's people,

“Come on you Hebrews. Be positive.

Learn a few Babylonian songs. The food's not so bad once you get used to it.

Learn the language. Before long this place will seem like home.

Sing us one of those good old gospel songs from Zion. Let us hear one of those spirituals that ya'll do so well ... something about the sweet by and by.”

Is this what we are called to preach?

Is it our job to make people feel at home in Babylon?

Or is it our job to remind people of a greater hope, a New Jerusalem in which God is honored and justice prevails?

I believe the latter is what we are called to do. In a world is focused on tragedy we call people to look up because our redemption is coming near.

The Psalmist chooses to set his heart and mind on Jerusalem. Singing the familiar hymns in a foreign land was not an option for the Psalmist. He remembered Jerusalem. That was his one true home.

And by the waters of Babylon they wept when they remembered Zion.

And they were very angry.

THE CRY FOR JUSTICE

Sometimes tears are justified. Sometimes anger is justified. There are some injustices that cause us to cry out in pain and even ask for vengeance.

If God's people never get angry, things will always be the same. Our captors will assimilate us. The waters of Babylon will soon begin to seem like home.

God's people must never get too comfortable in Babylon. We must learn to mourn and cry for the New Jerusalem.

We must learn to pray for that time when justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

Carlyle Marney once said, "Most preachers don't have the ego strength to damn a church mouse, let alone a culture."

I think this is tragically true of many of us. We prefer to go along to get along.

But, the gospel is about proclaiming God's truth and salvation to a world that doesn't want to hear it. God's people have never been nice, quaint folk who sing their harmless songs to a captive audience.

God's people have always been revolutionaries. They proclaim, "Let my people go."

They sing protest songs.
They speak truth to power.

Sometimes I think we do not appreciate the strength of that message.

THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

Consider what happened to Israel long ago.

The Israelites believed that the city of Jerusalem and the temple were a symbol of God's love for them. They lived in the Promised Land, and they were God's chosen people. They believed that God would protect them.

But, all of that was taken away by the Babylonian captivity. Jerusalem lay in ruins. The temple was destroyed. The best and the brightest were taken into captivity in a strange and pagan land.

Many had even seen their children ruthlessly killed. (By the way, that was a common tactic in the ancient world. When you kill a person's children you kill their hope for the future.)

And now in exile they hear that their ancient enemies, the Edomites have come to plunder what was left of their city and harass the few peasants who remain in the Promised Land.

God's people had every right to give up. Everything they deemed important had been taken away. It looked like the gods of the Babylonians were stronger.

Why not just give up?
 Why not just sing the songs of Babylon?
 Why not just go along and get along?

VENGEANCE IS THE LORD'S

But, the people choose to bring their sorrow and their longing and even their desire for revenge to the Lord.

Those last lines of the Psalm are very troubling, but notice that the Psalmist leaves the execution of this terrible vengeance to the Lord.

Walter Brueggeman wrote,

“The Psalms and the Bible are clear that vengeance belongs to God.

Vengeance is not human business ... it is a liberating assertion that I do not need to trouble myself with retaliation, for that is left safely in God's hands.

To affirm that vengeance belongs to God is an act of profound faith.”

BRING IT TO THE LORD AND LEAVE IT

Don't push your anger deep down inside. Don't sing false songs of joy when you find yourself in exile. Don't forget who you are and where you come. Don't allow an alien culture tempt you to take the easy way out.

Bring it to the Lord in prayer.

For those of you who are troubled by this Psalm, remember that the Psalms are basically prayers. They are prayers that often come from deep inside the pain of the human heart

We can truly bring everything to the Lord in prayer. Like the Psalmist we can even bring our rage and our desire for retaliation.

But, we also need to remember that we are called to leave those angry feels at the throne of grace.

The symbol of our faith is not a “smiley face.” The symbol of our faith is a cross. And on the cross we see that God takes the sins of an angry world very seriously.

On the cross God tells us,

“Yes, I know what it is to be angry over the unjust loss of a loved one. Yes, I know the sorrow that takes away every song. You can bring that pain to me because I have been there, and I have come out on the other side.”

THE LESSON OF EXILE

There is a resurrection after the crucifixion. There is the hope of new life and joy and peace that comes shining through on that third day.

But, we must not make the mistake of going too quickly from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. There has to be a time when we are honest with God and each other.

There has to be a time of exile so that we can learn to long for a New Jerusalem. There has to be a time for us to die to the old way of life so that we can learn to really live God’s way of life.

I think its instructive to note that much of the Old Testament was written during the Babylonian exile. It was during the exile that God’s people really learned what it meant to have faith in the salvation of a merciful God instead of faith in their own military and economic might.

I think we suffer from the same malady in our own country. We trust too much in economic and military might and not enough in the providential care of almighty God.

EXILE TODAY

It is no wonder that many in our nation also feel like they are in an exile of sorts. The national debt grows beyond our wildest imagination. The economy is anemic. Many struggle to find work.

Our leaders seem bent on the politics of personal destruction instead of finding a way to help us solve our problems. Our military is stretched thin and is under constant attack. And of course the terrorists continue to do a good job of keeping fear alive.

Have I missed anything?

And what is happening in the church while all this is going on? Are we stepping forward to lead our country in a more positive direction? Do we have a message of hope for a people who languish in exile?

On the contrary, one prominent leader described the state of the church this way: “Church members are confused about authority, bewildered about mission, worried about finances, contentious about norms and ethics, and anxious about the church’s survival.”

In other words, we don’t know where we’re going or where we’ve been. We are so wrapped up in our own fears about the future that we have forgotten our message of hope.

In fact according to a religion test given by the Pew Research group, agnostics know more about the Bible than those who profess to be Christians!

BEYOND SURVIVAL

In order to point our people toward the New Jerusalem, that place of hope and salvation the church must get beyond a survival mentality and move to a mission mentality. Instead of constantly worrying about our own future we must learn to look for God’s future.

We must dare to be different.

We must lift up a vision of what can be instead of what is. We must refuse to be captivated by the culture in which we live.

We must rediscover the biblical stories of faith and salvation and use them as a roadmap to the future.

In despair the Psalmist asked pessimistically,

“How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

He thought that it wasn’t possible.

But, I would suggest that this is exactly what we are called to do. We sing a new song, the Lord’s song. We sing a song that is not captive to the ways of this world.

The evil that surrounds us cannot be allowed to take away our song of hope. The evil that surrounds us cannot be allowed to take away our vision of the New Jerusalem.

Even in the worst of times we must continue to pray in faith:

“Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done.”

DEALING WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

A pastor said that in his marital counseling he sometimes tells his couples,

“It takes a strong marriage to have a good argument.”

That’s true. Some marriages are so weak that is not even possible to talk about those negative feelings.

But, unfortunately if that anger and pain is not addressed eventually it will spell the destruction of the relationship.

I wonder if the same might apply to our relationship with God. Sometimes our negative feelings run so deep that we are afraid to even express them even to God ... much less to anyone else.

This passage suggests that we can trust God with even our darkest emotions. Indeed sometimes our deepest expressions of faith will come from a time of personal exile and struggle.

Jesus tells us that discipleship begins when we dare to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

I know that many of you are in exile today.

Some of you are overwhelmed by fear. Some of you are filled with anger.

Don't keep those emotions inside. Bring them to the Lord in your prayers and share them with brothers and sisters in the faith who can listen without a compassionate heart.

Sometimes there are no immediate answers to our problems.

Sometimes all we can do is sit down with our brothers and sisters by the waters of Babylon and weep.

Sometimes all we can do is listen to the voice of anger and despair.

It takes a strong faith to do that.
But, we have such a faith.

WORLD COMMUNION

This is world communion Sunday. With brothers and sisters all over the world on this day we take the Lord's Supper.

We talk about body broken and blood shed.

But, it is not a memorial of a tragic event.

It is a sacrament of hope; hope not only for this life but also for the life to come.

Today we are all indeed in exile.

But, one day we will come home to Jerusalem. One day everyone will see that grace; grace that is greater than all our sin.

Amen.