

## Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost: Psalm 137

The Rev Brooks Cato

Most Sundays, the sermon you'd hear from me would use our scriptures as a starting place. Maybe I'd drill in on a verse or a word, or maybe I'd unpack the whole thing, but typically, I'm not doing a whole lot of scriptural teaching on Sunday mornings. That's sort of our tradition. There's a long line of Episcopal priests who write one way for services and a totally different way for Bible study. But that's not true for all Christian preachers. The churches my family and I hopped around to when I was growing up often blurred that line more than we do. That's not to say they lacked rhetorical flair, they just preach differently. And I gotta say, today, as we've got a passage like Psalm 137 sitting in front of us, I think it's time for us Episcopalians to do some Sunday morning Bible study. If we were in one of the 56 churches in my hometown, right about now, I'd ask y'all to pull out your Bibles and turn to the Book of Psalms. But I'm guessing most of us don't have our leather-bound, well-worn, zipper sealed and note-filled holy scriptures with us. So, pull out your bulletin insert instead. It may not have the same gravitas, but it's the same words, God help us.

But before we go too deep on Psalm 137 in particular, we need a quick note on psalms in general. Psalms are songs of prayer. They aren't always sweet or even easy to find God in, but they are prayers sung to God. Now, there's a rumor in Biblical studies that King David wrote the entire Book of Psalms. He didn't. He wrote about half the book. That's still a great accomplishment, but it's important to know that he wasn't responsible for all of them. In fact, he died roughly 400 years before Psalm 137 was written.

So, Psalm 137. We know this one, at least we know the first six verses. By The Rivers Of Babylon - we've heard it sung so many times. Boney M back in the '70s, Steve Earle, Sublime, they've kept this psalm in our minds to a catchy, almost jaunty tune. But that tune belies a darker meaning. Psalm 137 is a lament, in the great tradition of laments. We have several sacred texts that fall in this genre. Psalm 137, the Book of Lamentations, parts of Jeremiah, parts of Isaiah, Job's complaints, the list goes on. A lament is simply a prayer from a place of pain and loss directed to God. If you've ever asked, "Why me, God?" or "Why her?" then you've added your prayers to this ancient genre. The powerful thing is, a lament, no matter how angry the one doing the lamenting is at God, a lament isn't a mistake or a wrongdoing. A lament is a continuation of relationship, even when something in that relationship feels broken. And all the ancient laments we have point us to one absolutely crucial truth: not only is a lament a prayer, it's a prayer that should be spoken. God can handle it.

So, what's happened to make the person singing this prayer lament? Up until this part in the story, Israel is a force to be reckoned with. As small countries go, it holds its own in battle. Often, the Israelites succeed where they have no business succeeding, and the people see this as God fighting on their side. But the age of empires comes, and forces descend on God's people with numbers no one could have dreamed of. Before, a war with a neighboring country meant, more or less, the same number of folks fighting on each side. Imagine the Village of Hamilton versus Madison. More or less the same number of people, more or less the same kind of weapons, more or less the same advantages and disadvantages.

But now an empire comes. The Babylonian Empire. It stretches from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and almost as far north as the Black Sea. And now they've turned their gaze and their forces to the Mediterranean. The numbers are extraordinary. You're entire country's population is smaller than their army. They have tools of war you've never experienced, even in your nightmares. And they have the weight and resources of thousands of miles of territory. And when they wash over you, and they will, you'll wonder where your God has gone to. In 587 BC, the Babylonians take Jerusalem, and they level it. But it's somehow worse

than that makes it sound. First off, remember that the Hebrew people see the Temple in Jerusalem as, effectively, God's home. If you want access to God, you go there. The priests make sacrifices there. When the people go out to battle, they take the Ark of the Covenant and lead the troops with it from there. God can move with them, but most of the time, God stays put. The Babylonians destroy that Temple. So what of God?

Now, the Babylonians are smart. They've been conquering small countries for a long time, and they've learned a thing or two. Once a people are conquered, you have to take some extreme measures to keep them from causing trouble. And boy, do they. The Babylonians aren't trying to win the hearts and minds of the people. They're trying to break them. David's city is conquered. God's temple is leveled. The King is missing. And they don't stop. Soon, the entire city is brought to the ground, and what can be burned is. The conquerors round up all the leaders - politicians, priests, writers, poets, artists, shoot, even charismatic shopkeepers that could draw a crowd - they round 'em all up, and they execute them in public. There's even evidence in ancient Babylonian records that, just as they kill the leaders, they also kill the youngest generations. Those who might remember or be told the story of how their sad lot came to be, and might grow with anger and plots of revenge in their hearts. Can't have that, now can we. As if that wasn't enough, they take the survivors and fling them across the empire. But they're clever in how they do this, too. They don't send all the Israelites together to one place far from home. That's just begging for rebellion. No, they send a handful to one part of the empire and a handful to another and handful to another and so on. Remember, they've been doing this for years, so a collection of conquered people in one of these far flung places that these newly conquered people end up with don't speak the same language. It's mighty hard to bring down an empire when you can't ask the person next to you for a sip of water.

That's what these people have been through. That's what the person crying out this prayer to God has been through. And that's where Psalm 137 begins. Hear it now, not as people sitting comfortably in a church in Hamilton, but as an Israelite trudging through the desert with Jerusalem fallen at your back and who knows what waiting ahead.

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion. As for our harps, we hung them up on the trees in the midst of that land. (Harps were used mostly for sacred music, mostly at the temple. I brought this thing with me in the hopes that I'd sing to God again, but I don't even know where God is. So I left that behind, too.)

For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called for mirth: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." How shall we sing the Lord's song upon an alien soil. (This is just cruelty. Salt in the wounds)

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. Remember the day of Jerusalem, O Lord, against the people of Edom, who said, "Down with it! down with it! even to the ground!" (Edom, by the way, was one of those small countries bordering Israel. They didn't always get along, but they managed a truce of sorts. Until the Babylonians came and the Edomites picked their side.)

O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy the one who pays you back for what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, and dashes them against the rock!

Look, I know it's not pretty. But maybe now at least we understand the psalmist's pain, much as we can. I hope I never understand it fully. I hope I never see a Babylon coming my way, but my heart feels for this prayer. And I can't fault it's author for saying it.

A question remains, though, and it's a tough one. Sure, we can understand the psalmist here, but why is Psalm 137 scripture? Better yet, there's all sorts of Bible verses that don't get read on Sunday morning, so why does this passage get read? Rabbis and Biblical scholars have been asking these questions for thousands of years. It horrified ancient commentators, too, especially that final verse. Verse 9 wasn't heard with different ears from yours and mine. People have always been disturbed by it. Some likened it to the passage demanding "an eye for an eye" - which Rabbi Eliezer, writing in the 1st Century AD, said had nothing to do with bodily comeuppance. He said that scripture isn't meant to be taken literally. It's meant to be interpreted. 1st Century AD! It was impossible to place a value on the loss of an eye, he said, but still, justice needed to be served. And the one causing the other to lose the eye had to pay a massive sum to approximate the value lost. The pain of coming up with that sum served as a substitute for the punishment deserved. In fact, the Jewish Bava Kamma, a sort of sacred legal handbook from around the 5th Century BC, contains not a single writing that understood that passage to be taken literally.

In other words, the ancient interpreters laid the groundwork for us today, and the vast majority of 'em point to something I think most of us know. We say things in anger or in fear or in despair that we don't mean literally. How many of us have ever been so mad we've said, "Oh, I could just kill him!" but don't actually mean it. But, and maybe this points to some great strength in the psalmist's faith, or at least a persistence of faith in spite of everything, how many of us have said those awful things to God and said them as prayers? I don't mean, have you prayed for God to kill. I mean, have you confessed those desires to God? It's that lament we talked about earlier. God can handle your blame, your pain, your anger. But saying those things to God doesn't mean you're asking for God to do something terrible. Instead, it's more of a purging, getting those awful feelings out in pure and vulnerable honesty with God. Psalm 137, Lamentations, Christ's words on the cross, they give us permission - and maybe even a framework - to do this. God can handle it.

But maybe there's another layer, still. This psalmist sang his rightly earned anger with deep honesty to God. It's the sacred song of a broken people. And as soon as people heard it, they were reminded of the pain they'd suffered, too. But I wonder if there's something to the other side. I wonder if there's something there for the conquerors to hear, too. This is the song of the people they've broken. And as soon as they hear it, they're reminded of the pain they caused. I doubt the Babylonians cared. Or maybe they were even proud of it.

But for us, instead of hearing the vile particulars of that final verse, maybe we try to hear the pain at its root. We can read Psalm 137 as the song of our ancestors, and maybe doing that gives us permission to live a certain way. Or we can read it as the song of one we've conquered, of one we've brought pain to. And maybe our initial recoil read this way becomes a check on us. I don't know about you, but I'd never want to injure someone so viciously, so deeply, so thoroughly, that they'd wish something like this on me.

Turn to God when you harm someone. But turn to God when you've been harmed, too. Say your prayers with the deep and real honesty you wouldn't dare say to another person. And take your pain, your anger, and your fear and sing it to God. Because God can handle it.