

March 27, 2022
Rev. Kerry Smith

Psalms: Being Honest with God
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalms 137

New Revised Standard Version

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! 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. 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!” O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

For our Lenten journey this year we have looked at the Psalms and being honest with God in our joy, in our anger, and in our sadness. The Psalms are the prayers of people just like us, people who struggled, who didn’t understand, who cried, who looked at a sunset and felt complete awe. In the Psalms we see how people thousands of years ago sang a song to God.

An often-cited paraphrase of the fourth century theologian, Athanasius, says, “The Psalms have a unique place in the Bible because while most of Scripture speaks to us, the Psalms speak for us.” The Psalms put words to our frustration, our joy, and our despair.

Today we hear a lament which is a cry to God expressing a loss that has occurred. Laments can be personal or communal. This one is communal and expresses pain for the loss of Jerusalem. It is a song from people who have been forcibly removed from their homes by the Babylonian imperial policies of relocation but they cling to their memory and hope for homecoming with an unshakable passion. This Psalm teaches us about our capacity to endure and it is a song of grief.

We know grief. Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children alone. Grief is a man so filled with uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person. Grief is a mother walking daily to a nearby cemetery to stand quietly alone a few minutes before going about the tasks of the day. Grief is when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there. Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years. It is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying good night to the one who died.

Grief is so hard. Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they are not and never will be again. Priest and writer Henri Nouwen said, “I am beginning to see that much of praying is grieving.” Psalm 137 is a reminder for us that we can join together as a community and share our grief with God and with one another, that there is hope against all the evidence that may say otherwise.

Psalm 137 invites us to honest prayer, to offer ourselves and our desires, our grief as well as our anger, to God and to know that God loves us as we are. It seems that in extreme situations grief and anger are both inevitable and inseparable. Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel said, “The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.” The worst possible response to monstrous evil is to feel nothing. It is normal for victims and on behalf of victims to feel grief, rage, and outrage. For survivors of victimization to express grief and outrage is to live.

This is a song of people who know that wrongs don’t get righted in a day. This is a song for the long haul, for those who aren’t able to see the change but they know that change will come. For those who are exploited in our society, this is a reminder that they are not forgotten. Defiant hope reminding us that life is not controlled by those in power.

Psalm 137 is a prayer for victims, for those in captivity, and for ourselves since we know we are both victims and victimizers. It reminds us of the pain of exile, the horror of war, the truth

about ourselves, the terror of despair and death, the loneliness of a cross. It is also a prayer of honesty about our own vengefulness. The psalmist wants revenge because of their loyalty to Jerusalem and God. But, there is no evidence that the psalmist did act out the expressed desire for revenge.

The psalmist isn't saying that they will take action against the little ones. That action, rightly or wrongly, is left up to God. The speaker doesn't dash the heads of babies against rocks, but it is a prayer, a hope, a yearning. Even the venom is left in God's hands. Israel hopes, but God avenges. As humans we want revenge, it is the human condition. But, we have to leave vengeance to God. If we hold onto vengeance and don't give it over to God, we don't have the capacity, the energy, or the freedom to hope. The people in Psalm 137 express their feelings to God in prayer and then leave those feelings with God. What feelings do we need to express and then leave with God?

It's hard not to sing Psalm 137 and not think of the Holocaust. We have to remember what evil humanity did to one another. It's hard not to think of the horrors that are occurring right now in the Ukraine. To remember is painful because grief is always painful. To remember is unsettling but anger is always unsettling. But when we remember, we defy the same thing to happen again. To remember is to choose to live and to be faithful to God's purpose of life for all people. Remembrance is at the heart of Psalm 137 and at the heart of the Christian faith.

Remember God and remember our holy city. Somehow the people found a way to sing God's song in a foreign land. We may not face exile, but we do face pain and suffering and loss. Our daughter is graduating from high school this year and my heart grieves for all the graduates who weren't able to have all of the usual festivities because of Covid. My heart breaks for the people who didn't touch another human being for months, some even a year or more, because of the pandemic. I missed hugs so much! I also missed all of the children of our church.

Elie Wiesel once shared, "When I see a child, any child, I have tears in my eyes. Especially my own, especially Jewish children but any children... We [Holocaust survivors] want to caress our children 24 hours a day. We want to shelter them, to show them nothing but joy and beauty. And yet we want them to know... To me, nothing is more sacred, nothing more divine, than a child's life. There are two absolutes, life and death. I choose life."¹

Psalm 137 uncovers our sadness, our anger, our rage, our fear, and our tears at what has been lost. We have to be real and not have a Pollyanna faith. It is okay to not be okay. We only heal when we are connected to our emotions. The people in Psalm 137 had a visible enemy to direct their wrath to, which in some ways is so helpful! The next psalm moves us from angry lament to a place of gratitude for God in all things, even in exile. Psalm 138 says, "I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul."

It feels like a bit of whiplash to go from grief to thanksgiving so rapidly, but I am very glad that Psalm 138 is there to remind me in times of frustration, anger, fear, and unending anxiety, God is there. True lament is born from a deep conviction that the world is worthy of goodness. God chooses to be revealed through people with passion just like us. We are no less vengeful than the psalmist was. Maybe expressing vengeance is the first step to forgiveness? The cost of hope is giving God our wish for retaliation. Giving our most precious hatred over to God. If we want to endure with sanity against despair, we must have an alternative vision. Years

¹ Quoted in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*. Volume 4 Psalms. p. 1229. Taken from "Elie Wiesel and the Two Who Saved His Life." From *The St. Louis Post Dispatch*, October 5, 1988.

ago I read a study that found when people have lost everything, there is one emotion that is essential if they are to move forward through their despair. The emotion they have to have is hope. The necessary alternative vision is hope.

When poet Paul Laurence Dunbar died, his mother left his room exactly as it was on the day of his death. At his desk was his final poem, handwritten on a pad. After his mother died, her friends discovered that Paul Laurence Dunbar's last poem had been lost forever. His mother had made his room into a shrine and not moved anything, and the sun had bleached the ink in which the poem was written until it was invisible. The poem was gone. If we stay in grief, we lose so much of life. Life is a journey of transforming grief and anger into compassion. Hate can be replaced with hope.

I heard the developer of the 1619 project this week, Nikole Hannah-Jones. She said, "Hope is useless if it is only hope. It has to be an action." May we remember her words and act this week. We need hope. Let our hope be transformed into action! Thanks be to God, Amen.