

“Alongside Babylon’s River, We Cried and Cried”

Psalm 137

A few weeks ago, I warned everyone about the upcoming Scripture. Well, I was wrong about the week, but I wasn’t wrong about the need for warning labels for this Scripture.

Let us turn in our pew bibles to Psalm 137, knowing that many rabbis have deemed this Scripture worthy of a PG rating, meaning Pastoral Guidance is needed when we read it.

(Read Text)

I really have been dreading this moment. Ever since I started putting this sermon series together, I have wondered why I chose this particular Scripture and now I am sure you are also wondering the same thing. Every time I reviewed my list each week and saw Psalm 137 glaring back at me, I kept thinking, “Why oh Why did I pick this psalm” and then I would allow myself the delusion, like Scarlett O’Hara, “Oh, I’ll think about that tomorrow.” Well, tomorrow is here. And the verses are still there, glaring back at us. So I guess it is truly beyond time that we deal with them as people of faith..

Part of the reason that I chose this Scripture was because, let’s be honest, we have all had some of the same thoughts in the past. Maybe not to such an extreme

but, let's say, we are driving down the road, and someone cuts us off. Haven't we all said, "I hope you get what you deserve. I hope there is a cop up there to give you a ticket, an expensive ticket." Or let's say, at some point, we have all been hurt, whether, emotionally or physically by someone else, and we think, "I hope someone hurts you as much as you hurt me one day, that way you'll understand the pain I'm going through right now". Or if we are truly being honest, what about after September 11th? In the moment after our perception of safety and security was scattered, after we realized that as a nation, we were not invincible. Sure, Hollywood had envisioned attacks on the United States but the enemies were always aliens and the remote possibility of an attack, whether human or extra terrestrial seemed far fetch. The idea only appeared on the big screen and in the movie, there was always some big named Hollywood actor who could jump in and save the day. On September 11th, that didn't happen. We realized that we were under attack and it was for real. It wasn't a Hollywood production and there wasn't an Arnold Schwarzenegger to save the day. On September 11th, we realized that someone hated us so much that they would attack us and kill innocent people. We realized that someone could and would attack us on our very shores. No longer just a possibility on the movie screen, it was reality. And that reality was just too real, too in our face. It devastated us. And amid the cries of sorrow, there were also cries

of revenge, cries for an eye for an eye. There were cries to punish our enemies and kill their children, just like they had done to ours.

And that wasn't the first time this sentiment has been expressed in this nation. Think of after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. As a nation, we created Japanese internment camps because our enemy needed to be punished, because we believed in an Eye for an Eye.

So let's be honest and not pretend that such sentiments as expressed in Psalm 137 are not expressed in our world today. If anything, Psalm 137 holds a mirror up to ourselves and reminds us that at some point, at some time, we have all wished that someone got what they had coming to them. We've all wished that that person or nation got what they deserved.

That's one reason. Another reason why I chose this text is because it is so gruesome and so evil and we as humans try to avoid such feelings and pictures as often as we can. We like to pretend that everything is sunshine and rainbows, especially when it comes to our Bibles, our religions, our churches, our faith. We are not the first ones who have wanted to ignore evil or omit it completely from our Bibles. Many editions have edited out Psalm 137, almost like if they just take one that one example, then everything will go back to being fine. Some editions skip from Psalm 136 to Psalm 138, without a blink of an eye. All because we like our cleaned up religion. It is not polite to talk about evil, hateful stuff in church.

We only like to talk about love and grace. That's what is important. As people of faith, we have changed the old saying, "Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative" to "Pour all our attention and efforts into the positive and good and then completely ignore the negative, the bad stuff in life. Just pretend it doesn't exist." But it's here, glaring back at us, just daring us to deny it. So just like in life, we need to face the fact, that in our Bible, in our religion, in our churches, we cannot just ignore the negative and pretend it doesn't exist because in life, our world tells us differently.

This Psalm is here, in our Bibles for a reason, a good reason because we as people of faith are called to grapple with evil. We cannot just ignore it or deny it because the reality of it is that evil cannot be extinguished by trying to ignore it or by acting if things shouldn't be certain ways. We shouldn't be so naïve to think that if we truly believed that if we don't see evil, don't speak evil, don't listen to evil, then it won't exist, that life will only be sunshine and rainbows.

The hard fact for us is evil exists. Evil exists in our world, in our nation, in our community, and yes, evil even in exists in us as people of faith. We all have to make choices each and every day. And our choices can either reflect God's light and love or they can add more negative, more hate, more injustice to the creation. Either way, we cannot sit in denial or pretend evil doesn't exist. It is real. And we are called to grapple with it each and every day. Not because we have some super

human powers or because we have some inside tract to heaven. But because just like the psalmist of old, we have discovered the reality that “in the presence of God, the world is not a benign place where everyone is doing their best to get along. We can’t think that if we all just try a little harder, then things are going to turn out all right.” We’ve realized life doesn’t work that way. We’ve realized our world does not work that way. We realized that humanity certainly doesn’t work that way.

As people of faith, we can’t just keep thinking that if only people would love one another more, than things will be okay. It is not that easy. Evil exist in our world and there are consequences that occur because of this. Injustices happen each and every day. People are oppressed each and every day. Calls for revenge and retribution happen every day. And part of our calling as people of faith is to grapple with these consequences each and every day. Part of our calling is to begin to work with our God to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. Part of our calling is to pull our heads out of our pews and face the brokenness in the world. Because, only by facing it, can we begin the process of healing and reconciliation.

So now you know my reasons for picking this Scripture, and I bet you are all hoping that this is the moment where everything is wrapped up all neat and tidy. All questions of faith answered. All struggles ended. Well, I hate to disappoint you

but I know I cannot do just that with one sermon. Faith is a journey with lots of questions and struggles and this text is just the tip of the iceberg. I will tell you, however, that all week, I have struggled with this text, trying to find some small bit of hope, some small bit of good news to share with you, so that I could try my best to bring you some good news this morning but I'm not sure that I was able to do just that.

Let me explain, I firmly believe that in the end, love will win each and every time. That's what the story of the resurrection teaches me but as I spent time with this text this past week, time and time again, I couldn't help but think, maybe not this time. I couldn't help but think maybe there is no hope because the psalm just ends. We start out with this hauntingly beautiful picture of people crying beside the river. Their harps are hung on willow trees because they have no more songs to sing and suddenly we move to this horrible gruesome picture, hoping babies will be smashed upon the rocks. As we read this last line, it really does feel like God fails, that Love loses. So all week, I couldn't help see rage and hate as I looked at this psalm.

Sure, people of the years have tried to explain away this rage and hate by saying, "Well, that's the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus preached love." Yeah but...have we ever really looked at what Jesus really says? Sometimes, it is not a pretty picture, the stuff that came out of his mouth. He talks

about turning brother against brother, son against father, daughter against mother. In the Gospels, alone, Jesus does a bit of his own hellfire and damnation and don't get me started on the epistles!

We need to realize that Jesus was not this gentle nice guy we all think he is. More often than not, Jesus is more like an obnoxious party guest who says all the wrong things loudly at all the inappropriate times. Jesus calls down curses upon the people more than once. In fact, even as he is weeping over Jerusalem, he is calling for its' destruction through heavy artillery and saying that its' inhabitants and their babies will be smashed.

So it is not enough for us to say that it is just the Old Testament and we are New Testament people. First and foremost, we are people of God, and the Bible, all the Bible, tells our story, the good, the bad and the ugly. And sometimes in life, it is hard to separate the bad and gruesome from the beautiful and good. We are made up of all of it, and yes our story as the people of God is made up of all of it as well, the good, the bad, the ugly and yes, the downright gruesome.

So still I found myself with no good answers, no real good news from Psalm 137. So I tried the Biblical commentators. They talked about how we need to remember the context when it comes to this Psalm. The Israelites had just had their whole world destroyed. The Temple razed to the ground. Family and friends carted off into exile. Some even suggested that maybe the Israelites had just had their

babies smashed upon the rocks. All the commentators seemed to make the disclaimer, “Remember the Context.” Sure this helps, but it doesn’t excuse it and it certainly doesn’t help us completely understand the need for Psalm 137.

I found myself saying, Yeah, but... Is this the best the brilliant Biblical minds could do? I saw their point but I also know that every time I read Psalm 137, I couldn’t help but get smacked in the face with humiliation, degradation, and dehumanization. Context helped, but it didn’t help me stop feeling those awful feelings. It seemed shallow to simply say, “That was the mindset when this psalm was written” and then shrug our shoulders as we say, “But what are we going to do?”

As a person of faith, that didn’t sit well with me. It didn’t give me the good news I needed to hear from this text. And then I realized something. The Psalm just ends like I said earlier. Maybe instead of a period as the punctuation, it should end with the punctuation of ..., ending it like the psalmist just steps away.

He just steps away because he realizes what he just said. Maybe he is in shock. Maybe he just realized that he asked for innocent babies to be killed, to be destroyed. Babies, helpless creatures who don’t get to pick who their mother and fathers will be, babies who literally have no voice in the politics, problems and wars of the world. Babies who cannot defend themselves but rely on others to protect them. Maybe the psalm just ends because the psalmist realizes how low and

how hateful his speech really is at that moment. Does he really want something as innocent and pure as babies to be destroyed?

Then I recognized a glimmer of light, a glimmer of hope. And I'll be honest, I'm not sure it is the best glimmer of light or hope but it helped me to begin to find peace with this psalm. All I could think was that it is my hope and my prayer that this psalmist realized how low he had sunk, how out of control his rage really was, how destructive his hate really is. It is my hope and prayer that the psalmist realized that his rage and his hate needed to be restrained before it spun out of control and become a truly destructive force. It is my hope and my prayer that because there are no more words, the psalmist truly turned over his rage and hate to God because he realized how broken he had become, that he realized hate can be used by God to bring the enemies of life and salvation to notice, and then involve us in active compassion for the victims. Then once involved we find that while hate provides the necessary spark for ignition, it is the wrong fuel for the engines of judgment; only love is adequate to sustain these passions because love requires vulnerability, forgiveness, and response." And even when we are not able to feel these things or extend them to our enemies, God can.

That is why our hatred and our rage, all of which are natural human emotions, why our hatred and rage must arise in the context of God's holiness. Not because God will bless our efforts or our actions of hate and rage. No, they must

arise in the context of God's holiness because then and only then do we remember God is in control and God has the final word. And that word, whether we like it or not, is a word of love, a word of mercy, is a word of grace.

Even when we cannot feel these things for our enemies, God can. And God invites us to realize that yes, hurt is not good, but it wakes us to our need for help. Yes, there is no shame in admitting that human hurt is not a very promising first step to the accomplishment of wholeness as well as human hate and rage also not being a very promising step to the establishment of righteousness. Nevertheless, when prayed in the context of God's holiness, the understanding that God is in control, in the belief that God has the last word, they are steps, first steps into the presence of God where we learn that God has ways of dealing with what we bring God that are both other and better than what we had in mind because God can go there in love, in mercy, in grace, even when we cannot.

May we always remember that we are called to recognize our rage, our hate and turn them into positive action just in case there is someone who wishes to pray this psalm against us. Amen.