

October 2, 2022
"Homesick"
Psalm 137
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

This psalm, Psalm 137, is at first a classic lament; specifically a lament over the fall of Jerusalem and the roughly 50-year exile in Babylonian captivity that followed.

Babylon was the capital of the second Babylonian or Chaldean Empire. In the late 6th century BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar II's armies destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple, the first temple built in Jerusalem. Its destruction brought an end to the kingdom of Judah – the southern kingdom of what had previously been a united Israel, with Israel to the north, and Judah to the south. Its destruction also led to the extended captivity of many Judeans in Babylon.

Psalm 137 reads, as many of the Psalms do, as a community journal. In this case, a tear-soaked journal.

"By the rivers of Babylon –", it starts, in the New Revised Standard Version, "there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." Zion, of course, a synonym for Jerusalem and for the land of Israel more fully. Zion is home.

The Voice translation we heard this morning says, "... we sat and wept when we thought of Zion, our home, so far away." And the translation from The Message, which we also heard, reads, "... we sat on the banks; we cried and cried, remembering the good old days of Zion."

We may not totally register the historic details, but we get the lament. We hear the homesickness, the longing for home – if not for a specific place, then at least for the feeling of home. The familiarity, the comfort, the security, the warmth of it. The sense of belonging.

We all know what that feels like, to one degree or another, but we likely don't know what it FEELS like to be FORCED from home. By poverty and famine, by violence and war, by social and political repression and oppression, by natural disaster.

Violently forced, say, from African homes by Euro-American colonialist, transatlantic slave traders. Violently forced from ancestral lands by European explorers and settlers. Violently forced from Jewish homelands by Nazis. Forced from home in fear and desperation, stumbling toward a precarious future that is largely out of your hands.

This is the community journal of enslaved peoples, of refugees and internally displaced people, of migrant workers and immigrants. Of survivors of domestic violence. We may or may not know their pain, or be able to relate to their pain, but we are meant to feel it.

Psalm 137 begins with lament but ends with curse. Psalm 137 is one of roughly 20 psalms – out of 150 – that include some kind of curse. Officially, they're called "imprecatory" psalms – that's your 100-dollar seminary word for the day. Psalms that imprecate or invoke judgment or calamity or terror on perceived enemies or perceived enemies of God.

They can be uncomfortable to read or to hear. The curse in Psalm 137 is REALLY uncomfortable to hear.

Looking back at the destruction of Jerusalem and the Judean kingdom, we get this translation from The Voice: "O daughter of Babylon, you are destined for destruction! Happy are those who pay you back for how you treated us so you will no longer walk so proud. Happy are those who dash your children against the rocks so you will know how it feels."

The Message translates, "A reward to whoever gets back at you for all you've done to us; yes, a reward to the one who grabs your babies and smashes their heads on the rocks!"

It's vengeful and it's violent. You can't help but cringe when you read it or hear it. But understanding the Psalms as a shared community journal, it's also honest. The Psalms as a whole give us the full range of human emotion and experience – from thanksgiving to lament, from praise to rage. And everything in between.

Some of you know that I got mugged years ago, not too long after I moved to Philly. I was living in Germantown at the time, and was coming home late from work, very much in the dark, when two guys ran up behind me. Actually, from two different directions as far as I can recall. I could hear their footsteps, but by the time I started to turn, I felt what I had to assume was a gun pointed at my head. Maybe it wasn't, I'll never know.

I won't tell you what they said, but they grabbed the bag I was carrying and ran back in the other direction.

My heart was racing. I just stood there for a few minutes. I eventually walked back in the direction they ran, hoping to at least find the bag after they rifled through it. But I didn't.

It was traumatic, but I am grateful, of course, that it wasn't worse. We know what worse is in a city overrun with gun violence and violent crime. We are starting to acknowledge and better understand the incredible impact that trauma has on the lives of children and adults – especially repeated trauma, chronic trauma, generational trauma. Or what experts refer to as “complex” trauma, meaning exposure to varied, multiple and ongoing traumatic events. Within a traumatic social context, like living in neighborhoods – like so many do in Philly, including some of you I know – blighted by poverty and violence.

My experience was acute, just that single incident. But I replayed that incident in my mind over and over again. I had nightmares for weeks, maybe months, after – I can't remember exactly. I cried a lot. I was filled with rage. All the time. From one incident. I did not journal, but I know my journal entries would've read something like Psalm 137. I imagined revenge. Violent revenge. I imagined myself responding differently, fighting back. Beating the hell out of them, if I'm being honest. I don't remember, if I'm being honest, if my imagination, my visualizations, went as far as killing them. But I wouldn't be surprised if they did.

It was an experience that helps me understand Psalm 137. There's a reason why trauma and violence so often play out in vicious cycles. If you don't address the experience,

the exposure, give it the attention and care that healing requires, it spins out of control in an endless loop.

We may cringe at the curse, we may or may not be able to relate to it, but we are meant to hear and feel the pain behind it.

This exiled community is far from home. And remembering home, Zion, they apparently stop singing. Understandably. They hung up their harps and stopped singing, as their captors rub salt in the wound.

Sarcastic and mocking, The Message translation describes it, their captors demanded songs: “Sing us a happy Zion song!” The Voice translation says they “surrounded us” and “made demands that we clap our hands and sing—songs of joy from days gone by, songs from Zion, our home. Such cruel men taunted us—haunted our memories.”

Haunted our memories. That's what trauma does.

The exiled community refuses to sing. “Oh, how could we ever sing God's song in this wasteland?”

“How could we sing a song about the Eternal in a land so foreign, while still tormented, brokenhearted, homesick? Please don't make us sing this song.”

Feel that pain. Then hear the resilience. Hear the re-remembering. The refusal to let go of their home. To forget it. Even when they are so far from it.

“O Jerusalem, even still, don't escape my memory. I treasure you and your songs, even as I hide my harp from the enemy. And if I can't remember, may I never sing a song again—may my hands never play well again—For what use would it be if I don't remember Jerusalem as my source of joy?”

As an act of defiance, I imagine them refusing to sing on command, to sing for the mocking entertainment of their captors. But as an act of resilience, I also imagine them singing quietly to themselves. Humming the tunes. And quietly singing together when their captors aren't around. Fanning the flames of memory. Of home. Keeping alive

their source of hope and joy in the midst of profound pain. Picture enslaved Africans singing spirituals and songs of freedom as an act of resilience, singing their hope to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land.

And remember that the Psalms were meant to be sung. Psalms are literally hymns. Hymns, again, that express the full range of human emotion and experience.

There is divine gift in singing not only our joy, but our pain. Singing not only our gratitude, but our rage. That's singing, figuratively and quite literally, as spiritual practice.

When you are home, feeling at home, singing can be an expression of joy and gratitude. When you are far from home, or feeling far from it, or are in solidarity with those who are, singing can be an expression of pain and rage. It can open us up to feel what we need to feel, to get it out; and in so doing, make space for hope to expand our imagination, for courage to face our fears, for strength to carry on, for love to deepen inside us.

So sing like your own life depends on it. Sing your way home to love. To the God who is Love, the God who resides in you.

And embracing Psalm 137, and the Psalms in general, as the honest voice of a whole community, it's especially important that we keep singing TOGETHER, like all our lives depend on it. Like we belong to each other.

Sing in our collective joy, and sing through the valleys and wilderness so far off, through the trauma and violence, so we can all find our way back home. To love for the God who is Love itself, for each other, for ourselves.

May it be so.