

Exile: When you're ready to hang it up
Psalm 137
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Trinity United Methodist Church
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Since most of us have never been captured by an enemy and taken prisoner (some of you may have been there in war), it might help to know that the word Babylon comes from the word that means 'chaos.' Over time, Babylon comes to stand for any anti-God, chaotic, violent power that threatened God's people. In the Book of Revelation, for example, Babylon is the corrupt Roman government.

Since most of us have never been in Exile, taken prisoner in a foreign land, it might help to think about Exile as anytime chaos seems to control our lives. Can you put yourself in that mindset this morning? Maybe you are already there. Another way to frame the question is: What do we do when we are ready to hang it up? When we are at the end of our rope? When our hearts are broken, our lives shattered, or when the things that have always been certain no longer seem certain?

Some Christians, with no small amount of pride, will say, "I never ask 'why me?'" Be happy for them. If that's you, you are blessed beyond anything I will have to say to you today.

For the rest of us who have, if ever so fleetingly, wondered in the midst of difficulty "How long, O Lord?" For the rest of us who occasionally have "What did I do to deserve this?" cross our minds. For those of us who have suffered for things out of our control, or wondered if God is punishing us, or realized that often the decisions of a few at the top cause the rest of us at the bottom to pay...

Welcome to Church, Welcome to our Book. You've been, however briefly, in Exile. This may be your song.

Here is the story. The 12 tribes, once ruled by mighty David and wise (if a little self-indulgent) Solomon, have divided. The 10 tribes of the north called themselves Israel. The 2 tribes of the south, Judah. They are located on a strip of land between Asia and Africa, a much-contested strip that allows domination of trade in the world. Assyria is the super power 700 or so years before Christ, and Assyria takes those 10 tribes captive, deports them, and replaces them with other captives from other places. Those few poor souls who remain try to hold on. Eventually they will become what Jesus knew as Samaritans.

Judah holds out for a couple of hundred years. Powers rise and fall, the new superpower Babylon comes knocking, and after much violence and siege, they take the best and the brightest, the royal house, the leaders off to Babylon. They let them be Jewish still (read the book of Daniel for a little more about that). Then they come again, and take more captives. Finally, many thousands of survivors are in Babylon. Jerusalem and its walls are burned. The treasures

of the palace and temple are stolen. For decades, they live in captivity. Finally, they are allowed to return under Babylonian rule, and they find their home destroyed.

This is their song. It is our song, those of us who have been hurt. Who have felt alone at home, or who have watched our homes or families or marriages be destroyed. This is our song, those of us who have had our lives ripped apart by death or fire or firing. Who have lived forever in control only to have their health begin to deteriorate. Psalm 137 may be our song..

Verses 1 and 2 may sound familiar, if you've been in Exile. The first reaction is quite simply, grief. They sit and cry. They hang it up, literally, the palace musicians who sing the songs hang their harps on the trees. No singing possible. God love them.

I remember when our 3 daughters died, returning to worship for the first time with Randy and Maia. The traditional service was fine. We sang A Mighty Fortress is Our God, and God did indeed seem like a fortress to me at that time. I was on the outside, he was like a rock I could not penetrate. No problem singing about a world filled with devils that threaten to undo us, either.

Then, in the contemporary service, all the songs were praise. Sing joyfully. Lift up your voice. God is so good. The worship leader encouraged us to sing. I could not do it. I literally could not sing. All I could do is sit and die.

The Jews sit and weep when they think of how it used to be. The first thing we might remember when we are at the end of our ropes, when we are tempted to give up, is that it is entirely right that we should cry. Sitting and crying are appropriate when life is crazy, when we don't know what else to do. Sorry, those of you who don't want to show emotion. Sometimes showing emotion is the Christian thing to do.

The Jews have a tradition when someone dies, sitting Shiva. For seven days, the close relatives of the deceased gather, usually in the home of the dead relative. They don't go out. They aren't required to do anything. All their friends and relatives come and visit them there, but they are not supposed to try to cheer them up. They sit with them. They cry together. For a week. Then they go to worship and walk the family around the block to symbolize the ending of that week.

A week. We are lucky today to have two days before people start telling us to snap out of it, time to move on, put on a smile and get on with life. You can see this reflected in verses 3 and 4. We don't know whether the tormentors are tormenting – Where's your God now? Sing your happy praise songs now! Or whether they are literally saying, "Why are you still so sad? You know Psalm 47 – Clap your hands, shout to God with cries of joy! Snap out of it!"

Funny what people say when life is tough for us, when Exile seems an appropriate metaphor for where we live. The Psalm tells us it is really ok, in the midst of suffering, to cry, to wait, to grieve.

The Psalmist and his people don't stay there, sitting. But they do sit for a while. Then they choose to trust God anyway. Verses 5-6 see the turning to hope. They are not going to lie down

and accept what has happened as victims. They are not giving up. They will remember. They will stay focused on the center of their faith, for them, Jerusalem is that.

They make some strong vows! May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth! I WILL remember. That is an appropriate and necessary response too, the resolve to remember, the choice to have faith. There comes a time in the midst of chaos when we have to decide to cling to Jesus. We may not be able to hear him, we may not be able to sing with joy. We may not feel his presence or see what he is up to, but we choose him anyway.

Many Haitian Christians said that the earthquake that devastated their country was God's punishment on their country for so much godlessness. US Televangelists said the same thing. Other Haitian Christians pointed out that if God was punishing godlessness with the earthquake, it probably should have happened further north, say, Florida or New York.

When we are in Exile, we can sometimes be tempted to think that the chaos is God's punishment. With our limited human brains, we start to assign cause and effect logic to the pain and the destruction. The prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah do some of that. There is truth in it. God did make the world with certain laws. Jump off a building, and the law of gravity will have a logical consequence. A society that continually rewards the rich and punishes the poor will eventually foster such violent hatred that war will erupt. All the same, Jesus has a story in John 9, about a man born blind, that will not allow us to such simple logic where suffering is concerned. It's not the man's fault he's blind, not his parents, assigning blame is pointless. The only way to look at suffering is to see it as an opportunity for God to shine, an invitation to turn to God.

So some of our Hoosier missionaries discovered in Haiti during the aftershocks of the earthquake. They huddled and sang Amazing Grace, and heard it echoed in Creole from the Haitians around them. Their Haitian hosts shared whatever they had with them as guests.

They cling to God, even if they don't totally understand, and it was a choice they made.

Finally, the psalm turns to God for resolution. It's not pretty. They are hurt and angry. The prophets' words 'you're in Exile because of your sin' have faded into the background. All they know is that the Babylonians have taken advantage of their power. If God did call these pagans to discipline his people, they have gone way overboard. The Psalmists resort to war language, ancient and primitive, back when the only way to win was to destroy the entire civilization. Maybe that sort of violence is what they saw when the Babylonian soldiers invaded their town. It sounds brutal to us. It is. Anger often is brutal. It is also a proper response, even though we aren't very comfortable with it.

There is no remorse. There is no judgment on such a statement. To those of us who know Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," let's not forget that Jesus knows we have enemies!

So instead of being offended, let's notice what they do with their anger, the violent desire they have to wipe their enemies off the face of the earth? What are they doing in this Scripture?

They are singing. To God. Their desires not to sing. Their fears and their failures. Their pain and anguish. In a song. This whole scripture is a song to God, a prayer.

Jesus said, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Paul said, Be angry, but do not sin. And there are plenty of stories in the Old Testament where the people of God are instructed to hack the heads off their enemies, where God seems distant, angry, frustrated.

Take any one of those, like this psalm, by itself and it is like that old story of the blind guys describing an elephant. You know it? The guy feeling the tail says, “Oh, the elephant is skinny like a snake.” And the guy feeling the leg says, ‘Oh, you are wrong, the elephant is thick and round, like a tree.’” And the guy feeling the side says, ‘You are both wrong. He is fat and hairy, like an ape.’”

When we’re ready to hang it up, when we are at the end, we are only seeing a part of the story. What do we do with the part we are in? With the anger or the grief, with the choice to stay faithful or the doubts that storm us in the middle of the night?

We sing them to God, just like the psalm-writer does. We bring them to Jesus. When we can love our enemies, or when we can’t. When we are in grief, or when we are filled with hate. When we can see the way out, and when we can’t. When our thoughts are beautiful and holy, and when they are ugly and violent.

He doesn’t promise us an easy road. These Exiles, sent home to rebuild, have their work cut out for them. You can read about it in Ezra and Nehemiah. Their old neighbors, the Edomites, harass them constantly. There isn’t enough to eat. This psalm itself is an instruction of what to do when we don’t know what to do: come to Jesus.

Exile

Make a list of things you might say to God when you are hurt or angry.

Or, draw a picture of how you feel when someone hurts you.

Or, write a prayer for people who have been hurt or treated unfairly.

Children's Message

Raise your hand if you have been angry. Can you show me how people look when they are angry? What makes you angry?

Raise your hand if you've ever been hurt by someone else. Sometimes, people get angry when they are hurt by someone else. God knows that we feel that way.

People in today's scripture are hurt because their enemies captured them and took them far away from home. They feel sad and angry and hurt. One of the things that helped them when they felt that way is to write a song, and that is Psalm 137.

While we talk about this...

Here is a paper for you to use to think about some of the things we'll be talking about. If you are not in Kindergarten yet, or you're older than 3rd grade, this might help you. If you want to bring it to me after you are done, you can ask the adult you came with and see if they will let you bring it to me.

Let's pray.