

Psalm 137

October 5, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Psalm 137

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!

Let us pray: Blessed God, we pause now before this rage...we sit uncomfortably, frightened by this ugly cry for vengeance...we feel the struggle to honestly accept that such hateful fury is here in our holy book. Rage. Vengeance. Fury. Help us, O God. Amen.

This would surely get someone cancelled today. I don't know where the line is that one is not supposed to cross, but it is clearly somewhere long before the point where you say, "Happy shall they be who take your babies and smash them upon the rocks." When you give in to such uncontrolled, heartless hate, nothing more you have to say can be worth listening to. Or so it would seem.

This Psalm, though, wasn't cancelled. Here it is for all to see. For all to read. This was here long before any Twitter message, and will be around long after any TicToc post. It is here in our sacred scripture. The words threaten to pollute this sacred space – our holy gathering, and trouble the space in our minds that says, "God is love." "Happy shall they be who take your babies and smash them upon the rocks." I can't even read it with the rage, vengeance, and fury that it expresses. I can only read it as lament.

We don't really do laments these days. Laments are difficult. Emotionally difficult. Theologically complicated. Laments force us to acknowledge emotions we generally try to suppress rage: a fury unrestrained by compassion, a longing for vengeance, a bitterness that rejoices in the suffering of those who have hurt us.

I don't know whether that is broadly true here at First Church, that you haven't dealt much with the laments of scripture, but it is fair to say about most places I have been. I have preached on Psalm 137

before, but only once in 35 years. I've never preached on Psalm 92:

Who rises up for me against the wicked?
 Who stands up for me against evildoers?
 God Almighty will repay them for their iniquity
 and wipe them out for their wickedness;
 the Lord our God will wipe them out.

Or on Psalm 109:

When my enemy is tried, let him be found guilty;
 let his prayer be counted as sin.
 May his days be few;
 may another seize his position.
 May his children be orphans
 and his wife a widow.
 May his children wander about and beg;

I could go on - go on, that is, about the laments that I have never gone on about. Old Testament scholar, and wise agitator, Walter Brueggemann, has written about what we lose when laments are no longer part of our liturgical practice and our faith life. (Walter Brueggemann, *The Costly Loss of Lament* - JSOT36 (1986) 57-71, [online here](#).)

Brueggemann says that we lose a genuine, mature relationship with God. When we rarely, if ever, join with our ancestors in faith in expressing rage and fury and bitterness and disappointment and hopelessness to God, and sometimes rage and fury and bitterness and disappointment and hopelessness directed at God, our relationship with God becomes thin. It becomes based only in the good and grateful part of who we are – as if we can hide all the rest, or worse, as if God can't take it.

In a somewhat overly academic, but I still think helpful, way, Brueggemann says this is a loss of “genuine covenant [relationship] because the second party to the covenant [that's us] has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology. Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being. Or in political categories, the greater party is surrounded by subjects who are always 'yes men and women' from whom 'never is heard a discouraging word'. Since such a celebrative, consenting silence does not square with reality, covenant minus lament is finally a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense, which sanctions social control.”

He compares this with parents that seek to ignore or punish or even just redirect any negative emotions in their children. When a child isn't allowed a full range of human feeling, the child learns to put on a false front, develop a false self, that they can show the world, because that's the self that is found to be acceptable. Living a full and authentic human life, living a true self, becomes very difficult. I wonder how many of us have such a relationship with God?

Interestingly, Brueggemann also says that the loss of lament leads to political acquiescence, to passive acceptance of the status quo. If you never learn to cry out in the face of injustice, then you don't cry out in the face of injustice. That's why despots everywhere suppress cries of injustice. It's not just because they don't like criticism, but because the first step in being able to overcome an evil is naming an evil.

Again, as Brueggemann says it: “A community of faith which negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne [of God], because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne (which is a conclusion drawn through liturgic use [or lack thereof]), they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justice questions disappear into civility and docility. The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of this speech form is denied.” And he says, “A religious tradition that prohibits protest vis-a-vis the deity will hardly foster courageous resistance to lesser powers.”

No wonder the church that has gone for MAGA, including the evangelical praise song bunch, is the church where you will never hear Psalm 137.

A lament is a desperate cry before our Holy God. A cry that is honest, and comes from the fullness of who we are. To name our fear and our fury, our hurt and our hopelessness, our unbelief and our bitterness, is simply to be in an honest, true-self, relationship with God, and it teaches us (and gives us permission) to protest injustice with due rage. And to name it, to express it liturgically, is to submit it to the love of God, and to submit it to the love of God is to relinquish it. To be freed of it.

I don't actually believe that Psalm 137 ends where I stopped reading earlier. Verse 7 is the last verse in the text, but I don't think that's the end of it. I believe Psalm 137 doesn't end until we see the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself took the place of those little ones, those babes bashed against the rocks, supposedly giving joy to the vengeful singers of Psalm 137. Jesus himself takes the place of those babes, “bashed against the rocks” of the cross. He dies with love in his heart. And on the third day, that love is shown to the most powerful reality in all the universe, conquering death itself – healing us of our rage, and our fury - healing of us of the bitterness that will allow us to long for the bashing of our enemies' babes. Healing us with God's love – assuring us that we can trust God with the fullness of who we are, lament and all.

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.