What We Remember

Psalm 137

The Book of Psalms opens with these words: "Happy are those who do not follow the ways of the wicked or tread in the path of sinners" (Psalm 1:1). This "happiness" seems impossible to reconcile with the ending of Psalm 137: "Happy are those who take babies and dash them against the rocks" (Psalm 137:9). However, both statements exist within the human mind and heart.

John Calvin characterized the Psalms as an “Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul,” meaning these poems express the widest range of human emotions and feelings—including those we’d rather not confess or acknowledge, like a lust for vengeance. This morning, I want to take a close reading at Psalm 137 in hopes that we might see ourselves in today’s world. Let us pray…

Psalm 137 begins with a scene “by the waters of Babylon,” a reference to the archenemy of ancient Israel. This foreign power stormed and destroyed Jerusalem, burned the Holy Temple to the ground, and slaughtered soldiers and citizens, most likely children, too. Any survivors were forced into slavery and taken into exile. These survivors authored Psalm 137. Scholars debate whether the psalm was written in Babylon or once the community had returned to Jerusalem; however, the past tense of the verbs makes it clear that the trauma had already occurred: “By the waters of Babylon, we *sat* and we *wept*.” The community is remembering not only their pain but also that their captors mocked and ridiculed them (Psalm 137:3).

Memory powerfully shapes our attitudes and outlooks. We understand the present and project the future, in part, based on how we look at the past. This was true of Israel and remains true for us. I’m thinking of a national trauma in my lifetime—the terrorist attacks on 9/11. In the days that followed, a slogan popped up on car magnets and yard signs, a saying that was on everyone's lips: We will never forget. But exactly what were we pledging to remember?

Certainly, we wished to remember the lives lost and the light those souls shared. We wanted to honor those who sacrificed their lives for others, like the firefighters who led people to safety and then returned to the burning towers.

But just as certainly, the mantra to “never forget” became a war cry that led to a decades-long conflict across the Middle East. While Americans themselves did not dash babies against rocks, our military dropped bombs on children in schools, hospitals, and homes.

In Psalm 137, the opening verses of remembering the trauma at the cruel hands of the Babylonians culminate in a call for lethal cruelty against the innocent. It’s worth studying the middle verses, then, for signs about how this remembering resulted in a lust for revenge. Hear again verses five and six: “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.” Did you hear the frequent use of the first-person singular? From the collective “we,” the speaker of the psalm shifts to the use of the pronouns “I” and “my” seven times in two verses.

This striking shift reminds me of a variant of the Lord’s Prayer, but not about “debts” or “trespasses.” Poet Sandra Cisneros prays, “Forgive us our myopia as we forgive those who are myopic against us.” What is the sin of myopia? I think it is to see only from one perspective—*my* perspective. Myopia focuses on the “I,” which then degenerates into branding others as “them.” This attitude not only leads to a lust for revenge, but it also fails to account for the universal reality of suffering. We do not all suffer the same things, but we all do suffer. Let us never forget *that*. Remembering the suffering of others is a step away from revenge and toward empathy. It is a movement back to “we” and “us.” I recently heard a remarkable example.

Last Sunday, a man attacked the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints meetinghouse in Michigan. He set fire to the chapel and killed four of the worshippers. In response, there had been an outpouring of financial support for the families of the victims.

One Mormon in that Michigan community also started a fundraising campaign for the wife and children *of the killer*. He cited scripture’s command to care for the widow and orphan. He publicly told the killer’s family, “Our hearts are broken for all of those who are impacted by this tragedy. Our feelings also include you.”

A donor to the killer's family campaign said, "I can only imagine what your family must be going through." I admit that I have responded to tragedy by saying that I *cannot* imagine what others are going through. But this person tried to imagine, that is, to show empathy. And perhaps this donor drew on their experience of suffering to do so.

Perhaps the donor drew inspiration from the words of Jesus, who, prior to experiencing trauma and death, shared a meal with his disciples and imparted a new commandment to love as he loved them. He said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Psalm 137 ends with vengeance. There’s no happy or uplifting message there. However, that’s not where I wish to leave us this morning.

As Christ became flesh, so we often understand his teachings through the people around us. Though I did not know her well, I greatly admired the ministry of Mitzi Lesher-Thomas, who was one of my predecessors here at Chapel in the Pines. One of Mitzi’s responsibilities was to take Communion to the sick and dying. There was no uplifting ending. These people were going to die. But someone, in the sharing of bread and cup, made something known. Something like hope. Something like love. Someone like Christ.

When *we* shortly gather at the Lord's Table, *we* will remember. And *we* will also be invited to imagine Christ's body extending beyond ourselves to the entire world, binding up the brokenhearted, caring for the widows, orphans, and all who suffer, which includes us and even our enemies. This is what our Lord meant by "pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44). "Happy are those who do not follow the ways of the wicked or tread in the path of sinners." *Blessed* are the peacemakers, for those who seek a way beyond revenge and the cycle of bloodshed will be called children of God (Matt 5:9). Amen.

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