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Psalm 137:1, NRSV.

*¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

Rivers of Babylon.

Psalm 137 is highly emotional, and despite its brevity, it captures the two poles of human-created tragedy: one, the need to cling to hope and two, the tendency to turn to vengeance. It concerns the exile in Babylon and what became of a people who found themselves far from their home, far from their now-destroyed Temple, and unable to worship God in the way they have been taught they must do. The synagogue system did not exist at this point, and it was believed that the Temple was more than the symbolic home of God. It was literally the only place where the Chosen People could go to fully meet with God.

First, though, there are two people I met, both a couple of years ago, who felt that they had been harmed by others, but who reacted in different ways. The first was a man whom I came across on the streets. I'm guessing that he was in his late twenties. He was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, and I said, "Excuse me," to go around him, and he started yelling that I was just like his father, thinking I owned everything. I

stopped and engaged him, saying that I didn't mean to be rude; I just wanted to get around him. He was probably a drug user, but when I asked him why he was so angry, he was able to clearly tell me why. He said that his father and his stepmother had cheated him. They had thrown him out of his condo, he said, a condo that his father had bought when his mother was alive and that his father had promised would be his. He said that after his mother died, and his father remarried, his stepmother had brainwashed his father, convincing his dad to keep the condo for themselves so that they could rent it out for big money. Real estate in Boulder is expensive, you know, he told me. Now, he was couch-surfing and had no home of his own.

The second person was someone I met as a chaplain, but only indirectly. She was out in the parking lot, leaning on her car, on the phone, sounding very upset. The call ended and I asked her if she was okay. She said "Yes," that it was a silly thing. Her father was in the hospital and would soon be going to her home on hospice, and that he wasn't even dead yet, but her sister had already taken something that her mother had promised her. Her mother had been dead for several years. She said that she wasn't going to make a scene out of it but didn't know what to do. It was something that had meant a lot to her, ever since she was a teenager, and she thought that her sister was happy to take something else, something that was of

similar value. We'll call the young man on the street Arlo, and we'll call the woman in the parking lot Lindsey.

The exile in Babylon was a huge milestone in the history of the Israelites. It involved the destruction of Jerusalem, the conquering of the nation, the slaughter of four or five thousand people, the exile of five to ten thousand leading citizens, and the burning of the Temple, which was considered the only place where God could be fully worshipped. Babylon, as a city, is mentioned a few hundred times in the Old Testament, with only Jerusalem more heavily referenced. One thing we know: the Babylonian exile is real and not a faith story fabricated by Bible authors. Jerusalem being besieged and exiles being sent off is referenced in other places. There is something called the Babylonian Chronicles, which is a collection of clay tablets with cuneiform writing on them. They were kept by the Babylonians to record important events in their history. The Chronicles for the years 605 to 595 B.C. records the fall of Jerusalem. It gives us an exact date of this event: using our calendar, this is March 16, 597 B.C. A second case involves personal data about the king of Judah. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they took the King of Judah, the southern kingdom, which included Jerusalem, King Jehoiachin prisoner and exiled him to Babylon. In the 37th year of the Babylonian exile, Nebuchadnezzar's son became king, and he released King Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin

did not return to Israel but was allowed to live in a situation of relative honor in Babylon under the new king. In the 1900's an archeological dig in ancient Babylon unearthed a collection of clay tablets, and one of them makes a reference to King Jehoiachin's household supplies in Babylon. There is an intriguing 3rd ancient document, called the Nabonidus Cylinder, and it echoes a detail of the Babylonian exile that we find in the Book of Daniel, and that is the existence of someone named Belshazzar who was a son of a later king of Babylonia. The Nabonidus Cylinder, by the way, is made of clay and is covered in cuneiform. My point in mentioning these archeological artifacts is that when a psalmist uses the Babylonian exile as a metaphor for unbelievable disaster this is because it was remembered as arguably the greatest very real calamity to ever befall the Israelites as a people of faith.

Here is the first third of Psalm 137:

- ¹ *By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*
- ² *On the willows there
we hung up our harps.*
- ³ *For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

The words “*rivers of Babylon*”, which are sometimes and perhaps better translated as “*waters of Babylon*”, are canals that were built to divert the Euphrates River for

use in the city of Babylon. In the Psalm, the captives are sitting along one of the canals, apparently, remembering their holy city. By hanging their harps, instruments used in the Temple in Jerusalem, on trees, they were making a gesture of defiance against those who held them captive. The Babylonians ridiculed the songs they sang in their destroyed Temple. The Babylonians are declaring that their God has forgotten them, but the Israelites are expressing their faith in God.

Here is the middle third of Psalm 137:

*⁴ How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?*

*⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!*

*⁶ 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.*

The Psalmist is saying that without the Temple in which to meet with God and to offer sacrifices to God, and as a place to use those instruments to sing to God, they might forget God. Their faith might fail, and their people might wander permanently from God. The psalmist tells God that they would rather have their right hands wither on their arms than have this happen. They live agrarian lives in exile, and without their hands, they are helpless to feed themselves. They must keep Jerusalem in the highest places in their hearts at all costs, even at the cost of death.

Here is the final third of Psalm 137:

⁷ *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!"*
⁸ *O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!*
⁹ *Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!*

This last part needs explanation. Remember that the Edomites were the neighbors of the Israelites back home. They were said to be the descendants of Esau, the evil twin brother of Jacob. Esau and Jacob were the sons of Isaac, and Esau abandoned his duty to take over leadership of the clan. Isaac then became the father of the Israelites. Esau was condemned to become the father of the Edomites, pagan neighbors of the Israelites who ended up helping the Babylonians conquer and destroy Jerusalem and the Temple. The Edomites even captured people who tried to escape the Babylonians. Historically, the Edomites were real people, and there are references to them outside of the Bible, as well as archeological evidence of their existence. Almost certainly, they were enemies of the Israelites, and this is why they were retrofitted with the history of being descendants of the bad twin brother of Jacob. In this last segment of Psalm 137, the author is remembering that not long after the Babylonians conquered the Israelites, the Babylonians conquered the

Edomites, too. Thus, the people who had called for the destruction of the Temple were themselves destroyed. The psalmist is asking God to please bring destruction in a similar fashion to the Babylonians. (This did occur, perhaps 70 years after the beginning of the exile, the date is uncertain, when the Persians conquered the Babylonians.) The powerful part is that the psalmist is calling for a curse to befall the Babylonians in an extremely brutal way, asking for the same horror the Israelites suffered:

*⁹ Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!*

Often, this is translated as “**Blessed** shall they be who take your little ones...”, and this is an equally reasonable translation from the original Hebrew. This suggests that God should give his blessing to those who kill Babylonian children. We must remember that the Babylonians did cruel things when they invaded Jerusalem. They blinded people. They looted. They killed adults. They killed children. We can argue away the brutality of this last line in various ways. Perhaps it is simply symbolic, something expressing only raw emotion. Or maybe the psalmist is expressing a desire for God to prevent the Babylonians from doing something like this again. The Babylonians had robbed the Israelites of their future, and by saying they wanted to kill the Babylonian’s children, they were saying that the Babylonians deserved to have their future – symbolized by their

children – destroyed. The bottom line is that nothing can deny the horrible bitterness the psalmist must have lived with every moment of every day.

But we, as modern Christians, do remember that in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 11, Verse 25, Jesus is quoted as saying: *When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.* Still, we must put Psalm 137 in a proper historical and literary perspective. We have never been in the position they were in, and we must grant the author of the psalm a lot of leeway in expressing his anguish.

As I was talking to Arlo, I wondered if perhaps his father and his stepmother were trying to do what was best for him, by forcing him to quit using drugs and start taking control of his life. Maybe he was exaggerating the promise that his father made to give him the condo that his father and stepmother were now renting out. Maybe he would indeed inherit it someday. None of that was what really struck me, though. What hit me was his bitterness. We must fight to not react to pain, to loss, to betrayal with a desire for vengeance, with hatred. One of the last things that Arlo said to me was that he wanted to see both his father and his stepmother dead, so that he could claim his proper inheritance.

Lindsey was a different person. She was older, in her forties, I would guess. I deliberately didn't ask her what it was she was hoping to inherit, but she

volunteered that it was a very old Mercedes, but in excellent condition. Her parents had bought it used. Then, when she was in high school, Lindsey's parents had separated for a while, and it had devastated Lindsey. During that time, her mother taught her to drive, in that Mercedes. It had been something she was very nervous about, but she learned to drive quickly and developed confidence, and driving lessons became joyful times for her and her mother. Her sister, who was a few years older, was away at college at the time. Their parents had eventually gotten back together, but that car had remained an important foundation to Lindsey. She saw my name badge around my neck, which says "Chaplain" in big letters. Lindsey asked me what I thought she should do about the car. I asked her if her sister knew how important the car was to her. Lindsey said she had explained, but her sister couldn't really understand how she felt as a fifteen-year-old with her parents having just broken up. I said that all I could suggest was that she talk to her sister, explain that she loves her, and try again to tell her just how that used car had been a lone source of security and happiness during a frightening time for a fifteen-year-old girl. I suggested that she offer her sister significantly more than it was worth. Lindsey nodded and drove away.

Babylon is presented as the source of evil, corruption, and immorality in the New Testament. In the Book of Revelation, the first verse of Chapter 17 says:

17 *Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters.*

Notice the reference to the "*many waters*", which is a reference to Psalm 137. Babylon remains the symbol of ultimate corruption.

In the Book of Acts, Stephen, one of the first seven deacons chosen by the Apostles, delivers a powerful speech denouncing the corruption of religious leaders, causing him to become the first Christian martyr. In his speech, he quotes the prophet Amos and refers to Babylon. He's defending Jesus as the Messiah, saying that denying Christ is just as sinful as the leaders of Babylon.

The ancient city of Babylon is in modern Iraq, about fifty miles south of Baghdad. The city dates to about 2,000 B.C. As modern Christians, we still see Babylon as the symbol of rebellion against God. One of the key ways in which people who call themselves Christians stand in opposition to the will of God is by reacting with bitterness and vengeance. Unlike the ancient Israelites, we cannot be separated from God. Yes, our Scriptures hold Babylon up as a powerful metaphor. But as Christians we can never be put in a physical or emotional situation in which God has been removed from our presence. That alone should keep us from ever becoming resentful or rancorous or unforgiving. We do recognize the existence of evil, but we always live with joy and hope.