

OKAY. WAIT! WHAT?

October 6, 2019

Pentecost 17

[Psalm 137](#)

[Luke 17:5-10](#)

(prayer)

I once heard the book of psalms described as the *hymn book* of the ancient Hebrews.

I suspect, in ancient times, that many of the psalms were read (like poetry) or sung like hymns.

In fact, the earliest hymnody of western christianity was limited to musical settings for the psalms or other scriptures.

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You may have sung Psalm 137 as a round to the 18th century, Philip Hayes, tune:



Or you may have sung along while rollerskating to Boney M's disco version:

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Back in 1985, I even wrote my own song based on Psalm 137.

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But, of these (or other) musical versions of the 137th Psalm, *none* likely included parts based on verse seven:

Remember, on the day of Jerusalem's fall, how the Edomites said, 'Tear it down to its foundations!'

or verse eight:

Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

or especially verse nine:

*Happy will be those who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!*

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dash... the babies'... heads... against the rocks



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Just because a passage of scripture can roll easily off the tongue, doesn't mean it can sit well within our soul.

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Our Luke reading today may not be as homicidally disturbing as Psalm 137, but it does present very dehumanizing attitudes:

You are worthless slaves; I don't care how hard you work. You have no place at my table!

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The truth is... that if you want to find a justification for violent revenge or social classism, you can turn to your bibles.

And, believe me, people have. And do!

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I have been away from preaching pulpits for a few weeks, but I am making it up for that fact today. Earlier, I announced that everyone is invited to an inter-church service organized by the local ministerial association. This evening, at Peace Lutheran (next door), I will offer the sermon.

In a nutshell, my message tonight will focus on the call to be ever-expanding the circle of welcome in Christ's church.

I believe that the welcome modelled by Jesus (and practiced in the early church) is the very centre of the good news.

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And so I struggle with the attitudes expressed in Psalm 137 and Luke 17.

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In this struggle, I seek to understand.

So, let's delve into the context of these *hard to hear* scriptures.

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A reality that has spanned all eras of human history is that far too often, the powerful are inherently greedy. They want more for less.

Maximize gain. Minimize cost.

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The greedy instinctively insist on getting as much work out of their labourers for as little payment as they can get away with.

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How little can I get away with paying them?

In Jesus' time, labourers were only paid enough to provide for one day. That way, the boss would be sure that the workers would show up tomorrow.

If the work is dangerous, I will only insist on safety measures to minimize the downtime necessary to remove the injured out of the way and out in a fresh worker.

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If I can use slaves who get no wages at all... even better - as long as the initial investment pays for itself better than what I'd have to pay to day labourers.

If I have to provide the slaves shelter and food, let's see how little we can give them so that they have *just enough strength* to get the job done. Definitely, I don't want them strong enough to be a threat to me.

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And let's be honest, if it wasn't for government regulations, social safety nets, tight labour markets, the same attitudes would again rear their ugly heads even in our most enlightened societies.

But, I digress.

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While it is true that Jesus (and many of the early Christian leaders behind the texts of the New Testament) professed an inherent equality of all people in the eyes of God and in the most respectful moments within the community faith, they didn't challenge the institutions of slavery and indentured servitude.

Even the Apostle Paul, who famously preached that "in Christ, there is no slave or free" also insisted that the runaway slave Onesimus return to his master, Philemon. The best Paul could do was to write a letter of reference in hopes that, as a personal favour, Philemon wouldn't punish Onesimus too harshly when get arrived back, something Paul agreed there was no legal requirement to do so.

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So accepted were the realities of slavery that Jesus felt confident in using the obligations of slaves as a metaphor for being faithfully committed to God.

That's Luke 17.

You don't do good in God's eyes to earn God's favour; you do it because it is the right thing to do.

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I struggle with the times that the bible passively accepts dehumanizing attitudes, but I can understand them within their historical contexts.

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But, the attitude heard within the verses of the 137th Psalm seems to be about as bad as it gets.

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So, let's try to understand a bit about *why this is*.

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In the early sixth century before the birth of Jesus, the dominant world power was centred in Babylon.

In every moment of history, there is always a "dominant" empire in the world -- economically, militarily, socially, legally, culturally.

The southern Hebrew Kingdom of Judah had endured the Assyrian Empire that overran northern Israel a century earlier, but they were not so fortunate under Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon as it moved west to control the valuable east-Mediterranean lands bridging three continents.

Beginning in 597BCE, after refusing to capitulate to Babylon, some key political and religious

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leaders of Jerusalem were either killed sent into exile. This further destabilized Judah, leading to the eventual ransacking of Jerusalem

Over the next decade or so, a significant portion of the Judean people (from within and outside of the capital) were exiled and forced to scrounge out new lives by the rivers of Babylon.

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Psalm 137 comes to us from this time.

Psalm 137 expresses the resigned desperation of a defeated people.

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One of the greatest insights that I ever gained (while trying to find peace in my own life) was to realize that there is a relationship between depression and anger.

First of all they are both secondary emotions - they are a reaction to the fact that something seems out of balance in our lives.

- Depression is an inward response to this imbalance.
- Anger is an outward response.

They are not either or-s ... a lot of us struggle with both.

Sometimes, people who are experiencing deep personal sadness can erupt angrily.

And people who are obviously living out their anger are suffering a very private angst as well.

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Psalm 137 begins with words of deep lament.

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If you or someone you know has suffered (is suffering) from depression, it is a common reality that the things that once inspired you (or brought you joy) no longer have that power in your life.

That is part of the downward tragic spiral of depression: the very things - that might have once been able to brighten our mood - just sadden us further.

By these waters of Babylon, every time we think of Jerusalem, we just cry. It doesn't help that the locals keep asking us to sing our folk songs. Those songs that used to bring us so much joy, now only fill our eyes with tears.

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There is the inward response to the devastation of the exile.

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The last verses of the psalms lash out.

Why didn't anyone help us?

The edomites, our neighbours, supported Babylon, not us.

What the hell !

I hate you Babylon !!

Look at what you've done to my family.

How would you like this?

God, I'd love it if someone just killed "your" kids.

That's what you deserve !

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I can struggle with the violent wishes of the judean exiles, but I can understand the desperation behind those attitudes.

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Feeling angry at one's circumstances or an entity or even an individual is understandable; psalm 137 acknowledges that, for sure.

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But Jesus did not advocate violence as a way of fixing the imbalances in the world.

Jesus contrasted the power style of Rome, which was to maintain peace through might, with his gospel of peace through compassion.

The Apostle Paul reminded the early Christians that this deep compassion is *patient and kind*; but is NOT *resentful and envious*. Compassionate love does NOT *take pleasure in wrong doing, but embraces what is true*.

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As I reflect on Psalm 137, I hear the lament -- the sadness of being a defeated and displaced people. And I understand the anger that accompanies the sadness.

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The challenge I take from this psalm is: how do I accept the validity of the anger, without believing that violence is an appropriately response?

Actually that is not really that big of a leap for me ... acting violently generally remains unacceptable in a fair society. But, can I resist responding to the anger with desires for revenge or punishment of some kind (even if it doesn't rise to the level of a violent act)?

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The real world story that highlighted this for me this week was the [conclusion of the trial](#) of (former) Dallas police officer, Amber Guyger and the variety of reactions people had to the verdict.

Guyger was charged with murdering her upstairs neighbour, Botham Jean. Guyger was in uniform having finished a shift and thought that she was entering her own apartment, when - in fact - she was one floor too high. She saw someone inside, assumed it was an intruder. Guyger drew her service weapon and fatally shot Jean in the chest, while he was sitting in a chair enjoying a bowl of vanilla ice cream.

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Obviously, this was a tragic killing. The victim wasn't doing anything wrong. Unlike a number of other police shootings of *innocent* black people, when some people like to point out the victim was (in some way) partially responsible for their own deaths, it was hard to make that argument in this case.

That Ms. Guyger killed Mr. Jean was not the issue. She fully admits that fact. The issue to be decided was whether or not her (perceived) fear outweighed the reality that she was not really in any danger.

Did her negligence result in murder or was this just a horribly tragic accident?

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The jury convicted Amber Guyger of murder and the judge sentenced her to ten years in prison (eligible for parole in five).

People were angry all around.

- Some felt she was being over-punished.
- Others were upset that she got off so lightly.

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One of the things that got people talking was when Jean's 18 year old brother, Brandt, spoken in open court prior to sentencing. He spoke words of honest forgiveness and hope for Ms. Guyger. Brandt Jean said to his older brother's murderer: "I love you as a person. I don't wish anything bad on you." He asked the judge if he could give her a hug.

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It was powerful to witness (I was watching the proceedings live on my phone).

And yet, over and over again, various TV opinionators expressed how unusual that reaction is. Many opined that the brother did this for himself (to justify his own faith or his own need to *move on*). Maybe (likely) that's true. But, the grace was known in the moment by Ms. Guyger. She could not have embraced him any deeper.

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Some commentators could not accept any mercy or understanding -- the anger did not allow for compassion (specifically in this case, and the wider issue of police shootings and systemic racism).

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In the long run, anger is not going to be appeased through revenge... only in re-establishing balance, are we healed.

Lament/anger are clues to the salient problem -- we desire more balance.

Balance isn't a situation where everything is always going well; it is an overall sense of contentment -- grief can be part of balance, when it includes comfort and tribute.

Jesus knew this well... beatitudes:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Blessings exist in hard times; they don't eliminate them.

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We have a role in balancing not only ourselves, but others and our community as a whole.

Can we give that attitude a hug?

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Let us pray:

Holy God,

Hold us when we need that comfort.

Inspire us when we are stuck.

We pray that we can be honest with ourselves about how we feel and how we can serve the common good in Jesus' name.

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Amen.

offering

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