

Let's Talk About Grief
Psalm 137:1-9

Lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem

- 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!”
- 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.
- 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 is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The first time I heard this psalm in worship was at an Episcopal monastery along the Hudson River in upstate New York. Every day, the brothers and visitors of this monastery would faithfully pray through the psalms in worship. Most of the times, we who were visiting were so focused on the beauty of their voices and this small chapel we met in that we barely paid attention to the words. But not this psalm. It was strange hearing these incredible voices in the place of peace and rest sing out throughout the psalm these various words:

“We sat down and we wept...we hung our harps...If I forget you let my right hand whiter, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth...Happy shall they be who pay you back.”

And most striking of all: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock.”

These are not words I am used to hearing sung in church. These are words of honest, brutal pain and heartache, grief, and loss. That final line continues to be one that haunts me. What do I do with that, a grief so full that there is a desire to kill children as revenge?

Ellen Davis, the Old Testament scholar has a great book called getting Involved with God. It is on the Old Testament, and it tackles this psalm in particular and ones like it. And in it, she doesn't justify violence, especially violence against children. That is flat out evil and against God's will. But she points out that is not what the psalmist is doing. Instead, they are bringing to God all that is on their heart and mind, not filtering any of it, but being completely honest in prayer, trusting faithfully that God's love and grace is big enough and strong enough to take it all, to hear it, to know it, and the respond back with transforming love.

The Israelites in captivity never took vengeance on the Babylonians. That wasn't God's plan to make the Israelites hurt people as they had been hurt. And maybe they didn't do it because they were able to lift up prayers like this one. No, when the time comes, they were called to live into freedom, hope, and community, and a way forward. But until that time, they trust that God is with them, and not just with words that are comfortable or cheery. But in the deepest moments of pain, God is there, hearing them. But also weeping with them too by those rivers of Babylon.

Ellen Davis writes that we as western Christians today filter so much. We want our faith to be sunny and cheery, and we often don't allow ourselves to be fully honest or vulnerable – before God or before each other. How many of us would dare write or sing a prayer like this one? How many times are we ever invited to be fully honest, even in worship, even surrounded by our church?

But maybe there are times we should. When she was a seminary student, Dr. Davis writes that one of the most helpful practices she found was after talking with one of her own professors. She was angry at a horrible thing another student had done. And she didn't know where to go or how to respond. Friends and mentors tried telling her, "You need to think positively and just let it go." None of that was helpful. But what was a professor telling her. Actually, I think you need to tell God. The next chance you get, go into the chapel when no one else is in there, and yell at the top of your lungs exactly what you are going through. God will be there.

And for Ellen, that was the best practice she ever found. Being fully honest with God and knowing in that chapel that God was with her.

A lot of our sermons this fall have come out of a Sunday in summer when I asked you all what topics do you feel we need to be talking on that we aren't. A lot of people had written down grief.

There is a lot of grief in our world. And a lot of grief in our church. Grief of a spouse or child who has died. Grief of a lost job. Grief of a separation or divorce. That's one honestly, we don't give nearly enough space for in the church. There is a lot of grief for those who know separation and divorce, not just losing that relationship, but all the friendships and family connections and ways people view you being changed. And we don't talk about it.

In these past two and a half years, many of us have also been grieving a loss of connection, a loss of anything feeling normal in our lives, a loss of any sense of control or structure. And we are a people who desire structure and rhythm to life.

We have grief. But we don't know what to do with it. We don't know how to talk about it. And we especially don't know how to walk with others who are in it.

We do the opposite of the Psalmist. Instead of brutal honesty, we filter and hide so much. We also view grief as a problem to be solved or fixed.

Some months ago, one of our members of BSAPC, Mark Fagerburg, gave me an excellent book on grief. It is called, *It's OK That You're Not OK*, written by Megan Devine. It's an excellent book I highly recommend. The first two thirds of the book are written to those who know their own heavy grief. The final third, though, is written to family, friends, neighbors, church members who might be trying to walk beside those who are grieving. In that final third she gives a lot of helpful tips, including checking in regularly, asking questions, listening, allowing them to be honest, and being honest with them, not minimizing their grief or trying to put a spin on it (that usually just makes it worse), and never asking "Are you over your grief yet?"

My favorite of all her words though are these. And if you have something to write with, I invite you to do so now. She writes:

"Grief is not a problem. It doesn't need solutions. Seeing grief as an experience that needs support, rather than solutions, changes everything."

-p. 199

My wife Hannah served for years as a hospice chaplain. And one of her roles was often leading a grief support groups. And she often talks about grief as an act of love. Grief is a way we continue to remember and treasure what we love. Grief is not a problem, because love is not a problem. Love is something we should remember and treasure, even when it may be painful and hard.

Our calling is not to solve grief or tell people to get over it. This week while reading Psalm 137 a different line stuck out to me. It is verse 3. Our captors asked us for song. Our tormentors asked us for mirth. For those grieving and remembering, being told to just put on a happy face and sing happy songs can be one of the most painful and hurtful things we can do. It's how the Babylonians tormented the Israelites. Sing those songs as if everything is fine.

What they found helpful was tears. Was prayer. Was honesty. Was singing not the old songs of joy, but these new songs of lament, trusting God wanted to hear them just as much as God wanted to hear the greats songs of praise.

For those of us who know grief in our lives, our psalm for today is reminder our tears and cries, anger and pain are known by God and welcomed by God. And God is with us in all of it.