

## Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, October 2, 2016

### Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon--  
there we sat down  
and we wept when we remembered Zion.  
And so we hung up our harps,  
there upon the willows.

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 God'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 God, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem's fall,  
how they said, "Tear it down!  
Tear it down down to its foundations!"

O city of 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!

This is the Word of the Lord, **thanks be to God!**

### **Luke 17:5-10**

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you.

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Let us pray...Amen.

The children of God, and in today's Hebrew scripture, the people of Israel, have a tradition, a history, of recording as much of their interactions with and about God as they can. Even if those interactions are less than flattering. This is unique in the sacred books of the world's religions: many other religions try and present their histories and stories in the best possible light. The people of Israel have consistently shown that they are willing to record aspects of themselves that show their flaws, their faults, and their shortcomings.

Many of us here today have friends who are known for speaking their minds, known for their impulsive sharing of information, even when it can be awkward or painful. Don't we all have at least one friend who says something and then exclaims: "Oh! Did I say that out loud?"

Many of us here today have also had experiences with saying things ourselves that we might regret later. Things we've said in front of our children, or loved ones, things we've said out loud in the presence of co-workers, or friends.

Often these unfortunate exclamations come from deep inside us, before we've even had a chance to think about the consequences of our words.

Psalm 137 is an example of the God's children having an "Oh!, Did I say that out loud" moment.

After the prophet Jeremiah had warned of the consequences of the children of God acting unfaithfully, God had Babylon capture the people of Israel, and enslave them. Psalm 137 then, is simply the people of Israel expressing their anger at the Babylonian people for doing what God had them do.

Instead of blaming Babylon for their plight, there are two better choices the people could use to vent their anger: God, and themselves. And I think they know this, but it is so much easier to just blame the captors than to take on God, or face their inner feelings about their lack of faith.

But here the Psalm is, out in the open, out in public, for all to see. For all to study. Warts and all. And though we can all understand the opening verses describing the sadness and mourning that comes with being held captive, and while we *might* understand the anger that leads to the final two lines of the Psalm, did they really say that out loud? Yes. Yes they did:

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!

It would have been so easy to just leave this Psalm out of the Psalter, the collection of Psalms that made it into the bible, it would have been easier to end the Psalm without the lines that betrayed such hatred and bitterness. But those lines were left in, to serve as a reminder that even the most faithful of God's children have difficulty with our anger, with our expression of anger, and with our faith.

Which brings me to our Gospel lesson. Jesus was speaking with his disciples, teaching them about their role as his followers. It's unfortunate that the editors of the lectionary didn't include the verses just before our reading, because it helps set the passage in its proper context. Here's how the passage begins:

*Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive.'*

So in the face of a teaching that is especially difficult, one that required tremendous faith, the disciples turned to Jesus and demanded that he increase their faith. Did they really say that out loud? Yes they did.

Jesus, ever the patient teacher, basically told the disciples 'either you have it, or you don't. Even a minute amount of faith can do tremendous things.'

I find it interesting that the disciples somehow believed that Jesus could increase their faith. I find it interesting in the same way that I found it interesting that the people in Psalm 137 this morning somehow believed it was the Babylonians fault that the people of Israel were being held captive.

At least the children of God are consistent: it's always somebody else's fault if we're in trouble, and it's always somebody else's fault if we lack the faith to achieve our goals, right?

Either we have it or we don't. Either we know what to do, or we don't. Jesus believed that his disciples knew right from wrong, knew what the right thing to do was. Jesus believes that we know what to do as well. We have the opportunity to do the right thing many times a day, and for the most part, we do.

For whatever reason, we often have a really difficult time owning up to things even when we are presented with bold evidence that we screwed up! For whatever reason, we find it so much easier to blame others for our mistakes than to honestly assess them, put them in perspective, and learn from them.

And the people who can do that have our highest esteem, don't they? We respect and appreciate the mature people who seem to be able to gracefully acknowledge their mistake, ask for forgiveness, and move on.

Whether they know it or not, they have faith. And whether we know it or not, whether we act on it or not, we, too, have faith.

In the face of painful and devastating captivity, the people of Israel blamed their captors. In the face of a nearly impossible task of forgiving another, the disciples blamed Jesus for their lack of faith.

And like the disciples and the people of Psalm 137, we will often claim to have no control over our circumstances, claim that the power to make a change is outside of ourselves. Did we really say that out loud? Yes we did.

If someone hurts us 7 times a day, and then asks for forgiveness, Jesus wants us to forgive them. But that sure is a difficult thing to do! Do we have the faith to do that? Jesus would say that if we have any faith at all, then we have enough faith to do that.

We just have to do it. Just do it.

We already know the right thing to do. We already know what things Jesus expects of us each day, don't we? It's not a surprise, is it? It's not a mystery, is it?

Love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Love our enemies. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty. Clothe the naked, house the homeless, visit those recovering from illness, visit those who are imprisoned. Forgive those who have hurt us. Practice amazing hospitality.

In the face of this seemingly impossible list of things to do, we might want to exclaim, we can't do it, it's too hard!

But we know what we need to do, we know what the right thing to do *is*. *And*, we have the faith we need to do it. So either we do it, or we don't.

Given the way our world looks these days, are we doing it?

Given the increasing need of the world for food, shelter, clothing, protection, and health care, probably not enough. Given the increasing need of the world for mental health care, help with addiction, reconciliation with disagreements, justice and forgiveness, protection from violence, maybe not enough.

We each have faith. We each have faith of at *least* the size of a mustard seed. It's time to start putting that faith into practice, beyond just assuring that we have a place to worship, that we have a leader to guide us...it's time to step up and just do it. What is 'it'? 'It' is living our faith, applying our faith to all our interactions during our days, reflecting on our faith in our quiet moments, asking for forgiveness where we have caused hurt, granting forgiveness when we are asked. If we can do those things, the world will be less needy. If we can do those things, we will all be closer to the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus spoke about.

Is it the Babylonian's fault that our world is so needy? Is it up to Jesus to increase our faith so we can do what is expected of us? Of course not! It is up to you and me, to look each other in the eye and say to each other: we've got this. Amen.