


THE
PLYMOUTH  H
PULPIT

watch the sermons | plymouthchurch.org

“Supper at the Homesick Restaurant”

Psalm 137

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

February 5, 2023

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

*On the willows there we hung up our harps.
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 the Lord’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 Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it
down!*

*Down to its foundations!”
O daughter 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!*

Psalm 137

My family moved around a lot when I was growing up, so I have trouble remembering the details of particular houses—except for my grandparents’ home in Mantachie, Mississippi. They never moved. In 1930, my grandfather

hired a builder to construct a house on a corner of his in-laws' farm. Ten neighbors volunteered to help. They cut down trees my great-grandfather had planted and built a three-bedroom house that felt like home the minute you walked in the door. In my memories, the house is loud and happy.

A few years ago, the house burned down. A volunteer fireman, returning from a 9-1-1 medical call, saw smoke about two a.m. He kicked open the front door and woke the family that rented the house from my cousin for \$400 a month. Five community fire departments were called, but the house was completely destroyed. The mother, a home health care nurse, told the newspaper that it must have been old wiring, but we suspected that they left the propane heater on in the back, because it was so cold that night. My grandparents never kept that heater on.

I know it was just a house, but it was more than just a house. It is painful to think about what was lost. A while back I took a brick from the rubble. It sits near our basement door. I do not know if I thought it would remind me to be sad or grateful. As you would guess, it is both. Some people keep their wedding ring after the divorce. Some keep their company I.D. even after they are laid off. Some keep the pictures after the child is gone.

Most of us have some memories of home that are wonderful, and some that are painful, the sorrow of good that is gone forever, and the sorrow of heartache that is never completely gone. The joys are not far from the sorrows.

Some mistakenly think of church as a place to get away from sadness. They think church is for smiling people

thinking happy thoughts. Emily Dickinson was talking about shallow worship when she wrote, “Pain—is missed—in praise.” Sometimes churches do give the impression that if your life is falling apart, then you need to sing a happy song and pretend everything is fine.

When someone says, “I’m too depressed to go to church,” it is a judgment on the church. We should not have to pretend to feel better than we feel. We cannot be holy without being human first. Worship that does not take sorrow seriously is not the worship of God.

The Israelites knew how to bring their sadness to God. By the rivers of Babylon, the Hebrew people sit down and weep. This small group has been overwhelmed by a terrible empire that took everything they loved. They are haunted by the memories of their homes burned and their synagogues destroyed.

They come to the river looking for a quiet place. They bring their instruments, but they cannot bring themselves to sing. The Babylonians taunt their captives by asking them to sing some of the old, happy songs. But how can they sing “Concrete jungle that dreams are made of” when they have been marched against their will to Idaho?

Their grief turns into bitterness. They cannot sing, but they will not forget the song: “If I should forget Jerusalem, let my hand, which will not play the harp, fall off. Let my tongue, which will not sing, stick to the roof of my mouth.”

They are angry at the turncoats from Edom who cheered when Jerusalem was destroyed. They are furious with the Babylonians: “We hope someone gives you everything you dished out. We wish someone would throw your children against the rocks.”

The Hebrews sang this angry psalm during services commemorating the anniversary of the exile—their holocaust, their 9/11, and their children’s funerals. They sang about children being smashed against rocks right there in worship.

Psalm 137 does not often get set to music. The Psalms have inspired books with titles like *The Beauty of the Psalms*. They print the text of psalms along with pictures of seagulls, oceans, evergreens, and small children. They never include Psalm 137 with a picture of a rock garden. One of the best-selling books on the Psalms is *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*. There is no sequel *A Babylonian Looks at the 137th Psalm*. There are no Christian T-shirts with Psalm 137, verse 9 on them.

In his exposition on the last verse of this Psalm, one commentator says, “It remains startling in its cruelty. One almost wishes for such a line to be gone altogether.” (Broadman Bible Commentary).

Bernhard Anderson writes, “It is surely legitimate to question whether the whole Psalter should be retained in Christian worship, (especially) this troublesome passage.”

But this Psalm that starts so beautifully, and ends so angrily, is a gift to people like us. The Hebrew people sang this violent, troubling song, because they hurt like we do. We usually try to ignore our own anger. We attempt to get over the ways in which we have been hurt by not thinking about it, but genuine faith is honest. We should bring our emotions with us to worship—especially whatever bitterness we feel. We should be honest about the heartaches we have known and slow to announce that everything is fine.

We know our share of Edomites and Babylonians: co-workers who do not do their share and claim credit for work we did; the employer who decides we are expendable; the friend who makes us feel small; the people who neither accept us nor explain why they do not; a mother who is too demanding or too submissive; a father who is in our face or out of the picture.

We have good reasons to be angry: at those to whom we give our hearts only to discover that we should not have; at those who slight our children; at daughters who do not recognize the love they have been given; at sons who reject their parents; at friends for whom betrayal seems second nature; at the one who commits suicide who should have known we would never be able to forget them; at the ones who die too soon.

Life is harsh. Nobody lives long without scars. Everybody gets hurt. The grief and anger we feel is holy, because it is honest. We do not want to be people who have learned not to cry or people incapable of rage. We can be honest to God when we are hurting. Bringing our sorrows to worship does not make everything easy, but when we share our lives with God, we remember what it feels like to hope. When we come to church and cannot sing, we still remember the song. We may not be able to stop grieving, but we remember God's love.

Anne Tyler's novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* tells the story of a broken family. The husband abandons his wife and three children. Pearl, lonely and overburdened, raises her family with anger. Her oldest son, Cody, is jealous of his younger brother. Ezra runs The Homesick Restaurant—where people come for the food they feel

homesick for—bulgogi for Koreans, tacos for Mexicans, and vinegary, nasty barbecue for North Carolinians. After their mother's funeral, the children sit down for a meal at The Homesick Restaurant with the father who left them 35 years earlier.

The father looks at the grandchildren he has only just met and says, "This certainly is a great, big, jolly, noisy, rambling family."

Cody responds, "You think we're a family when we're torn apart, torn all over the place, and our mother was a witch who wished us dead, shook us till our teeth rattled, screamed in our faces."

The argument escalates until the father gets up and leaves. The children have to decide whether to go and look for him and invite him back to the table. Cody finds his father and they argue again, "How could you just dump us on our mother's mercy? We were kids, we were only kids, we had no way of protecting ourselves. We looked to you for help. We listened for your step at the door so we'd be safe, but you just turned your back on us. You didn't lift a finger."

His father shares from the horrors of his own broken life. They are still shouting when they see the others walking towards them.

Cody says, "Let's go finish our dinner."

His father replies, "I'm not so sure. Well, maybe one last course."

This table is for hurting people willing to try one last course, willing to bring their heartaches to this supper. Communion is for those who get angry and need grace because life is hard. At this table we remember Christ,

whose heart was broken as he gathered his friends around him.

God invites everyone who has ever been hurt to come and say, “God, I’ve been carrying this sorrow around for so long. It’s hard for me to imagine not carrying this with me for the rest of my life. But at least I can share it with you, because I know you understand.”

God invites us to take bread and cup and remember God’s love.

sermon © Brett Younger