

WHEN WE PRAY TERRIBLE THINGS

Psalm 137

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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You may remember me telling you the story about the man who lost his wife and two children in a fatal car accident. He approached the pastor of the church in his neighborhood to ask permission to use his sanctuary on week days at noon time for prayer. Of course, the pastor agreed.

Some time later a church member came to polish the communion set for the following Sunday. Passing the closed doors of the sanctuary she heard a man shouting and uncontrollably sobbing. She ran to the pastor's study and knocked. When the pastor opened the door she stammered, "There's a crazy man in our sanctuary, walking up and down the aisle shaking his fist in the air and shouting."

In a quiet, reassuring tone the pastor answered, "I know..." but before he could explain anything she interrupted, "But he's saying terrible things to God!"

The pastor replied, "God can take it."

I thought of this story when reading today's Psalm in preparation for today's sermon. It starts out mournfully then develops into a promise to cling to faith even during horrific times, but then it quickly descends into a barbaric cry for revenge that goes against everything Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount,

Oh Babylon you devastator!

*Happy shall he be who requites
you (or retaliates against you).*

*Happy shall he be who takes your
little ones*

and dashes them against the rock.

(Psalm 137:8-9)

How could this blood thirsty tirade ever be included in our scriptures? Surely these words have been used to rationalize murdering innocent children in war time. What's more, unfortunately, this and similar verses support arguments made by New Atheists like Bill Maher and Richard Dawkins, claiming the Old Testament promotes a vengeful God who smites his enemies through his so called Chosen People and what's more both Jews and Christians have used these verses to condone violence to further their "holy" cause. Therefore, how could any rational human being ever consent to be associated with any brand of organized religion, especially the Judeo Christian tradition?

Until these charges can be satisfactorily answered, these random passages in the Old Testament will continue to embarrass and confuse anyone who believes the Bible is

indeed the revealer of God's truth. So even though we may want to, we just can't pretend they don't exist, instead we need to let these verses confront us and with God's help somehow discern why these offending verses were never edited out.

To help us come to terms with the closing verses of Psalm 137, I refer you back to the angry grievances of the shouting man in the sanctuary. Why did this man approach the pastor in the first place? Apparently he wanted a sacred space to process his overwhelming anger and grief. Simply put, he wanted a venue for honest, gut wrenching even furious prayer. The pastor understood this, even though the man was saying terrible things to God.

What terrible things do you think he was saying? We can only imagine, especially if we put ourselves in his place because, after all, all of us are capable of praying terrible things.

You can bet he was accusing God of being cruel and vindictive, allowing his young family to suffer and die so terribly. Maybe there was a drunk driver involved who escaped without a scratch. Can you hear the man shouting for vengeance, calling for the drunk's wife and kids to suffer a similar fate?

But before judging this man, keep in mind he's going through hell on earth. His emotions are raw and vulnerable plus he's angry and vengeful, blaming God, the other driver and maybe even himself for the loss of his wife and children. But also pay attention to his chosen place to spew his venom. He came to God's house, to pray, unconventionally for sure, but to pray nonetheless.

We can only hope that in the time, after venting his anger, he could move on knowing his grieving would continue for the rest of his life, but so would his healing. Because God could take it, through fierce, gut wrenching prayer the man would be able to release his venom and come to that place of peace and grace by being forgiven and hopefully being able to forgive.

The Book of Psalms has been called the prayer book of the Bible. Many of the psalms express joy and thanksgiving, others are laments and still others are furious pleas for vengeance. Like all honest prayers, the psalms express humanity's collective range of emotions. You might even say the psalms are templates for all types of prayers helping us process our passions so our terrible words aren't put into action. You can't deny that sometimes saying terrible things to God keeps us from doing terrible things to others. At the same time you can't deny if you don't pray and refuse to let go of your rage, you'll give into your anger and seek vengeance on your own and by doing so deny yourself the way back to spiritual health and wholeness.

For these reasons this psalm shouldn't be taken to condone violence against enemies nor does it give any indication God affirmed this prayer for vengeance. The petition is just left there hanging, even though you can be sure God listened and had empathy.

And what caused this suffering that drove the psalmist to compose such a hateful rant? Let's look at the historical context.

In 586 BC, almost six hundred years before Christ, the warlike Babylonians defeated Judea, destroyed Jerusalem and kidnapped the ruling classes and brought them back to Babylon. This psalm was written for them, expressing their sorrow and anger for all their losses. But I think we do these Jews a disservice if we think they were only angry because of their lost privileges, power and national pride. Would that alone justify the psalmist's desire to murder all the Babylonian children, by smashing their heads on the rocks? Let's hope not. So what was it that would cause the psalmist to rage uncontrollably and desire the deaths of innocent children?

Besides losing wealth, power and homeland, what must have pained them most was the deaths of family members and friends, including their children. Remember, conquering armies kill people and destroy things. Sons died on the battlefields, daughters were later defiled and on the long, forced march back to Babylon many more suffered and died on the way. Maybe the psalmist's cry for bloody retribution can never be justified but it can be understood, especially when you fast forward and picture another long line of Jews, reciting this same psalm as they were forcibly shipped from their homes in cattle cars to the gas chambers in the east.

Today we celebrate World Wide Communion Sunday. Christians from all traditions and denominations are gathering around the Lord's Table to remember Jesus' suffering and death for the sins of the world. We particularly remember Jesus himself was the victim of injustice and violence, but he made himself a willing sacrifice who, instead of cursing his accusers and executioners, prayed for their forgiveness because they didn't know what they were doing.

I always had problems with Jesus saying, "They know not what they do." Of course they knew what they were doing, they plotted and planned every step of the way, securing Judas' betrayal, grabbing Jesus at midnight when he was alone instead of in broad daylight when he was with the crowds; they bribed witnesses and skillfully manipulated Pilate into a corner to condemn Jesus and then they booed and taunted him as he hung from the cross. They knew exactly what they were doing, they just didn't realize who they were doing it to. If they did, they'd be scared to death.

Even in our advanced modern world there're still those who know exactly what they're doing when they shoot to kill shoppers in a mall, gas their own countrymen and engineer famines so whole populations will die of starvation. They know what they're doing when they sell human beings, including children, into slavery and prostitution. They know what they're doing when they deny women the right to an education. And when brave women defy them and go to school anyway, they know what they're doing when they whip, maim and murder them. They know what they're doing when they import tons of heroin or cocaine across borders. I could go on and on.

So yes, they know what they're doing, but they don't know who they're doing it to. If they did, they'd be scared to death. What did Jesus say? "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you also do it to me." This is the promise of Christmas, Good Friday and Easter all combined into one. Christ is with us. Christ suffers with us. Christ is raised up with us.

You see, Christ is ultimately victorious. That's the promise but when evil prospers we still want to curse our enemies. That's why the Psalmist salivated over the thought of revenge killings. But that's also why the Psalmist didn't get affirmation from above. Repaying evil for evil is not God's way. We may wish it was God's way, but it never was and never will be. "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "bless and do not curse them."

As we pick up our Sunday papers, turn on the Sunday television news broadcasts and search the internet for more information about what's happening in our broken world, it's so tempting to curse the enemies of humanity and equally hard to pray for them as Jesus instructs us, even when we're not their immediate victims. It's also tempting to shout terrible things at God for letting these unspeakable horrors continue. Thankfully God can take it, and we can too when we trust God enough to help us process our outrage and redirect our energy for the good.

The Lord's Table is set for people willing to bring their broken hearts, minds and bodies, plus their ache for the suffering innocents in the world. What's more, the Lord's Table is set for those wanting to do something important enough to be a blessing and not a curse to the world Christ loves and died for.

Come to the Table and then go from the Table nurtured and loved but also inspired and empowered to be a force for peace and grace in your homes, work places, the neighborhood you live in and all the other neighborhoods God wants you and me to bless by bringing Christ, who is with us, with us.