

# A Sermon for DaySpring

By Christopher L. Fillingham

“Sing Again”

Psalm 137

October 7, 2007

This week was significant in the life of our church. It marked a new beginning. But for another community of faith, it marked the one-year anniversary of a school shooting. A year ago the world was shocked, and not by the brutality of one man. That is all too common. The world was shocked by the grace, love and forgiveness of a hurting Amish community. Somehow, even those whose children had been attacked were able to go the funeral of their attacker. And we have been amazed by them. But I can't help but know that the Amish are not superhuman... and their grief is like our grief: filled with a mixture of despair, sorrow and anger, even while they are trying to forgive.

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The psalm today, of course, was written out of the Exile--perhaps the most devastating and painful experience in the history of Israel. You'll remember that the Israelites believed that Jerusalem would never be destroyed. It was the city of God. The temple was the epicenter for Jewish life and faith. It defined them as the people of God. But then, the great dragon of Babylon lay siege on their city.

If that wasn't bad enough, their neighbors - their distant relatives and rivals since the days of Jacob and Esau, the Edomite - were standing on the sidelines cheering on Babylon:

**“Knock it down... Knock it down... Way down!”**

**“2, 4, 6, 8, who do we all love to hate.... JUDAH.”**

**(Burt Burleson)**

And of course, Babylon did knock it down. Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple was destroyed and the people of Judah are carried off to exile.

**The impossible became possible... became reality. Their nightmares somehow found their way out of the boundaries of sleep and into the reality of their life...**

Not only was it the end of their political and economic system. It was the end of much of their belief system. With the crumbling of the temple, much of what they thought was true about God and faith became rubbish.

And so they find themselves sitting by the rivers in Babylon... weeping, crushed... wondering if they've been abandoned by their God. And what's worse, their captors are taunting them, telling them to sing those joyful songs of Zion. They said things like:

**“Come on... sing your foolish songs for us! How about that one “Rejoice in the Yahweh always, He let the Babylonian's win!” .... or our favorite, “A Mighty Fortress *isn't* Yahweh!”**

But of course they couldn't sing. In fact they weren't even sure what was true anymore.

Because they are in exile... The impossible has happened. They've been carried off into a foreign land and in the darkness of night, despair takes over their hearts.

Their jobs... gone

Their families... gone

Their hopes and future... gone

All that life was suppose to be... gone.  
And after awhile... they feel nothing.  
It's as if the very breath of life is sucked from their lungs.

So, of course they can't sing. And that's the ironic thing about this psalm, because it is a psalm about silence. A song about not being able to sing anymore. And in this silent song they are remembering, and trying to remember, and asking God to remember...

So they sit there on those riverbanks, silent and weeping until their eyes have no more tears and their hearts go numb. And all they can think about is Jerusalem. Verse one says they wept when they remembered Zion... And you know they did.

For every time they stopped guarding their thoughts for just a moment,  
Every time they closed their eyes  
All they could see was the fires of Babylon destroying their city, their temple crumbling to the ground.  
All they can hear are the cries of their neighbors, or their loved ones...  
All they can smell is the sultry smoke of death...  
And their memories of Jerusalem are forever stained with blood.

But this is not how they want to remember Jerusalem... the center of life and faith for their people. So they cling to the Jerusalem as it was: The City of David in all its glorious splendor and power and prestige. They cling to visions of what it was and what it is suppose to be. And in their struggle to remember, they pronounce curses on themselves if they forget.

**“May I never sing again; may my life never create music again if I forget Jerusalem. If Jerusalem isn't my greatest joy!”**

It's funny how we do this. In the midst of tragedy, in the midst of chaos and sometimes our fears we cling to what was. Somehow, we think if we remember we can hold on to how things used to be. “Just keep remembering,” we tell ourselves. “Remember how special that was. Remember how we felt... and maybe we can get back there.” “Maybe we can forget this ever happened and start over...” “Just remember Jerusalem!”

*But as we live in the memory of what was, we miss the gift of finding God in the midst of our what is.*

Throughout scripture there is a call to Remember. The people of God are constantly told to remember... But there are two kinds of remembering, so that *what* we remember and *how* we remember matters. There is the kind of remembering where we cling to a place or we cling to an answer or a person or a kind of remembering where we just cant let go of the pain in our life... so much so that we are blinded to the presence of God around us....

And then there is the remembering that Scripture calls us to. That's why this psalm has to be read in light of the whole story, as one part in the whole of scripture. And the psalms before and after Psalm 137 clue us in to that. They teach us *what and how* to remember.

Psalm 136 is this great litany rehearsing the story of God and the world... rehearsing the story of the people of God... our story. And after every line the people respond, “His love endures forever.”

We're reminded that God is the creator of the earth and the waters,  
The heavens and the starts... the day and the night and the people respond:  
**“His love endures forever.”**

We're reminded that our God is the God of the Exodus. He delivers his people out of bondage and all that enslaves them... and the people respond:

**“His love endures forever.”**

We're reminded that God is present in the wilderness, leading and guiding his people to the promise land.... and the people respond:

**“His love endures forever.”**

And these words from Psalm 136 are ringing in our ears as we begin 137, as we sink into the sorrow and pain of exile. When our hearts long for what was, *what* we need to remember is never one place or one time. What we need to remember is our story. This great story that we find ourselves in.

Despite what Israel believed... God was never confined to Jerusalem. But in the magnificence of Creation, in the journeys of Abraham, in the bondage of Egypt, in the freedom of the exodus, in the wonderings in the wilderness, in the milk and honey of the Promised Land, and yes, even in the pain of the Exile, God has always been there:

**“His love endures for ever.”**

But those sitting by the rivers in Babylon cling to Jerusalem because the temple is where they've encountered God... They cling to their memories as if they could go back and not forward.

So, with their songs silenced, they weep.

They weep for themselves.

They weep for Jerusalem.

And oh, how they weep for their children.

You see, those last two verses that are so harsh to the ears are a little bit of poetic parallelism... They have to be read together.

**“Daughter Babylon, Happy are those who repay you for what you've done to us. Happy are those who dash *your* infants against the rocks.”**

This isn't some distorted imagination conjuring up these words. It's what the Babylonians did to them... And they can't get this horrific image out of their heads.

But still... when we hear those words we gasp and sink back at their horror. It's hard to believe that this is in scripture. Dashing infants against the rocks doesn't exactly fit with “How lovely is your dwelling place” or “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” This psalm kind of stands out like a sore thumb. In fact, it is one of only two psalms that end so abrupt and harsh. So we need to be careful here. We need to remember that these words are not **“Prescriptive.”** They are **“Descriptive.”** These aren't instructions on how to respond to evil. They're an honest description of how we find ourselves wanting to respond.

And I think what is so astounding to us is not that someone would think horrific thoughts. Because if we're honest, we've had our own horrific thoughts from time to time; we've felt them in the darkest places of our lives...

Like, when our towers are attacked...

Or, when our children are attacked...

Or even, when our egos and our agendas are attacked.

We know those thoughts. We gasp because the psalmist dared to write them down.

Now remember that the Psalms are our collection of songs and prayers... the songs and prayers of the People of God to God. They didn't write this on a piece of papyrus, cut it out and hand it to the local

Babylonian officials. Saying: “**Hey, guess what we think about you!**” That probably wouldn’t have helped their situation any. The psalms are our honest reflections and prayers to God.

This psalm teaches us that denial is never a way forward. Instead it is showing us what to do with all the pain and all the dark thoughts within us that scare even ourselves. What can we do but honestly cry out to God and trust in his universal righteousness... Surrendering everything within us.

Surely behind closed doors, the Amish a year ago and even today cry out to God, trusting in his ability to somehow make things right. Trusting in his universal righteousness.

So, we’re learning here how to clear the dark cloudiness of our soul. This is the spiritual work and the spiritual path these psalms are leading us through. When we have no song to sing, when despair overwhelms us, and when we find evil stirring within us... Do not give in... Cry out to God... Because when we do, we eventually find our way to Psalm 138. The very next words in scripture:

“I will praise you, Lord with all my heart;  
Before the ‘gods’ I will sing your praise... for your unfailing love and faithfulness...  
When I called, you answered me;  
You greatly emboldened me...  
Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life.  
You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;  
With your right hand you saved me...  
Your love, Lord, endures forever.”

Sound familiar?

Of course most of us here have not experience anything like the People of Judah... where our city was burned to the ground and we were carried off as captives to another country. **But the truth is that we all find ourselves in exile.** Since Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden, the entire backdrop of the biblical story, and of our story, is one of Exile. And no, we don’t feel that and know that everyday... Thanks be to God.

But we do see it from time to time...

When we look around at the atrocities of our world...

When the walls we’ve built around our life begin to crumble under the pressures of Babylon...

When the fires of Babylon destroy our loved ones...

destroy our health...

destroy our families and marriages...

And we know we are in exile when we are captive to those things that so easily entangle us.

So as you journey through this world and you find yourself longing for something beyond all this...

May you remember that God was not confined to the temple and God was not confined to the Garden ...

But God goes before you and is behind you and around you everywhere.

May you remember that your life is part of the great unfolding drama in which all things are being redeemed in Christ.

And when you feel you have no song left to sing, cry out to God. So that with faith even as small as a mustard seed, your life may begin to sing again. Amen.

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