

“Honest to God”

August 26, 2018

Psalms for the Soul series

It happened in the first week of serving a new church. I was new and didn't know the congregation well yet. And I got the call - a terrible car accident where three generations of women were hit head-on by a driver who crossed the center line. One woman died as a result of her injuries. Another was seriously injured and has subsequently gone through numerous surgeries and a leg amputation. And the youngest among them didn't sustain serious physical injuries, but carried the trauma.

I met the family in the hospital. One of the relatives was so angry, and he told me so. He wanted revenge - for the driver to experience the pain he was experiencing. And though I'm still not sure it was the right thing to do, I went to Psalm 137 and shared with him that his feelings were normal and that God heard his prayer - not inviting him to act on it, but inviting him to get it out. He wasn't alone; for centuries, we've been dealing with anger, pain, grief, and even the desire for revenge.

We encountered a personal lament in Psalm 34 last week - someone coming to God with honest prayer for forgiveness and grace. Psalm 137 is a lament, too, but it comes from a whole community. Are you surprised by it, especially the ending? It's incredibly violent and difficult to hear.

If it makes you cringe, then you're not alone. John Wesley, the leader of the Methodist movement in the 1700's, didn't like to use this psalm in worship. He said it was “not fit for the mouths of a Christian congregation.” At first glance, I'd agree. But there's more here than just a brutal image. There's brutal honesty, which is something we need to reclaim in our faith.

This psalm is painful to read. It's painful because we see the reality of revenge that's so much a part of our human experience. It's painful because we can sense that these people were going through something difficult. It's painful because when we read it, we realize that we've been in this place of anger. Perhaps you felt it after September 11th, or when we hear hate-filled speech, when children are killed in a school shooting, or even when someone you love passed away tragically.

We have lots of reasons - personal and communal - to lament. I lament the hate and violence in our community and country. I lament the struggles of our leaders - “tweets” and quips on social media rather than an effort to communicate face-to-face. We lament the reality of abuse in the whole Christian church and in educational institutions. We grieve and feel the anger. And if we're honest, anger is a product of pain.

But somehow we've come to think that expressing anger isn't OK with God. We think that God can't handle it, or that God doesn't want to hear it, or that God will smite us if we come honestly – even with the deepest pain that we carry. As difficult as it may be to hear, Psalm 137 is a prayer to God. I invite you to hear one interpretation of it by Don McLean:

*By the waters, the waters of Babylon
We lay down and wept, and wept, for thee Zion
We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee Zion*

You can hear it in this version - this psalm is a Jewish funeral song – something that folks would've sung to express anguish. Do we sing something like this at a funeral? Most of us rely on songs of comfort. Hopefully we give credence to the pain that we feel, but we don't stay there.

But is there benefit in facing the anger and the pain? The fact that Psalm 137 is a part of our Scripture says that we need to express even our deepest anger to God. And in the Jewish tradition – from long ago even until today – mourning the dead and claiming our grief is an important ritual. Whereas we tend to focus on honoring the living, Judaism takes specific time to honor the dead and to mourn.

Maybe you've heard of "sitting Shiva," which is a period of seven days after a death when family and friends surround those who have lost a loved one to care for them and allow them to grieve. And the official mourning period can continue for a total of 30 days, which is a very different approach to mourning than the Christian tradition. And in our current culture, bereavement leave isn't very long.

Psalm 137 is probably one of the later psalms. It comes from a time when the Israelites had been displaced from their homeland. The year was 587 BCE. The city of Jerusalem was burned and Temple destroyed, the king exiled, leading citizens deported, and public life ended.

It was an incredible crisis. It meant the end of privilege and domination for the Israelites. It was the end of their public institutions. It ripped their social fabric apart. Even more painful, they felt it was the end of life with God. In the thinking of the time, they had been unfaithful, and this was the result of ignoring God's instruction and God's leading. In Psalm 137, we hear a people who have lost their identity. We hear despair and an inability to see any way out.

They had been captured and taken to Babylon – a strange land. This psalm was written either during this time of exile or after the people had returned from exile. We can hear the pain of being away from home – and even more the pain and anger at being mocked by their captors to "Sing a song!"

Remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of life for these people. It was the most sacred of places and much beloved. So for them to be taken away from it – and for the Temple to be destroyed - broke their hearts and their spirits.

And the Temple was the place people came to be with God and to praise God. How could they sustain a relationship with God without the Temple? How could they sing a song to God in any place other than the Temple? How could they praise God when their grief was so overwhelming?

Perhaps it's difficult to relate - maybe it seems too far removed from us. But consider how we might feel if we were removed from what was familiar? A physical building isn't the end all of who we are, but it's an important space. Places are important to us. Think about what this space means to you - or think about another space or place that's sacred. How would you feel?

Or consider something a little different - we may not experience a physical exile, but perhaps we've experienced spiritual exile – that feeling of being cut off from God and wondering how to be restored. Thankfully God never stops loving us or pursuing us, but those feelings are real and painful.

And beyond the pain, we certainly experience emotions around people we would call "the enemy." Sometimes it happens as a nation – when we're involved in a war. And war is cruel no matter what. Some of you know that more closely than the rest of us ever will. We pray for the family of Senator McCain; I thought of his time as a POW in Vietnam and his service to this country. Perhaps you saw the news of Korean families coming together after years of separation because of the conflict in that country.

Sometimes it happens as a culture – when we draw lines in the sand about issues and view "that person" as "the enemy." And sometimes it happens in our personal lives – when people wrong us intentionally or not, when relationships go sour. We struggle with pain and anger - and even a desire for revenge.

What we need to understand is that our response isn't so much the problem. It's OK to express rage to God. Telling God about our true feelings doesn't separate us from God. But the action that we take because of rage can become the problem.

The powerful point of this psalm is that the speaker stays connected to God in the midst of rage and feelings of revenge. What might happen if those feelings are never shared? It could turn into actions that do more damage and hurt others. When we long for things to be different, when we feel totally hopeless, God wants us to be connected! God wants us to express it!

There's something powerful that happens when we come to God honestly. It's a very faithful thing to do. We don't have to hide our feelings because God knows them! God knows we get angry! God knows we get hurt! It's not that those feelings

automatically disappear when we talk to God, but at least we own them! When we admit our despair, then God can lead us to a place of possibility and new life!

I've never liked how this psalm ends. I want resolution. I want another line that says something positive. I want a happy ending. But we're left with unfinished business. We're left with the speaker's anger and rage. And it pushes us to realize those places in our lives and in our world where we need to mourn. Maybe it's personal – a situation we've never fully embraced and talked to God about. Maybe it's in the church – pain that's never been talked about.

Maybe it's in our world - wondering how we're called to respond in love and grace. There are people all over the world who have lost their homes, their cities, their livelihood, their connections, their homeland, and their places of worship. There are people who are displaced every day. There are children who have lost parents to HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The world that God created is being destroyed more and more every day by our carelessness and ignorance. Friends, there are plenty of reasons to mourn! And maybe if we take that more seriously, then God will work on us and use us to make a difference.

The psalms take us many different places. We've talked about how to be happy – to be righteous and God-centered rather than self-centered. We've been reminded that we should be ready to praise God. We've been challenged to look at "sin" and how pervasive it is in our personal lives.

And today, if we dig deep, we find that this psalm gives us permission to be honest to God. Yes, we can even dare to tell God how overwhelming it is to lose something we love. We can dare to tell God how anxious we are because of where we are right now. We can dare to tell God how scared we are that things will not work out like we had hoped.

Anger is OK. Even brutal honesty is OK! There are no quick fixes, but there is the assurance that God listens and hears us. Even at the worst moments, when we feel the most alone and hopeless, God is there. Even in our vengeful moments, when rage is all we can feel, God loves us and accepts us where we are. It takes deep faith to trust that, but we can - honest to God! AMEN.

I invite you to pray about one situation or issue where you need to be honest today. What are you mourning today? What do you need to say to God?

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE