

WELCOME 1 December 2019 – 1 Advent '19 A

Psalm 137

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! It is great to have you here. Please stay with us for morning tea after worship...

Earworm...a tune that gets stuck in your head & it just won't quit. Could be an ad jingle...a song you heard on the radio...some musical hiccup from your memory... something the kids practiced on their instrument...but it's stuck & it isn't going anywhere except around & around in...your...head...

Sometimes life has an earworm all its own...a recurring tune that plays day after day & sets the melody & measure of how we live. Life often has its own playlist... Sometimes you "whistle while you work"...Sometimes it's a song of sadness or despair, of frustration and futility. Try as you might you just can't seem to shake it & that tune...persists...And that tune, sets the tone for all you are/do...

Between now & the end of the Christmas season, we'll invite Jesus to rewrite the music for our lives. Instead of the same old songs stuck on repeat, we'll allow Jesus to write us into A Christmas Playlist and be swept into a song of hope a melody of love and the full harmonies of life and joy for all eternity.

We'll explore & experience that this week...and throughout the Advent & Christmas seasons...

Let's pray...

PRAYER OF THE DAY

"Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!

How the mountains would quake in your presence!

As fire causes wood to burn and water to boil,

your coming would make the nations tremble.

Then your enemies would learn the reason for your fame!

For since the world began, no ear has heard and no eye has seen a God like you,
who works for those who wait for him!" – Is 64:1-4

Father...We bring to you ourselves. Just as we are...sadness, anger, disappointment, frustration, hopelessness. Lord, things aren't as they should be...in our world or in us. By your Spirit receive these things of which we are sometimes ashamed & transform them to work for your kingdom. Thank you that you moved in Christ to make all things new again. Thank you for your Holy Spirit to guide us in living in a broken world & the assurance that one day all brokenness will be healed for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1 ADVENT '19 A – CHRISTMAS PLAYLIST: A SONG OF DESPAIR

FAITH CHAT:

1. Is there someone with whom you feel comfortable sharing the “ugly” side of your emotions?
Anger...Bitterness...Fears...Despair...the ugly stuff What do you say to God?
2. When that stuff is boiling around inside...How/What do you pray?

Let's just start off with the elephant in the room...Ps 137 is hard to read...to hear... Those last vss blast away at our sense of propriety/respectability/decency.... I mean if Psalms are prayer songs...Who prays that way? Who sings that song? Elephant in the room...I do...at least I have. Maybe not that ferocity against babies, but in the heat of feeling betrayed...abandoned...lied to...I see rank injustice & can do nothing... I'm not above asking God to drop a bus on somebody...Most of y'all are safe...

I've become more honest about that over the years...one of my OT professors always said if you're not praying those sorts of prayers you're either a liar or a fool. You see lament expresses our longing for God to make things right. Ps 137 is a lament psalm that shifts at the end to imprecation (calling down curses 69/83). If we don't express anger at injustice, if we don't give voice to our frustration for all the ways we & our world suffer, if we don't come to God with all these things, we are in danger of losing our identity as God's people. We are in danger of somehow losing hold of our desire & longing for God & his desires his intentions for how life ought to be. If we bottle that stuff up & just blithely/blindly submit to evil injustice wrongdoing...we risk losing God's vision for the way he intends his world & his people to be.

Eugene Peterson says, “Our hates need to be prayed, not suppressed. Hate is our emotional link with evil. It is the volcanic eruption of outrage when life's holiness & sanctity is violated...Hate is often the first sign that we care... It's easy to be honest with God in our hallelujahs; it is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts, & it is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate...But in prayer, not all is sweetness & light. The way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so they will appear respectable, but to expose them so they can be transformed for the work of God's kingdom.”

Those who put their words/hearts into Ps 137 are those who've been conquered & driven from their homeland in Judah. This is the song of the So Kingdom/Jerusalem as she is crushed under the might of the Babylonian army. These are people who've seen their soldiers die by the 1000s, their fields & homes destroyed, their flocks butchered to feed their enemies, their friends & families slaughtered & their kings & priests made slaves. They've seen their Temple violated & bloodied in sacrilege.

Now...when you think it can't get any worse than being dragged away as captives in chains to a land not your own...their captors taunt, “Hey! Sing us some of those Zion songs you're so famous for! We could hear you while we were building the siege ramps & the battering rams. Sing those songs...now!” Every stanza of this psalm shrieks with the pain of their annihilation as a people. Every line is a live current of shock & horror at what they have brought on themselves by their rebellion/idolatry/apostasy Before we dig into the pain; we have to understand/confess the sin.

Daniel ch 9...Daniel was one of those captives hauled off to Babylon...he survived faithfully better than most & became advisor to a string of conqueror kings. (Outlived the exile?) But in ch 9, Daniel discovers among the king's papers the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah...Jeremiah had spoken for God saying things like: *My people have forgotten me; they make offerings to false gods. They have stumbled off the ancient highways & walk in muddy paths. – Jer 18:15 But your eyes & your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood & on oppression & extortion. – Jer 22:17*

And as Daniel reads how God warned his people & warned his people & promised that their failure to turn to him would bring their destruction & death...*It is the Lord who did just as he planned. He has fulfilled the promises of disaster he made long ago. He has destroyed Jerusalem without mercy. – Lam 2:17 I, Daniel...turned to the Lord God & pleaded with him in prayer & fasting...I prayed to the Lord my God & confessed. - Dan 9:2-4* 16 vss later he's still praying & pleading & confessing...Daniel understands that the desolation of Israel is not a battle God fought & lost to the Babylonian idols but a battle God fought against his own people by the armies of Babylon & won. The desecration of the Temple was not a sign of God's weakness against the invading hordes, but a manifestation of his strength in punishing the sin of his people.

As you read Ps 137 are you knocked to your knees by the magnitude of the power of human sin rebellion disobedience pride? When you see signs of sin in our world are you driven to repentance & confession or finger-pointing? When the aftershocks of sin & brokenness leave human rubble & ruins all around do you, like Daniel, plead with God for relief & rescue? Do you ask the Father to purge your heart, to cleanse your soul, to renew your trust & dependence on him? Rather than turning the page on the last verses...perhaps it's time we prayed, fasted, pleaded, & wept when we

remember what we forsake in the pursuit of our own self-interest...keep more than we share...blame more than we bless...silent more than we speak...

Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem. We put away our harps, hanging them on the branches of poplar trees. For our captors demanded a song from us. Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn: "Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!" But how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a pagan land?" As the captives look across the Euphrates River remembering all they have lost by their own fault...new conviction is borne. If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget how to play the harp. May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I fail to remember you, if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy.

When the children of Israel were in Jerusalem b/4 the exile, they didn't remember Jerusalem. They weren't thinking about Jerusalem at all...except to believe the lie that they were unassailable because the Temple was there. **BUT** Jerusalem was not just a city where they lived; it was the place where God had chosen to dwell w/ them It was the place God lived in their midst unlike any other nation on earth. Jerusalem was the place where the glory of God was revealed & his people lived his presence as a light to the nations...And because they did not value the blessings of God when they had them, they had to lament them when they were lost.

But now...a new conviction is borne. They commit themselves to treasure God...to trust his promises...to tell of his mighty love for them across time & circumstance. And in that new conviction they find God has given them the answer to the question, "How do we sing the songs of the Lord in a pagan land?" In Jer 29, the prophet told the captives they were going to be in Babylon for 70 years...2-3 generations would rise & fall: *But then I will come & do for you all the good things I have promised, & I will bring you home again. – Jer 29:10* But over those 70 years: "...work for the peace & prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare." – Jer 29:7

Imagine being told to build up the city of your conquerors...to pray & work for the good of those who destroyed your home, killed your friends/family, defiled your place of worship & chained you in a cart to make you a slave in a foreign nation. But when they obey that command, as doggedly as they had disobeyed the others, "In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me." – Jer 29:12-13 They hadn't sought him in Jerusalem. They hadn't sought him when everything seemed to be just fine. They hadn't sought him when the prophets warned them about the coming destruction. So now that everything else has been taken away...when you have nothing left but me & my promise to always love you & never abandon you...then I'll listen to your prayers...then I'll show you my presence then I'll bring you home again...then I will again live in your midst.

In the darkness of their exile in the middle of their song of despair God promises light & life & love & restoration. The Father promises himself. Isaiah had prophesied *Nevertheless, that time of darkness & despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun & Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan & the sea, will be filled with glory. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine. – Is 9:1-2* You see...God intention is not darkness, despair, separation from him...In their annihilation God has not forgotten his love for them. In the abyss God steps in to rescue & redeem & restore. Darkness does not get the last word. Despair does not sing the victor's song. The road to glory runs through the valley of the shadow of death in the hands of the Father.

How is that heaviness lifted? That burden raised? That darkness dispelled by light? The song of despair transformed...mourning to dancing? "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. – Is 9:6 You see... God doesn't just stand back & watch, God immerses himself in our existence. God comes to share our vulnerability, to endure betrayal, to take on our suffering to live our pain & to die our death. Our songs? He sings them. He sees what makes us afraid. He knows what keeps us awake at night He comprehends our frailty & failings & fakery. He holds us in our loneliness & embraces us in our sorrow. He takes our hand to lead us through the darkest hour. In that child, dies & rises so we might have life forever.

God stands close in our worst moments & hears our anguished cries. When you are convinced you've been left to rot, God has a hold on you tighter than ever & has his glory in your future...his kingdom as your destiny...his arms as your refuge/strength. And the vengeance we pray for in our despair, the scales of justice we plead for God to balance, the bloodlust that emerges in our unguarded moments... the Son experiences in full bloody gore...for all of us...so that the last notes of our song are not a funeral dirge but a song of victory.

The 1st verse of that victory song is the joyful shout *He is risen!* but the daily chorus & constant refrain is *Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good. – Rom 12:21* The psalmist does what we are to do...leave that prayer for vengeance & violence at the throne of God...He will exact ultimate justice. He will destroy evil & cast out the perpetual

source of sin & death. The Father's triumph is assured. We place our prayers & our lives with the one who calls us to bless not curse...to pray for not attack...& in so doing...let praise go before us & Christ triumph through us...

Let's pray with that in mind...

Lord Jesus Christ, we await your coming.

We wait filled with hope knowing your light will shine in the darkness.

We wait anticipating your peace, believing that one day it will fill our world.

We wait trusting your will and wisdom in all things, confident that you make all things work for good for those who are called according to your purpose.

We wait embraced in your love. Lead us to share it with our neighbours.

We pray in your Name...Amen