



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Violence and Scripture
Trinity Sunday, Year A
Sunday, June 7, 2020
The Rev. Amber Carswell

Psalm 137 is found on page 792 of the Book of Common Prayer.

- 1 By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, *
when we remembered you, O Zion.
- 2 As for our harps, we hung them up *
on the trees in the midst of that land.
- 3 For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,
and our oppressors called for mirth: *
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
- 4 How shall we sing the LORD'S song *
upon an alien soil?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, *
let my right hand forget its skill.
- 6 Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you, *
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
- 7 Remember the day of Jerusalem, O LORD,
against the people of Edom, *
who said, "Down with it! down with it!
even to the ground!"
- 8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, *
happy the one who pays you back
for what you have done to us!
- 9 Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, *
and dashes them against the rock!

The Word of the Lord.

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I have taught the Bible to Episcopalians now for many years, even as I remain the Bible's student, learning from a text that I can only describe as alive — alive with the spirit of God, which has the power to lodge in our souls and transform them.

It is not a convenient book to love. I do not love it because its so agreeable. And in my experience, the most pressing question on all good and peaceful Christians' minds when we run into a text like Psalm 137 is: *what do we do with the violence?* What do we do, when the Word of God sounds like a call to arms, like a

glorification of genocide, when it sounds like Psalm 137, which closes by reveling in the horrifying image that their enemies' babies might be smashed against the rocks?

I have heard some good people say, "My God is a God of love," and deny the text. I'm here to announce today that you will not get a star in my Bible studies when you say this. This reaction sets up an untrue dichotomy: it puts God over here with me and my sound morality, and over here is this text and these people who got it wrong. You individually become the arbiter of meaning and value — a dangerous posture of hubris when searching for God. You will lose points for this.

So what do we do with the violence?

Let's think about Psalm 137 and what might cause *you* to write this. You are a member of an ethnic group violently removed from your home land, the people who survived have been enslaved, everything that matters most to you has been destroyed. The words of the book of Lamentations describes the scenes of siege, starvation, poverty, the rape of your young women, the tragically short lives of your young men.

The horror and violence done to your people would make Babylon the central image of the destroyer into time immemorial, long after Babylon itself had fallen, long after your nation was restored, long after you lived in a place where you could worship freely again. Babylon would live in your stories.

From this context comes the anguish and the rage of Psalm 137. Are you better than this? **This is the first rule of reading violence in our sacred text: Do not mistake our apathy for higher ground.**

We do rightly find the sentiment reprehensible. But why is the comment about the babies so specific? Because that's what's been done to them. They've seen their children snatched from their arms and dashed against the rocks. They're saying — what you've done will come back upon you. And it did, as these legacies of oppression and violence always do, the tab does come back to be fulfilled.

The disconnect of our privilege looks to us like a superior morality. And this is a mistake. I have never been tested in such a way, and if I was, to paraphrase the Mighty Mighty Bosstones, I'm afraid of what I might find out.

The second rule is to keep your eye on the priorities.

Now, I'm sorry that this one is even a rule, but here we go: when you read Psalm 137, to say you disagree with the sentiment is one thing. To say, "oh those poor Babylonians" would be another. To side with the oppressor, to tell the Israelites to be quiet and live in the peace that Babylon established for them: now this would be unthinkable to many. To see any rebellion or protest or Psalm 137 foremost as an affront to the peace of Babylon... nobody does that. Except, you know, Babylonians. The people silencing this Psalm were their oppressors. Again, this one shouldn't be a point, but it's sadly worth mentioning.

Third. When you read Psalm 137, and you have understood the root of its anguish, when you've decided to listen to the Israelite's voices even when you have the uneasy suspicion that you might be more like a Babylonian...

Rule 3: Remember that Scripture is dialogic.

If you come to my class and use the word dialogic, you will get a star. Scripture is in conversation with itself. It argues with itself. It would be wrong to name Psalm 137 as the ruling ideology of Scripture. Not one piece of it alone defines the story.

For instance:

- Today, we have a neat and orderly account of creation, with everything in its proper place and a powerful God moving with methodical and absolute certainty. In the next chapter, you have another creation tale, but this one is messy, kinda chaotic, God tries and fails and tries again to make his newly-made dirt-man happy.
- For the cries of vengeance in Psalm 137, you have an answering song of Isaiah's about a suffering servant who will be bruised and crushed.
- We spent Easter reading Acts, and everywhere Paul goes, people start riots. Everywhere I go, people throw cocktail parties. I tend to have more of the pastoral letters in me that tell me to abide peaceably and give no offense. Mostly.
- For the heroic tales of armed Jewish rebellions in Maccabees, you have Esther using her feminine wiles to save the Jewish race without lifting a finger.
- For the Peter who lops off an ear, you have the answer of Jesus who puts it back on.

You get to choose which one to follow and I think it is obvious which one Christians are required to choose. I remain unconvinced that you get to choose on behalf of others, no matter your wishes. But *you* get to choose one. And then the world tests your commitment to that belief. Having seen the brutal treatment of our nation's peaceful protestors, the violence against even the sainthood-level peaceful protests of MLK, once again, I remain unconvinced of the results of my own testing.

Rule 4: Remember when you silence Psalm 137, you silence the voice of pain in order to maintain your comfort.

We stuff our ears with the idols of comfort and ease and when doing so, we muffle the cries of our brothers and sisters that might be speaking the story of the Word. Listen. Resolve to listen. When you are tempted to shut your ears because your God is a God of peace and love, remember that these words that upset our comfort are the Word of the Lord, too, all the struggles and pain and violence of humanity caught up in our biblical story, it's our story, and to it, through our tears, we said thanks be to God.

I teach the Bible because I love it. It is not a simple love. It is not an easy relationship. This is a living word. It is alive, and its life is mostly unconcerned with making itself appear agreeable or nice. To come into relationship with the Word, you must set aside your requirements for "nice".

It is obvious to you by now that this is not a lesson to store away as a helpful tidbit on how to read the Bible. My question is this: how could Scripture's violent and discomfiting words help us face our times head-on?

- If we could hear these words rather than to deny them in the name of our saccharinated God of love, would we be able to hear the cries of the oppressed around us a little more clearly? Could we stop mistaking our apathy for a superior moral ground? Could you put into context the voices you don't agree with and still work toward the arc of justice? Could we name more fearlessly the structures that incarcerate black men at six times the rate of their white counterparts? That keep black folks from being able to get half-decent jobs or housing? The machine of white comfort built on black oppression in America, running up an unfulfilled tab for 400 years?

Their song is probably not your song.

Rather than blocking out the harder voices of pain and conflict because it doesn't quite fit your narrative, could we resolve to listen?