

Sermon for Sunday, October 3, 2004  
Trinity "Old Swedes" Episcopal Church, Swedesboro, NY  
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It's one of the most horrific verses in the Bible, the last line of Psalm 137, that we read today,

"Happy shall he be who takes your little ones,  
and dashes them against the rock!"

It's a horrifying image,  
one that reflects a frightening level of anger  
that is almost more than we can imagine.  
It's difficult to even read the words,  
to get our tongue around such hatred.

Why did something as horrible as this  
get included in our bible?  
And why do we still read it today?

Let's begin with the second question first.  
How did the people get to the point  
that they said these horrendous words  
for all the world to hear?

Psalm 137 is a psalm of lament, a song sung by the people of God  
when they were at their most helpless, at their most helpless.  
It was most likely written  
when they were in exile from their country, or maybe soon after they had returned  
to the ruins  
of what had once been their home.  
Jerusalem had been razed to the ground. Everything that was important to them was  
gone.  
They were devastated.

It was about two and a half thousand years ago, give or take a hundred years,  
and the people of God  
had been caught up in warfare between the superpowers of their day, Egypt and Babylon.  
The Babylonians had taken over Jerusalem, and instead of dragging the people off into  
exile, which was how they usually dealt with occupied land in those times, instead of

that, the Babylonians decided instead to let the Israelites stay in their homeland, under the watchful eye

of a Babylonian supported king. It was a good deal.

But the king and his advisors

thought they knew better. Why stay as subjects of the Babylonian rule,

when with a little diplomacy and some fast talking,

they could ally themselves with the Egyptians instead, and throw off the Babylonian invaders?

It all went according to plan — at first. Egypt was on side, and anything seemed possible. But the Babylonians counter attacked, and after a siege that lasted a year and a half,

Jerusalem fell.

And this time there was no mercy.

The king's family were killed, Jerusalem was razed to the ground,

the leaders of the people of Israel

were taken into exile.

And they were hopeless. Their king was gone, their city was gone, even their temple was gone. And because everyone knew that God dwelt in the temple, that meant that their God was gone too.

The wonderful history of the people of Israel that had begun with the call of Abraham and survived exile in Egypt, that had returned triumphantly in the Exodus and established itself as a nation with kings, all that was gone.

And in its place,

the leaders were in exile,

their cities were in ruin

and they weren't sure

that they still had a God.

Over the next hundred and fifty years

the exiles returned to the land that we now know as Israel.

They re-founded their cities, they rebuilt their temple,

they rediscovered their God.

But the sorrow and bitterness of the exile stayed with them, sharp in their memory. And so they wrote the psalm we read today, a psalm that laments the pain of the exile, and calls on God to take revenge.

“By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,  
 when we remembered you, O Zion.  
 As for our harps, we hung them up  
 on the trees in the midst of that land.  
 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.”  
 How shall we sing the LORD’S song  
 upon an alien soil?

The memories of their exile are fresh in their minds, the humiliation, the despair,  
 but alongside them  
 the memories of their faith.

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
 let my right hand forget its skill.  
 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.”

Jerusalem, their home, Jerusalem, the holy city, Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God.  
 No matter how far they were from home, no matter how remote  
 they did not, could not  
 give up their faith.

But that faith  
 came at great cost,  
 that faith  
 didn’t protect them  
 from the ravages of occupation and exile,  
 it didn’t protect them  
 from attack and ridicule and oppression.  
 And so the anger  
 and bitterness  
 and pain  
 stayed alive within them,  
 and even when they were able to return home  
 it remained a part of who they were.  
 And they called on God

to take  
revenge.

Remember the day of Jerusalem, O LORD,  
against the people of Edom,  
who said, “Down with it! down with it!  
even to the ground!”  
O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy the one who pays you back  
for what you have done to us!  
Happy shall he be who takes your little ones,  
and dashes them against the rock!

They are abhorrent words,  
but they come from the mouths  
of people who had a tragic history,  
and whose pain  
continues to define them.

But that was then. This is now.  
This sort of language makes us uncomfortable.  
So why are we asked to read it  
on a sunny Autumn morning in church?

There’s a tendency to identify Christians  
as people who are gentle and kind, and never say a bad word of anybody. We are  
characterized by love — it’s supposed to be  
at the heart of our lives and of our relationships, both with one another  
and with God.  
Because we follow a Savior, who is himself love incarnate.

But sometimes we forget. Sometimes we forget Jesus  
whirling into the temple, swinging a whip around,  
turning over tables,  
and emptying out the cash boxes. (John 2:15)  
We forget about him  
crying imprecations over Jerusalem:  
“Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes,  
some of whom you will kill and crucify,  
and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town,

so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth,  
 from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah,  
 whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.  
 Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.” (Matthew 23:34-36)  
 We forget about him  
 hurling accusations of abandonment  
 from the cross.  
 “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus got as passionate, as angry, as despairing, as any of us.

And God didn't smack him across the mouth and say  
 “don't talk like that!”

God doesn't smack us across the mouth and say  
 “don't talk like that!”

Instead, God invites us  
 to speak the unspeakable  
 in his presence.

It's difficult to acknowledge  
 that in our heart of hearts  
 there are times when we want to say things  
 as horrible as this psalm,  
 to call down the vilest of curses  
 on those who have hurt us.

And there are times when we're tempted  
 to retreat from God when we're in pain,  
 to remove ourselves from a place  
 so that God won't see  
 the darkness inside our own hearts, a darkness so profound  
 that it scares even us.

But maybe what this text is doing here  
 is telling us  
 that there is nothing, nothing at all  
 that we cannot say  
 in the presence of God,

nothing that is so terrible  
that we can't say it in front of God.

After all, if Jesus could throw aside tables and money,  
God can surely cope with our fury.

If Jesus could call down blood on the heads of those  
who had shed the blood of the faithful,  
God can surely cope with our anger.

If Jesus could accuse God of abandonment from the cross,  
surely God will cope with our bitterness and sense of abandonment.

And nothing  
can get between us and God, nothing, not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things  
present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all  
creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
Nothing,  
not even the unspeakable things  
we find in our very own hearts.  
can separate us from the love of God.

God invites us  
to speak those things, to speak those things  
honestly, openly, painfully  
in prayer,  
and to receive in return  
healing.

It may not be quick. It may not be easy. But it's just like an infection that is deep inside  
our bodies. It can't heal unless it's exposed  
to the healing power of doctors.  
The unspeakable things in our own hearts, the wounds and anger and bitterness  
can never heal  
unless we're willing to expose them  
to the healing power of God.  
Knowing that nothing, nothing at all,  
not even our own darkness,  
can separate us from the healing love of God.

