



By the Waters of Babylon We Sat Down and Wept

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 7, 2007 at Christ Church Detroit. RCL Readings: Lamentation 1:1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1-4; and Luke 17:5-10.

*In the name of God, Redeemer and Mother of Israel,
God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.*

The thread that runs through all of today's readings is that of faith. The reading from Lamentations and the psalm were composed by people living in exile following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. The great temple lay in ruins and its glory existed only in the memory of the people. The temple of Solomon was looted, and its sacred objects and precious vessels were carted off to Babylon.

The Babylonians deported a large number of the leading people, the King, the court, most of the religious leaders, the professional classes and skilled laborers and craftsmen. A year later, they marched back again and destroyed Jerusalem. After a long siege they broke down the walls, slaughtered a large number of people, and demolished all the buildings. Left behind were the blind and deaf, the aged and infirm, the sick and the lame. It was devastating for those who were deported and worse yet for those left behind in a land that had been plundered and left in ruin. The land was ploughed up and sown with salt, so they could no longer grow anything. God had broken the Covenant.

One of the keys to the Covenant for the people of Israel was land. If you remember the covenant God made with Abraham, there were five promises.

1. I will be your God.
2. You will be my people.
3. I will give you land.
4. I will make of you a great nation.
5. Through you all nations will be blessed

For people with no land, a nomadic wandering people, land was a precious gift. Now Yahweh had taken the land away from them because of their unfaithfulness. The Covenant was broken.

Walter Bruggeman writes that within a year's time "...public life came to an end. For Ancient Israel it was the end of privilege, it was the end of certitude, it was the end of domination, it was the end of viable public institutions, it was the end of a sustaining social fabric. Our mothers and our fathers in faith had learned that even the life guaranteed by God is tenuous and can end."

Once in exile the people could respond in one of two ways. The first is to say: We will maintain ourselves as a people, we will build a ghetto, we will keep ourselves pure, we will not intermarry, we will not take their customs, we will not take their religion, we will not take their language, we will not engage ourselves in this new place. We will keep ourselves pure and someday we will go home. The first ghettos in history were those built by the exiles in Babylon.

The other is to say, we will engage with the community around us. We will live our lives, we will maintain our dignity and identity but we will engage fully in the life of the community.

In Babylon the exiles were of two minds. The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the remaining elders among the exiles: "Thus says the God of Israel whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem. Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens, and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease. This is the key. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf for in *its* welfare you will find *your* welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7f.)

The people of Israel ignored his advice, and built a high-walled ghetto. They said to themselves, we have broken the Covenant; we have been unfaithful to God, which is why we have been sent into exile. So what we must do now is be very careful to maintain every detail of the Covenant and God will forgive us, accept us back into the Covenant and give us back our land. But they had forgotten the nature of the Covenant it was not a call to privilege but a call to service. Jeremiah said, "Seek first the welfare of the city for in the welfare of the city you will find your own welfare." They were given land not for their own purposes but so that "all the peoples of the earth might be blessed." That is the bit that was forgotten, that the Covenant was for service not privilege, for others and not just for themselves. And so they ignored Jeremiah's counsel and proceeded to build the ghetto.

Lamentations sketches in vivid and powerful images the desolation of Jerusalem after its destruction. As we know, rituals of mourning are essential for the survival and well-being of individuals and communities. Grief that is not expressed will be repressed and continue to produce pain, depression and anger. Over the centuries people of faith have continued to find in these ancient lamentations the means to articulate grief. They allow us to lift up the community's responsibility for such disaster to one another and to God.

Lamentations and today's Psalm 137 are expressions of sorrow, grief and rage. Memories of Zion, the mount on which the temple stood, are so painful the psalmist can no longer sing and the exiles hang up their instruments. Their captors taunt them by asking them to sing one of the songs of Zion, psalms that proclaim the greatness of Jerusalem and declare that Zion will always be protected and defended by God. Now the exiles must face a very different reality.

However, the experience of exile is as much a contemporary experience as a historical one. It is the experience of those who are divorced and who find themselves separated from familiar surroundings or relationships. It is the experience of those unemployed. It may even be the experience of a young adult leaving home for the last time.

"By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered you O Zion." By the little canals that run through the city, connecting the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the exiles sat down and cried.

The experiences of sorrow, grief and rage are no strangers. And the importance of giving expression to them we know. Unspoken and they will make you crazy and break your heart. We can be thankful that the ancient Hebrews faced life and its calamities with an unfettered honesty that could give expression to the depths of affliction and torment. It allowed them to hold on to their faith and their memories of the past even when separated by years, miles of desert, and a life of captivity in a foreign land. It allowed them to hold on to their faith.

In the epistle, Paul writes to his young protégé Timothy, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” Timothy’s own faith is indebted to those who preceded him. Faith is a tradition handed down from generation to generation, not simply as a repository of apostolic witness, but a gift of trust that lived in mother and daughter and now lives in the third generation in Timothy. Jaraoslav Pelikan says, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” Paul recognizes that Timothy has inherited from Lois and Eunice a living faith.

Eunice as some of you know appears in one of the windows in St. Michael’s Chapel. Each window has a large figure in the center. In the window on the left the figure is the personification of Peace. St. Michael and St. George are the figures on either side. St. Michael is the archangel at the head of the angelic army said to have driven Satan and his fallen angels out of heaven. St. George, a Roman soldier and martyr, is the patron saint of the Crusaders and of England, Canada, Ethiopia, Greece, Portugal, Serbia, Russia, and Palestine just to name a few. In this window it appears the great warriors of heaven and earth serve as the protectors, guardians and guarantors of Peace.

The companion window to the right has a similar figure in the center; this one is the personification of Faith, today’s theme. On either side are the figures of Eunice, the mother of Timothy, from today’s passage, and St. Elizabeth, the wife of Zachariah and mother of John the Baptist, a descendant of the priestly line of Aaron, and cousin of Mary the mother of Jesus. As Sts. Michael and George are the guardians of Peace, St. Elizabeth and Eunice serve as the protectors, guardians and guarantors of Faith.

Paul says “Rekindle the gift of God that is within you” – which is to say the gift of faith. The words “rekindle the gift” put me in mind of a wonderful comment by Gustav Mahler who said, “Tradition is the preservation of fire, not the worship of ashes.” Paul is urging the rekindling of that fire of faith.

And faith is at the heart of the gospel today. The disciples on the road to Jerusalem are fretful and anxious. They are facing increasingly heavy demands. They have been told not to be a stumbling block to others, to rebuke others, and to forgive sins, as often as seven times a day if need be – a tall order. Stressed, they say to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” And Jesus replies, “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Now the mustard seed grows into a plant, which was an unwanted weed and hard to get rid of. The precursor to kudzu I suppose. To have faith like the mustard seed is to spread persistently, even where it is not wanted. In other words, the disciples do not need more faith; they need only to use what they have.

Walter Wink, in his book *Engaging the Powers*, says, “Jesus explicitly states that it is not how much faith we have that counts, but whether we simply do our duty and exercise whatever faith we

do have; and an infinitesimal amount, he says, is enough” (p.308). The Bible is filled with stories of people who manage great things with faith like that of a mustard seed. For example, during the Exodus, when the Israelites gathered manna, those who had gathered much had nothing leftover, and those who gathered little had no shortage. Whatever they gathered was enough (Exodus 16:18). When Elijah fled for his life from Jezebel after the slaughter of the 400 prophets of Baal, he was awakened by an angel who provided him with a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. On the strength of that food we’re told he traveled forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God, a distance of more than 200 miles (1 Kings 19:5-8).

There is a story from South Africa that was first told in The Des Moines Tribune (December 5, 1968). Two businessmen, Mr. Rumbold and Mr. Samuel, were having lunch in the “copper country.” They hung their coats over the backs of their chairs. Soon after, Mr. Rumbold noticed he was missing his wallet, which contained cash and coupons for gasoline. It didn’t turn up.

Three days later, while driving back to Johannesburg, a middle-aged African, dressed in shorts, flagged them down. “Are you going to Johannesburg?” he asked. When they indicated they were, he pulled from his pocket a wallet, and said, “Would you please try and find a Mr. Rumbold there and give him this wallet. I found it in the street three days ago.”

Rumbold was speechless. Showing the man his identification, he examined the wallet. Everything was intact. However, when he went to offer a reward, the African refused. In an illustration of today’s gospel he says, “No sir,” he said. “I do not need to be rewarded for not stealing. I am a Christian.”

This is a man who does not expect to be paid what he is not due. This is a man who lives by faith.

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