



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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6th Sunday of Easter

May 1, 2016

“Throwing the Sword to the Lord”

(Psalm 137)

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COLLECT: O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

The psalm starts with a vivid description of the anguish of God's people held captive in Babylon:

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the willows, we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy. They said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you . . .”

So far, so good right? It puts us right there by the rivers of Babylon. I've preached on this part of the psalm, but I've never preached on the rest of the psalm. In fact I've never even read the rest of the psalm in public worship. This is how the psalm continues and ends. “Remember, O Lord, what the Edomites did [long-time enemies of the Jews, and friends of the Babylonians] “Remember, O Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. “Tear it down,” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!” O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.” Thus ends the psalm, unless you add “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit...” which feels a little tongue in cheek.

How could this curse appear in the Sacred Scriptures? How could such barbaric words make their way into the prayer book of God's people? That's what the psalter is: it's our prayer book. It's meant to teach us how to

pray and to lead us through prayer. So how did this awful little prayer get in there? Someone on the Doctrinal Review Board was asleep at the helm!

Most of the psalms are psalms of lament. The imprecatory psalms are a subset of these. Imprecatory psalms are those that invoke curses upon one's enemies. Psalm 58 is memorable, "O God, break the teeth in their mouths". That's a psalm of David, same guy who wrote about quiet waters and green pastures. Here's another line from that psalm: "The righteous will rejoice when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked."

Realize these sentiments of broken teeth and bloody baths and baby bashing are not confined to just a few psalms. They are not statistical outliers. In fact, thirty two psalms are considered "imprecatory."

Some of these imprecatory psalms against the wicked. Who are they? I remember reading somewhere an opinion that the vast majority of people (maybe 96%) need very little government, while the remaining 4% cannot be governed. The idea was this small group causes a great deal of trouble; their wickedness stresses the rest of society.

Some of the imprecatory psalms are against national enemies. In the case of Psalm 137 the enemy are the Babylonians who sacked Judah and Jerusalem and did all kinds of treachery in the process, but also the Edomites who cheered them on with gleeful hearts. Today, we can think of ISIS as an enemy of our nation but also of the church.

There are also imprecatory psalms against personal enemies, the one who has latched onto you with a malice that will not let go, the one who is trying to make your life miserable.

When planning worship, I will often avoid the imprecatory psalms, or I'll skip over the nasty parts. An example: Psalm 139. Most of it is just gorgeous. "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar." The psalmist mines that vein of gold for 16 verses, but

suddenly, he hits coal. It turns imprecatory. “If only you would slay the wicked, O God! I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.” And then, just as suddenly, the psalmist seems to find the vein of gold again: “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.” So what I do while planning the service? I just take out the coal. That’s probably not right because the coal is part of God’s Word too. The coal is also inspired and therefore useful.

So how might these imprecatory psalms be useful? Why are they in Scripture? And didn’t Jesus tell us to “love your enemies” (Mt. 5:44), to “turn the other cheek” (Lk. 6:29), to “walk the extra mile” (Mt. 5:41), and to “bless, and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14)?

First this: the psalmist has these emotions (right or wrong) and he lets them spill over. They are genuine emotions, emotions that all God’s people will experience sooner or later. Christians today who lose loved ones to war or to a violent criminal or to a drunken driver, they cannot escape these same feelings of anger and desire for revenge. But there is an enormous difference between asking God to take action against your enemies and you taking action yourself. These imprecatory psalms do not give you the license to seek vengeance. The psalmists reject personal violence. The psalmists know that vengeance in the hands of man is too dangerous weapon. And yet, we want justice right? We need justice. And with these psalms we ask the Lord to take the fight to the wicked and to judge and punish them as only he can. These psalms ask God to do to our enemies what they have done to us. Kick their teeth in like they did ours. Make them feel the grief of losing a child like we have.

Second, God’s people continue to be victims of violent and unthinkable acts of hatred. We need to be able to vent safely, and there is no safer ear to bend than God’s. When someone does you a great injustice, your natural inclination is to tell whoever will listen what that . . . guy . . .

did to you. But that's wrong. That's a sin against the 8th commandment. In fighting the dragon, you've become a dragon. Instead of shouting it aloud for many ears, these imprecatory psalms teach us to whisper it into God's ear. He's heard it all before. You won't shock him. He can take it. In fact he loves it when we come to him in prayer, even if it's just to complain and vent, as I love it when my kids turn to me.

Third, in the face of monstrous evil, the worst possible response is to feel nothing. When you saw the pictures of ISIS lining up your brothers in Christ on a beach to behead them, I hope you felt something like grief or rage. To not feel grief or rage is to be complicit. Silence in the face of evil and injustice is a nod of assent. If you don't allow yourself to feel anything, there is a sense in which you've already died. But to feel something is to be alive again. These prayers put feelings into our mouths. They inspire you to hate injustice and violence. We need that. Otherwise we grow too comfortable with it. Some injustices cannot be overcome with positive thinking. A narrow diet of praise songs will not meet the needs of those who are really suffering under injustice, or persecution. There is a time and place for songs of praise, but there's also a time for the imprecatory prayers!

These psalms are a way of clinging to God when everyone else seems to be forgetting about him or speaking against him. These psalms stir passion for God in an environment of indifference or doubt. These prayers teach us to have compassion for those who suffer. Again, personal violence is prohibited, but these psalms stir us to action in other ways.

Fourth, you have friends and family, but not all of them are safe places to vent. In fact, you dare not let it all hang out, and give them the bad version of yourself, the unedited first draft of raw anger or sadness. They're not going to accept it. They're going to start editing you and how you're feeling. They'll going to tell you things like,

“You shouldn’t feel that way. It’s not that big of a deal.”
But you do feel that way and it is a big deal to you.

There are others who if you give them the bad version of yourself, they’ll help you make it a little worse. They’ll egg you on and join you in slamming your neighbor’s reputation and planning his ruin. They’ll make the injustice done you seem even worse than it really was. After having been with that kind of friend, you’re going to need to take a shower at least.

But when you vent to the Lord, he won’t shut you down, and he won’t egg you on. He won’t edit your sadness or anger. He won’t react with disgust over who you are or the feelings you have. And after getting the anger out of the way, you’ll finally be able to do a little self-evaluation, and consider how you might have contributed to the problem. Drawing closer to the Lord always makes you want to be a better person.

Finally, these psalms are not just curses parading around as prayers. They are a safe way for God’s people to vent real anger. Sometimes they are more specific than what we need them to be. And I rarely pray for the demise of anyone. But I’ve never really been victimized like some of you have, and really like knowing I have the permission to pray to God like this. That means a lot to me, that he would listen to that. Maybe not those specific words, but the tone and tenor, yes. So much he cares for you that he invites the unedited, first draft of yourself. So much he loves you, that he doesn’t shut you down or say “you should be grateful for how good you have it.” Hopefully, when we’ve settled down enough to think straight again, we’ll come to that realization on our own steam, for in Christ we have everything.

You know that business about 96% needing very little government and the other 4% who cannot be governed . . . I’m not sure I buy that. It’d be nice. It’d be nice to believe that if the rest of the world were just like me I wouldn’t have to lock my doors anymore or use passwords on my devices. But the truth is, there’s plenty of sin and wickedness in each of us, and it leaks out in different ways

for different people. And God's commands are set in place not just to curb the wickedness of the four percent, but to curb the wickedness of the 100%. And God's Son Jesus Christ is on the cross not just for the 4% who really need that death, but for 100% who really need that death. And he didn't redeem only those sins we are aware of, those we make the effort and time remember to confess, maybe four or five percent. He died for all of them. And when he covers you over with Christ's cloak of righteousness, that cloak doesn't cover just four or five percent of your body, like a mini bikini, but it covers and protects the whole body, like a shroud. And when he gives you his forgiveness in this Supper, it doesn't cleanse just some of your sin, but all of it. By the time he's through with you, there's nothing left that he'll have to burn off later. That's one more reason why we have trouble with the doctrine of purgatory.

Finally, these imprecatory psalms are God's gift to anyone who's suffering injustice. They help us hold on to human dignity while at the same time endure suffering and hardship nonviolently. Luther said we should [first] pray that our enemies be converted and that they become our friends. If that doesn't work, then pray that their plans fail and that they perish from the earth rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ perishing (St. Louis Ed, 1000).

These psalms may disturb, appall us even, but that probably reflects our own sheltered existence (thanks be to God) and perhaps it reflects the blandness of the piety with which we've been brought up. These psalms shatter those illusions. They make us face life in the raw, life as it is at least for other Christians. There is a war going on, and it is a war of opposing powers with eternal consequences. In times of acute and ongoing injustice we must call on the severity of God as expressed in these psalms, if not for ourselves then for others. It is our way of throwing the sword to the Lord, for the battle belongs to him (1 Sam. 17:47). Amen.

