

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's
LENT 2017 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES
"The Psalms: Tools for Being & Becoming"

Study #5: "A Time to Love and a Time to Hate"- March 28/29, 2017
Psalm 137

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you spoke of both judgement and love; teach us now, by your Holy Spirit, how to hate what you hate and to love what you love that we might demonstrate the righteousness and mercy of our Father in heaven. Amen.

Introduction

After moving from the east, one of the things which I like about British Columbia and Manitoba is that we take Remembrance Day seriously. It is a civic holiday and you see people wearing poppies everywhere. It is not the same in all parts of the country. But you might ask, especially if you come from a pacifist tradition, does not Remembrance Day serve the purposes of militarism and glorification of war and violence? There is a danger of that but I think the benefits far outweigh the dangers.

The value of Remembrance Sunday not only allows us to remember those who have served (and some to the death) in the defense of those who are oppressed and at risk but also keeps before us the realities of anger and violence, hatred and revenge, and retribution and justice. These are major features of much of the Bible and especially the psalms. In this fifth study in our series on the psalms we are going to look at one of the most difficult of all, Psalm 137. As we do so, we will see that there is "a time to love and a time to hate" (Ecclesiastes 3:8).

The Cursing Psalms

Psalm 137 is known as one of the "imprecatory" or "cursing" psalms. About twenty years ago, I began to follow the Prayer Book pattern of reading the whole Psalter through every month. One of the things that surprised me was the great focus on "enemies" in so many of them. Eugene Peterson notes that "God is the primary subject in the psalms, but enemies are established in solid second place."¹ The people who pray in the psalms seem to have a lot of enemies and they don't react too kindly towards them. Right next to some of most intimate and sublime prayers to God we find the most vindictive and negative preoccupation with enemies. Here are a few examples of the "cursing" passages:

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God, The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pg. 95.

Break the arm of the wicked and evil man. (Psalm 10:15)

On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot. (Psalm 11:6)

Break the teeth in their mouths, O God...Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun...The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. (Psalm 58:6, 8, 10)

May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous. (Psalm 69:23, 28)

Make them like tumbleweed, O my God, like chaff before the wind. As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze, so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm. (Psalm 83:13-15)

He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones. (Psalm 109:18, NRSV)

If only you would slay the wicked, O God!...I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. (Psalm 139:19, 22)

And finally, at the end of today's psalm:

O Daughter of Babylon,
doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
for what you have done to us.
Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks. (Psalm 137:8-9)

Now this is all Scripture. But how can we say "This is the Word of the Lord" after such readings? Is it fit for public consumption? Some of these verses (and even a whole psalm [58]) have been seen as unfit for public reading and so are omitted in the 1959 Canadian Book of Common Prayer (e.g. Psalms 58; 69:24-30; 109:5-19; 137:7-9) and although there is no censorship in the Book of Alternative Services, certain verses and sections are left out in the recommended readings (e.g. Psalm 137, verses 7-9 [Lent 4, Year B], pg. 293). How do we handle such raw emotion which seems to run counter to Jesus' teaching to "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28)? To answer these questions we will first look at Psalm 137 in more detail and then draw out the implications of the "cursing" passages for ourselves.

Psalm 137

Psalm 137 is not really a prayer addressed to God (except verse 7) but a cry of lament, a cry of the heart. It comes from the time when the Jews were languishing in exile beside the canals on the plains of Babylon. Jerusalem was in ruins, the temple destroyed and the people transported a thousand miles away to pagan Babylon.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept

when we remembered Zion.
 There on the poplars
 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!" (verses 1-3)

Here is a relief from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh which depicts "three prisoners of war playing lyres as they are marched along by an armed soldier."² Like these three unfortunates, the Jews, in their despondent state, are asked (tormented, taunted) to sing songs of Zion – Jewish songs – but they can not. The humiliation and pain is too great. Walter Bruggemann relates that "Such a scandalous scene was savagely repeated in the death camp of Treblinka, where Jews were forced to sing and dance of their Jewishness. It was part of the humiliation intending to rob Jews of their identity, their dignity, and their hope."³ Here in Babylon, "silence is their only dignity."⁴

The psalm continues in defiance:

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,
 if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy. (verses 4-6)

They refuse to expose the songs of the Lord to ridicule but this is not a mark of defeatism. It springs from burning loyalty and defiant hope, a desire to uphold God's character and justice. It is a posture of counter culture which leads to the outburst in the final verses.

These are the verses omitted from the public readings:

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 destruction,
 happy is the one who repays you
 for what you have done to us.
 Happy is the one who seizes your infants
 and dashes them against the rocks. (verses 7-9)

The word "happy" or "blessed" is used twice; we think back to Psalms 1 and 2, where the "happy" person is the one who pays attention to God's law or who trust in his messianic

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1975), pg. 459, with photograph from <http://www.ancientreplicas.com/hebrew-captives-lyres.html>

³ Walter Bruggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), pg. 75.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *ibid.*, pg 27.

presence. Here the “happy” person is the one who pays back enemies for their evil deeds. It is pure hate! We feel uncomfortable or awkward.

But Bruggemann comments: “Such a statement might be an embarrassment to bourgeois folk who have never lost that much, been abused that much, or hoped that much. But such a statement is not embarrassing to those who have been marginalized long enough.”⁵ What if we were victims of Rwandan or Balkan genocide; the refugee “Lost Boys” of the Sudan; the terrorized in Darfur; feuding Palestinians and Jews; abused children or raped women... “In such deep anguish, one dare never forget” and so the call is to “remember.”

But the call to “remember” in verse 7 is rooted in legal life and wants to present the judge with the evidence and facts against the oppressors. The call to repay evil for evil in verses 8 and 9 asks the Lord to take action. There is no sense here that the Jews in Babylon would be taking matters into their own hands and doing that to the children there. They knew the Scripture from Deuteronomy (32:35) where God says, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.” The prophecies for the time of the Exile declared, “See, it stands written before me: I will not keep silent but will pay back in full; I will pay it back into their laps” (Isaiah 65:6).

In their anguish, they were calling on God to take action. In this sense, you can read the final verses not as a literal call for infanticide, but a call that violence and injustice be acknowledged and dealt with. This can be seen by using the following inflection:

happy is the one who repays *you*
for what you have done to *us*.
Happy is the one who seizes *your* infants
and dashes *them* against the rocks.

This is not a childish outburst but faithful tenacity. The curses called down on their enemies are paralleled by curses upon themselves if they forget God and his salvation plan to deal with evil represented by Jerusalem: “May my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you” (verses 5-6). Here is a cry which expresses a capacity to endure, to hold on in the face of complete disaster - a voice which fights off despair, encounters evil and calls on wickedness to be exposed and confronted.

The Message for Us

So what does all this say to us?

1. ***Hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed:*** First, that “our hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed. Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil. It is the volcanic eruption of outrage when the holiness of being, ours or another’s has been violated.”⁶ We need to grapple with the wickedness of evil - sin - to expose it, to see it for what it really is – not to hide or repress it. “Hate is often the first sign that we care.”⁷ Just as pain leads us to pray to God for help, so hate leads us to take a stand against injustice. Prayer does not legitimize

⁵ Walter Bruggemann, *ibid.*, pg. 75.

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *ibid.*, pg. 98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pgs. 99f.

hate – it uses it. Just as pain leads us to our need for help, so hate leads us to our need for righteousness. Our hate needs to be prayed not suppressed.

2. ***Uphold Justice and Righteousness:*** This expands into the second message for us, to take right and wrong seriously – to stand up for justice and righteousness. The list of “woes” in Luke 6:24-26: “Woe to you who are rich...well fed...who laugh...who are spoken well of” imply injustice towards the poor and vulnerable. Next week, we shall see that “Singing Praise Songs is not an escape from addressing public justice issues.”⁸ Evil is seductive. The imprecatory psalms underline the reality of good and evil and that we must not be lulled into thinking that the world is a benign place where everything works out right. When the psalmist cries out in Psalm 10 (15), “Break the arm of the wicked and evil man” it is followed with “Call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.”

This theme is replayed again and again in popular action movies. In the film “Live Free and Die Hard,” the reluctant hero (Bruce Willis) fights against the unrestrained evil of a rebuffed government computer programmer who brings terror and anarchy to a whole nation to prove he was right. Justice is done and the brutal violence spoken of in the cursing psalms is displayed very graphically on the screen. We complain that this may lead to violence - but does it have a higher function by underlining the innate need we all feel for justice to be done? Whatever the answer, we need to be clear that there is right and wrong and these psalms emphasize that for us.

3. ***Acknowledge hatred within ourselves:*** Thirdly, the cursing psalms teach us to acknowledge our feelings of anger and not to minimize them. When we are faced with these psalms, we are meant to reflect on our own resentment and anger. The preacher Fleming Rutledge quotes a wise Benedictine monk who once said, “If you can’t handle the violence in the Psalms, you can’t come to terms with the violence in yourself.”⁹ Don’t just say, “It was nothing”, “Oh, it wasn’t that bad”; “You didn’t really mean it” when it was something, was that bad and he/she really did mean it! When something negative happens, express your anger – acknowledge it. We could draw a parallel with grief here. With grief, we must truly mourn the loss of something (good or bad) in order to move on. It is the same thing with anger; acknowledge your desire for revenge, work it through, and then give it up.

This is very well illustrated by the story “My Messy House,” by Kathleen Norris, an American spiritual writer and artist who also works with children. She speaks about asking children to write their own psalms and relates that their poems often have an emotional directness that is similar to that of the biblical Psalter.

Children who are picked on by their big brothers and sisters can be remarkably adept when it comes to writing cursing psalms, and I believe that the writing process offers them a safe haven in which to work through their desires for vengeance in a healthy way. Once a little boy wrote a poem called “The Monster Who Was Sorry.” He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at

⁸ Howard Peskett in *Encounter With God*, Scripture Union Bible Reading Notes, Jan-March 2003, pg. 88.

⁹ Quoted by Fleming Rutledge, “The Common Criminal” in *Bread and Wine*. (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2003), pg. 78.

him: his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'"

"My messy house" says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell? ¹⁰

Acknowledge hatred within yourself.

4. ***Leave vengeance to God:*** Finally, we are reminded to leave any action of vengeance to God. We have noted that Psalm 137 is a call for God to take action and the corollary to that is to leave things in God's hands. In his comments on the psalmist's long (15 verses - 6-20) and vitriolic tirade against his enemies in Psalm 109, Walter Brueggemann points out that in submitting one's rage, two things become clear. One is that "the submission to (the Lord) is real and irreversible"¹¹ - it can not be tentatively offered to God and then taken back if he doesn't do what we had hoped. We are agreeing with God when he says that "Vengeance is mine" (Deuteronomy 32:35) - in other words, it is not ours. The second thing that becomes clear is that this submission to God means that God is free to act in his own way and his own time - not as we would wish or hope. We do not dictate to God what he must do. We leave any action in his hands.

There is a third result which is liberation for us. By releasing our anger, we are "freeing ourselves from pettiness and paralysis for praise and thanksgiving"¹² which is how Psalm 109 ends:

With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord;
in the great throng of worshippers I will praise him.
For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save their lives from those who would condemn them. (verses 30-31).

Conclusion

We will leave the ultimate last word to Jesus:

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:28-29). However, in order to love our enemies, we need to know they are there and who they are – don't live in naïveté. "Our hate is used by God to bring the enemies of life and salvation to notice, and then involve us in active compassion for the victims"¹³ – and the victims are both the recipients of evil and the perpetrators of it. There is a time to love and a time to hate.

¹⁰ Kathleen Norris, "My Messy House" in *Bread and Wine*. (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2003), pgs. 4-5.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *ibid.*, pg. 86.

¹² *Ibid.*.

¹³ Eugene Peterson, *ibid.*, pg. 102.

