

24 October 2021

## **Healing as Those with Hope: Loss and Rebuilding of a World**

Lamentations 1:1-5; Psalms 137 and 126

Around 588 BCE, the armies of the Babylonian Empire advanced on Jerusalem. This was the empire of King Nebuchadnezzar, and he had already conquered much of the ancient world. In fact, he had already officially conquered Jerusalem once, eleven years earlier. At that time, he had taken the king and all the nobles of Jerusalem into Babylon as captives, had set the king's uncle on the throne on the condition that he pay annual tribute to Babylon, and left the city standing. But now that replacement king had made an alliance with Egypt and stopped paying the protection money to Babylon, so the Empire was headed back to finish the job.

You would think this would be a concern to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to some it was. The prophet Jeremiah promised that the city was going to be destroyed, but no one listened to that crackpot. You see, Jerusalem was God's throne. The Eternal City. A century before, when the Assyrian Empire had completely destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, God had miraculously delivered the Southern Kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem. God would do the same against Babylon. As Psalm 46 puts it, "God is in the midst of the city. It shall not be moved."

Babylon obliterated Jerusalem. They laid siege to it for almost a year, while thousands starved to death inside, then breached the city walls, slaughtered thousands more, and took the survivors into captivity. Then they burned everything that would burn and dismantled what would not. Jerusalem, God's throne, the Eternal City, became a heap of ruins, and the temple that had stood proudly at the center of the city for 400 years, a symbol of God's protection, became a smoldering memory. The unthinkable had happened, and one eyewitness wrote these lines.

We read Lamentations chapter 1, verses 1-5:

*1 How lonely sits the city  
that once was full of people!  
How like a widow she has become,  
she that was great among the nations!  
She that was a princess among the provinces  
has become a vassal.*

*2 She weeps bitterly in the night,  
with tears on her cheeks;  
among all her lovers  
she has no one to comfort her;  
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,  
they have become her enemies.*

*3 Judah has gone into exile with suffering  
and hard servitude;  
she lives now among the nations,  
and finds no resting-place;*

*her pursuers have all overtaken her  
in the midst of her distress.*

<sup>4</sup> *The roads to Zion mourn,  
for no one comes to the festivals;  
all her gates are desolate,  
her priests groan;  
her young girls grieve,  
and her lot is bitter.*

<sup>5</sup> *Her foes have become the masters,  
her enemies prosper,  
because the Lord has made her suffer  
for the multitude of her transgressions;  
her children have gone away,  
captives before the foe.*

Before the Fall of Jerusalem, the Israelites' worship of God – really, their entire faith – had been based on blood sacrifice. Through the sacrifice of animals, they sought reconciliation for themselves and cleansing for the land. But now there was no temple, no altar, and the priests were dead or in chains. Besides, what was the point of cleansing the land now? They weren't there. The land that had been promised to Abraham was a ruin, without inhabitant. The few Israelites who had survived the fall were now in exile: numb, then filled with impotent rage – not only at Babylon but at the neighboring country of Edom, which had joined Babylon in the siege. From the land of captivity, one grieving, angry poet wrote these lines:

We read Psalm 137:

<sup>1</sup> *By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.*

<sup>2</sup> *On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.*

<sup>3</sup> *For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

<sup>4</sup> *How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?*

<sup>5</sup> *If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!*

<sup>6</sup> *Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.*

<sup>7</sup> *Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem's fall,  
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!'*

<sup>8</sup> *O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!*

<sup>9</sup> *Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!*

It's an angry, violent poem, but you can understand the anger. Israel's world had been destroyed. Different Israelites responded to the catastrophe differently – some with grief, others with fury and dreams of violent vengeance – but no one was untouched. And nothing would ever be the same again.

In terms of scale, our Covid-19 pandemic experience cannot compare with the Fall of Jerusalem. Grief is grief, and those who lost someone to Covid have experienced no less than those who grieved for loved ones in 586 BCE, but our country still exists, as the kingdom of Judah did not. Still, our experience over the past two years does share some traits with that disaster. Most of all, Covid has touched every life. Not everyone has known the death of a loved one or experienced the disease themselves, but everyone's life has been affected in some way – by the shutdowns, the job losses, the business closures, and so on. And I suspect there is another way our experience parallels that of 6<sup>th</sup> century Judah: nothing will ever be quite the same again.

In our nation, I think what Covid-19 has done is not so much cause change as to strip away some façades and reveal the stresses that were already nearing a breaking point – and then to give them a push. I have no idea what changes will eventually come in society as a whole as a result of this time, and it may be years before anyone will be able to tell, but the areas that suddenly look frail and in danger include our health care system, our education system, our wage distribution, and our childcare and elder care systems.

I am slightly more qualified to speak about the world of the church, and while I have no divine guidance here – like Jeremiah had in Jerusalem – I'm a little more confident in looking toward the possible future of the church. What I see is dramatic. As with society as a whole, the pandemic has hastened along things that were already underway. I think that, whenever we finally come out of this shared crisis, we will find fewer and smaller churches. One of the things that has happened in the larger society is that people in unrewarding, poorly paid jobs had a break, and when they were able to come back from the break realized, "I don't want to do that anymore." From what I'm reading and seeing, a similar thing is happening now with churches. People who had been marginally involved church members, coming out of habit or duty, had a break and are now realizing that they didn't miss church. Why would they go back? Others, the very active members who before the pandemic had held a dozen different leadership roles at church, had a break from that hamster wheel of holy busy-ness, and while those people *will* return to church, they don't want to do all that anymore.

In the larger church world, I see these past two years hastening the demise of national denominations, changing the way we train and credential clergy, and perhaps ending the whole

artificial concept of church “membership” (It’s not a biblical concept, you know.) None of us enjoy change, but buckle up. Like Judah, we have experienced a collective trauma, and nothing is ever going to be exactly the same again.

We now read Psalm 126:

<sup>1</sup> *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.*

<sup>2</sup> *Then our mouth was filled with laughter;  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
‘The Lord has done great things for them.’*

<sup>3</sup> *The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.*

<sup>4</sup> *Restore our fortunes, O Lord,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

<sup>5</sup> *May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.*

<sup>6</sup> *Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.*

The exile in Babylon was not forever, and some fifty, sixty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Empire itself collapsed and the new Persian emperor sent the exiles home. True, home was a pile of rubble covered with two generations’ worth of underbrush and a badger problem, but they got to return to the Land of Promise and start over.

But at least in terms of their religious life, they weren’t starting from scratch. During the long years of exile, without a temple and an altar and priests, the Israelites had a choice of whether to give up their faith or to reinvent it. So some of them did. They asked hard questions: What things that we used to think were important can we do without? What matters in our faith? If our God didn’t disappear with the temple, how do we reach out to that God now? First they had to find a new way to worship, so they came up with a time of praying and singing psalms and reading scripture in small local groups. In other words, the exiles in Babylon invented the synagogue, which would later become the model for Christian worship. In time, the returned exiles would rebuild a temple and reinstitute the old sacrificial worship, but it wasn’t the same as before. The temple was a thing for special occasions; the synagogue had become the center of Jewish faith, as it still is today.

I don’t know if all this is comforting or not – this reassurance that faith can be reinvented on the other side of communal trauma and collapse – but it’s what I’ve got. We have experienced a worldwide, nationwide, and faith-wide trauma, and if I’m right we are looking at major changes coming earlier than anyone expected. I may be wrong. It’s been known to happen. But in a sense it doesn’t matter whether we’re looking at major changes this generation or next. Either way, we have the same task and the same questions: What are the things that we are used

to thinking are important that we can do without? What is the center of our faith? If God isn't confined to the traditional structures and practices of the church as we know it, how do we reach out to God now? I do think we are looking at a time of fewer and smaller churches, but God was with the exiles, and God will be with us, working with us for good. In light of that, we may also be headed for a time of stronger, more focused churches. God's creativity will always exceed our destructiveness. Thanks be to God.

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A final word. I may get some blowback for this sermon, not so much because of what I said as because I said it at all. People don't tune in to church for warnings of coming crisis but for encouragement. I get that. It won't help, but I didn't enjoy writing this or preaching it, any more than Jeremiah enjoyed his job.

In Jeremiah 28, a few years before the Fall, he had a confrontation with another prophet in Jerusalem. Jeremiah the Prophet was prophesying disaster, and Hananiah the Prophet was assuring people that everything was going to be all right. Jeremiah's response to Hananiah was, basically, "I hope to God you're right and I'm wrong. I guess we'll see."

But Jeremiah had another message, too. God's not done with Israel yet. He has a new covenant waiting, and it's great. Look for it. And hold on.