I speak to you in the name of our Creator, Christ the risen one, and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

You may remember the last time I was here two weeks ago I preached on lament in Jeremiah. Today we are going to continue that theme. The reading from Lamentations is crucially important to set up the context for the psalm. Now, you may be wondering why Rachel didn't chant the psalm for us today. That's because Psalm 137 which is appointed for today, is what I call one of the smitey psalms. It's a very dangerous psalm to read in a church setting without unpacking it first. I can almost guarantee you that no one else is preaching on the psalm this week. Preachers avoid this reading. But as you know one of my preaching principles is to not ignore the difficult texts. So let me set the stage, so to speak, before I read it to you.

Both Lamentations and this Psalm were written in exile. They were forcibly removed from their land and forced marched across 1700 miles or so of desert wilderness. They had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the brutal murder of their own children. Now in Babylon they are bonded labourers or slaves for the Babylonian Empire. Trauma is woven into every line. The poet from Lamentations (Lam 1:3, 5c) tells us:

> [3] Judah has gone into exile with suffering
> and hard servitude;
> she lives now among the nations;
> she finds no resting place;
> her pursuers have all overtaken her
> in the midst of her distress.
> …
> [5] her children have gone away,

captives before the foe.

This coming January I will be teaching an intensive 2-week course on these troubling psalms called "Reading the Psalms as Trauma Literature." This psalm, 137, is the reason I developed the course. I heard it read in church once and at verse 9 there was a collective gasp and shocked silence. I am going to read it for you now. I know the first line will likely trigger the Boney M song in your head. Try to set that aside and listen to the grief. This is a person crying out from horrible trauma.

[1] By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
[2] On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
[3] For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
[4] How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
[5] If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
[6] 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.
[7] 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!"
[8] O daughter Babylon, you devastator!

Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

What do we do with this? By my count, there are about twenty-six psalms that move into cries for vengeance and violence. And we can't just skip over that. We can't ignore it—because it's in the Bible. But maybe even more, we can't ignore it because it's in us. That same anger, that same longing for vengeance masquerading as justice lives in the human heart. We shrink in horror from the violent and graphic cries for vengeance. Even if we don't think of the psalms as the literal word of God breathed into a writer, subconsciously we can still be tripped up by thinking that if it's in the Bible, then God must approve of it. We come across the last two verses of the psalm and are horrified! How can God condone the brutal murder of babies? Is it ok to seek vengeance, or call God to enact vengeance for our sake? The cognitive dissonance is brutal. Walter Brueggemann of blessed memory and one of the most trusted Hebrew Bible scholars, suggests that the violent ending is best seen as the faithful anger of the powerless—handing rage over to God. This brutal honesty makes hope possible.

It's important to understand that God does not edit these voices out. God allows them to remain in Scripture. God can bear even our most vengeful words. This is grace: we are not required to sanitize our prayers. We can bring our whole selves before God. This isn't God approved, **it's God heard**. These words were not written for the comfortable. They are the words of the enslaved. Words of protest. Words of judgment. They rise up out of lives crushed by violence, by war, by slavery, by oppression. They may not sound like *our* words today, but I believe

they are kept in Scripture for us, because one day, we may need them. Sitting with these psalms of vengeance, letting them do their work on me, I've learned something essential: we must take the reality of a victimized world seriously. We dare not look away. These cries remind us that the world is full of voices silenced, lives broken, people crying out for justice. And those voices matter to God.

And the more work I've done on **this** psalm, the more inappropriate the Boney M, Caribbean tune seems. It needs a minor key which evokes sadness and then deep rage. For that is what we are witnessing and experiencing from this psalmist. They have lost everything! And their tormentors demand songs of them! Maybe, "sing us how your God reigns; or how you've got joy deep down in your heart. You'll sing us those songs." It like pouring vinegar into their wounds. The Nazis coerced the Jews to sing and dance at the death camps in the same way. This disturbing echo of Psalm 137 reminds us that trauma is not an ancient problem but an ongoing reality. Oppressors have long demanded the song of the victim. Yet even in coerced singing, the human heart resists.

The psalmist cries out to God, "Lord, don't forget what the Edomites did on that day when Jerusalem fell. Our own neighbors joined in the mockery. Tear it down, they cried. Tear it down to its very foundations. And so the people of God sat and wept. They wept over the loss of their holy city, Jerusalem, the city of God's throne. They wept for the temple in ruins, for priests no longer able to serve, for worship silenced. They wept for the loss of their freedom, for their way of life uprooted. They wept at the gloating of their enemies, the humiliation of being taunted while their world collapsed. They wept over the terrible uncertainty of their

future as God's people—what future is left for us now? They remembered Zion and they wept.

This psalm does not hide from us the depth of that grief. It does not tidy it up. It lets us see and hear the raw anguish of a people who have lost everything. And it insists that such sorrow, such torment, is part of the human experience. Walter Brueggemann says this psalm is freighted with the memory of trauma, a lament so sharp that it resists turning into a song of joy. The psalm's lament is not a rare thing. It is part of the world we live in, part of what it means to be human. We don't have to look far today to find people whose grief echoes these same words.

Every refugee knows the trauma of displacement; of all they know being ripped away from them. They yearn for their homeland. But it's not just refugees. It's those who have been stolen from their land like the African slaves, or their land stolen from them like the Indigenous peoples in North and South America and elsewhere in the world. In the middle of the psalm, we hear a vow: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!" These words sound strange to us, but they are a self-imposed curse. To forget Jerusalem would be to lose their very identity. Better to lose the ability to sing or play than to betray memory. Hermann Gunkel, writing over a century ago, noted how longing and faith are fused here. This isn't nostalgia. It's survival. To remember Zion is to keep alive the possibility of return, even if that hope seems impossible.

The demand of a song reminded me of the very same thing done to African slaves. Sing a song, dance a jig for the entertainment of their masters. The very thing which was life giving in their home communities was used to torment them. Their babies were taking from them. They were used as breeding stock, beaten,

tortured, raped, and murdered. That trauma goes deep into their bones, into their DNA and is passed down from generation to generation. And every generation since the end of slavery has been retraumatized by the dominant white culture around them. Jim Crow, denial of human rights, segregation, systematic imprisonment of their people, voter suppression, systemic poverty, redlining practices which make it impossible for them to own their own home or live in an area which provides the basics of healthcare and food security. It's dangerous to drive while black. Families have that conversation with their kids on how to act when, not if, but when, they are pulled over or stopped by the police.

During the 1992 LA race riots after the acquittal of four police officers who brutally beat Rodney King, many if not most folks were more concerned about the damage to public property than what caused the rage to erupt. We saw the very same thing happen after George Floyd's murder in 2020 and others that followed. Of course we should not condone violence. But we should have used more energy to ask why the response was so violent, rather than condemning it outright.

I suggest our response is to hold the pain for the Other. To let it soften our hearts until compassion and empathy override our revulsion. When we hear violent cries from oppressed peoples—whether in ancient Babylon, among enslaved Africans, among Indigenous peoples robbed of land, among the people of Gaza and the Westbank, after the murders of George Floyd and others, our first response must not be horror at their words or actions. Our first response must be compassion. Empathy for the Other does not mean we agree with or condone their actions or desire for vengeance. That's an all or nothing proposition, a dualistic viewpoint which gets us nowhere but further polarization. Their pain must be heard

before it can be healed. We must learn to listen. These verses are the voices of the traumatized. We should not rush to explain them away, nor condemn them, nor use them to justify violence. Instead, we are invited to hear the pain. To hold space for those who have been crushed, who cannot pray polite prayers, who can only cry out in anguish. When we hold space for such pain, we are participating in God's work of healing the world.

The truth is that our lives are filled with wounds and sorrows. They shape us more than almost anything else, often carried from childhood right through to the grave. The real question is: what will we do with them? With the rage, the resentment, the desire for revenge that sometimes clings to them. Too often the church skips over verses like these. We pretend Christians shouldn't feel that way. But what if we do? Because sometimes if we are really honest, we do. Walter Brueggemann says there are three ways we can handle the violence that rises within us. First, we can act on it—seek revenge. Second, we can deny it—push it down until it leaks out in destructive ways. Or third, we can hand it over to God. Let it out, unedited, and place it in God's hands. And God does not scold us or turn away. God listens. God says, "I hear you. I know your pain. You can leave this with me, you can trust me with this."

One of the last assignments I give my students is to write their own psalm of lament. I cried through each one of them. Students who had never tapped the grief of deep wounds were able to do so and it was a healing experience for them. I invite you to do the same. What are you lamenting? What wounds do you carry? Are you ready to hand them over to God; to be healed and made whole?

Amen